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THINGS TO MAKE AND DO

BY GUFF WHITEHOUSE

Plush toys...ah right those things to see in the bins at Toys R Us right? That's generally many people's reaction to plush. It's either that or thoughts of scary old ladies with a bed linen and bears. Let's face it, cabinets full of vinyl are kinda the modern equivalent of people who have nice plate collections...you know the sort of thing your Gran used to have on her walls.

To the owner they mean everything, but generally nearly everyone else who sees them, or browses are raised and gizzical looks exchanged. Sorry Gran it's true – we just didn't understand why you had plates on the wall! And even in this little designer toy world that we all know and love, designer plush seem to raise more than the odd glance and even a few sniggers...maybe they've also seen the scary lady's teddy bear collection.

In fairness, when a lot of people think about collectible plush toys the immediate name that springs to mind is Beanie Babies. And I think none of us want to go there! Before that there were Dream Pets that caught the imagination of kids and adults. I'll admit back when I first got into designer toys, the thought that one day I've have a shelf of stuffed critters staring at me would have filled me with dread. So why the change of heart?

Handmade, unique creations

Stuffed toys go back years, but in the designer world they're still in relative infancy. Perception has definitely shifted over the past few years, thanks in no small part to a band of dedicated – and lets not forget, talented – designers who use plush to bring their 2D ideas to life. To me, the medium doesn't matter – painting, print, vinyl, custom, plush – it's the idea, the concept, the characters and how that has been realised that makes these creations fascinating.

There's no doubt that designer plush is gaining in popularity. If you could look to any single factor for its rise then Uglydolls would be the obvious marker. The huge success of Uglydolls has opened up new collectors to a world of intricate and interesting designs with a quirky edge. They have seemingly bridged the gap between desirable designer toy, kitch object and child's toy.

Uglydolls didn't win a toy of the year award because they are a huge commercial success – successful, for sure, but we're not talking Furby scale here. They won, in my opinion because they offered something different that appealed to child and adult in totally different (and sometimes similar) ways.

"Some plushies are more seat cushions and door mats than dolls (although some seat cushions have more form than your average plush). They are so primitive they flout the artists' lack of skill and knowledge of the medium and the inexperience and gullibility of their consumers," says Jill Penney creator of the Toggodye plush dolls. "Uglydolls, while still lacking in most of the qualities that are required to qualify them as good cloth dolls in my book, were one of the first of their kind. Like Jackson Pollock, for example, they had a unique aesthetic that spoke to a certain time and stage in our society, culture, and art history."

My introduction to designer plush – not a great term I'll admit, but I'm open to suggestions for a better one read elsewhere – came in the form of Shawinimals. What struck me straight away – was the strong colour and simple, but effective character. An eye here or there, a mouth. Something intrigued me.

Who'd have thought that the designer toy revolution would spread right down to the humble soft toy? But it has big time. Bizarre concepts and ingenious uses of materials make these creations real talking points.

"Plush is less static than vinyl so there's a greater level of interaction," says Dennis Douven, creator of Byedust. "Also, compared to what a lot of people consider 'plush' the characters can be quite subversive and illicit. You wouldn't see that in your average toy store!"

"I also think people are starting to explore plush more because it's a fun medium to work with," says Heidi Kenney of Myppercrane. "More galleries have become open to the idea of plush as art and I feel like more and more adults are starting to think they can buy plush for themselves and not just for their kids!"

The appeal of plush to collectors

But what is it about plush that appeals? Perhaps it's the childhood memories of a favourite toy or, in a niche market that's already being crowded with platform toys and recycled designs, plush represents individuality. Plush is soft, inviting, embraceable...usually because of it's size and

material there is a different level of interactivity with it you can't get with small, hard, vinyl figures.

Spanish-based designer Eklote agrees: "I think we all had that special cuddly toy that we hid our secrets too when we were young. There's something about being able to step back to that period and become children again that I like. I think others do too."

Design is key. There's a whole generation of people who have grown up on a diet of great cartoons bursting with amazing characters. These cartoons have stretched pretty far from traditional characters and more of the content is geared towards adults. Now you have a group of artists of a certain age creating interesting plush characters geared towards their peers. You also have to take into account the internet and the spread of online sites and shops promoting these characters," says US plush maker Crump (crumppl.com).

There may also be a more practical reason for plush gaining in popularity with collectors: cost. While many vinyl platform toys are relatively cheap, many others retail at anywhere between £20-70 – a whole lot of money to be dropping on one item.

Plush, generally half that price, has much of the same design appeal. The number of plush artists breaking onto the scene and getting more coverage has also helped raise the profile of these creations. What was once sneered at has become an integral part of the designer toy world.

"I think some people are fed up with the repetitive nature of some vinyl – we all joke about colourways, but some people are finding it a real turn off," says Belfast-based plush maker extraordinaire Maz.

"This is a complicated issue. There's an issue of product vs. art vs. handmade. I do believe in the concept of an art toy, and that some toys can be art, or at least artistic in intent. Some other folk out there think of all of designer toys as collectible products," says Shawn Shawinimal "Smith." I think a lot of the stuff out there as both things – they're products and art, and, in our case, handmade. It seems much more reasonable to look at this issue on a case by case basis rather than a blanket statement, and say, "OK, this thing here seems much more like a product, whereas as this thing over here seems more artistic in intent."

New artists have also offered people more variety so if there aren't plush out there someone liked before, chances are there is. The handmadeness (is that even a word?) ensures each one has its own quirk and character and the limited runs means they just ooze collectability.

"It's a big draw for me, but I'm not sure if the average Joe or Mary walking into a designer toy store cares as much. There are certainly people out there who do care, and collect things because they're handmade (we love you!). But I also think there is a stigma associated with plush because of big toy stores – that if it's a stuffed thing and looks remotely close from one to the next, it must 'manufactured in a factory, and should be cheap,'" adds Smith.

"We're insane enough to make sure one Shawinimal is really close to the next, but if you look close enough,

you'll see differences. I look at this as a good thing. When you see that, you know it's a hand made."

But that's not to say there's some divide where handmade is good and manufactured designs should be frowned upon, as Smith explains. "Were definitely NOT against having things manufactured. But we are against suggesting something is 'handmade' when it's made in a factory. With that logic, Nike shoes are handmade! So if you see a manufactured line of Shawinimals plush in the future, you'll know it's manufactured in a factory. It won't be the same as our existing stuff, and that's definitely OK. We can continue making our limited edition stuff like the Back in Back Ninja and the Zombie Ninja, and also have stuff done in a factory."

"In the made-in-china age the handmade, one-of-a-kind element is the draw for all art and collectors. Part of the point of handmade is that the artist is able to imbue every piece with the same amount of care and detail," comments Jill Penney. "Knowing that the artist's own hands made a piece versus the hands of some underage Chinese girl gives great worth to a piece. But just being handmade or individual in itself is not the draw. A piece still has to meet the standards for good work. It has to have detail, thought, and skill that is desirable and unique."

Heidi Kenney from Myppercrane, agrees: "I think the handmade element is a big appeal. It's so nice to be able to own something and connect with the artist who created it."

Why artists are picking up the needle and thread

The world of designer toys inhabits this strange hinterland between character design and illustration. Some are considered pieces of sculpture, some to be admired in a cabinet or shelf, but nothing something more tactile. Plush occupies a unique place within this little niche of designer toys, almost a niche within a niche.

So what's the appeal to designers? Do they have a scissor fetish, or like seeing their own blood when they jab a needle into their thumb for the millionth time?

"From a creation standpoint, it's a very direct way to turn something 2D into something 3D. No rigging or molding is needed, and in most cases, the end result is very close to the original drawing, especially with my aesthetic," says Shawn Smith.

Smith, with support from Rodzugi in his hometown of Chicago has been a major force in pushing all plush custom shows and getting agents involved. The In Plush We Trust was a great example of how plush can be used by artists to transfer 2D designs into 3D objects. "I liked the idea of giving all the artists the same set list of materials and just how different the end results were. That way you really see someone's vision, their aesthetic. Kirby came up with the



Jill Penney



Jill Penney



Dennis Douven



Bretford

monochromatic fabric idea and the end result was fantastic. So many different takes and such a cohesive show visually, but each piece stood out because of the artist's aesthetic. I plan on creating more shows like this helping ensure it gets the attention it deserves."

Some artists make plush simply for their own enjoyment or because it was the easiest way to bring their vision into 3-D reality. Others, are driven by the potential for their creations to inform and educate.

"I always felt that there would be no greater accomplishment than to have made a child's favourite stuffed animal or doll – the doll they can't go anywhere without; that they clutch to so dearly; that's comforting, forgiving, welcoming that they fill with the most intimate parts of their personality and through which they play out their dreams, fears and curiosities," explains Jill Penney. "That stuffed animal becomes more than a comforting friend and extension of self but a tool for imagination and development. I wish people could see the value of a unique toy aiding in the development of a similarly unique child."

One of the biggest advantages of plush is its tactile nature – most vinyl feels the same in your hand. Different materials can be mixed and matched to great effect. The interactive nature of the medium is what drives other artists, such as Barcelona-based Etoile.

"The variety of textures and colours makes plush an interesting medium, which for me is so important. It's a material that allows you to create very interesting forms and structures," she says. "It's a challenge – different material demand different ways of working and as an artist that means you're learning new things and pushing yourself."

If you get the image of a bunch of artists rummaging round material bins at the local fabric suppliers...you wouldn't be far wrong says Crump. "Picking the material is my favourite part. I try and think of what the character is saying, how they dance, what their voice would sound like...ha ha...I walk around the fabric store for hours with these characters in my head saying 'oh lady, I would look sooo good in that.'"

While some big names have picked up the thread and got designing, the biggest draw for me is seeing new people come up with designs. Bestest plush maker Maz is a great example.

"I just figured I'd give it a go about 8 months ago. With each piece I've got better: the sewing and backing but also more adventurous designs. It's all about trial and error, so some things work others don't but you gotta love your rejects! Personally I'm a sucker for all things cute, so plush is the perfect medium – colours, material, funny faces, what's not to like?!" she says. "My designs just work better in plush. It has a

unique character, each is different with little mistakes, odd stitching. Just like people – we all have scars, beauty spots...hell manboobs too!"

"The little faults, bumps that are out of place, odd shapes – its part of the charm to me," agrees Natalia, creator of the Grüssli line of plush toys.

It's all in the detail

One element of plush that differs from much of the vinyl is the number of pieces that have stories accompanying them, ranging from the sublime to the slightly ridiculous. Some seem to be an integral part of the character, others you can really tell when it's been tacked on as an afterthought.

And the artists themselves are split on the idea of the stories that accompany their furry creations. Shawnimals, for example, are well known for their stories as part of a wider narrative that Shawn Smith has created for Shawnimaland. "The depth of story differs from one character to the next. Take Wee Ninja. The story on his tag touches briefly on his skills and his enemy the Wee Devil, but then if you look on the Ninjatown one there's much more going on. And then the Ninjatown story connects to the larger Shawnimaland storyline," he says.

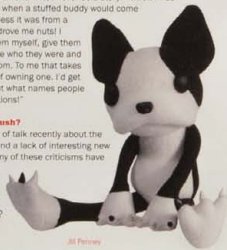
Heidi Kenny is another designer who creates a story, if the piece inspires her – "the story isn't everything, I will come across a fabric that maybe is really sending vibes to be made into a certain plush. Then when I'm making the plush and it's all coming together if it seems sad or happy then maybe a story comes to me. I once stumbled across some bubbly white fabric that reminded me of cabbage, so a cabbage plush was born."

But that shouldn't mean just creating a story because that's what everyone else does. Something Jill Penney feels strongly about. "I do not always create stories for my characters. Stories, in some cases, speak to the development and depth of a piece but others, I think, are used as padding to make up for a piece's shortcomings. In a lot of cases the stories become all talk with nothing in the piece to back them up. Stories are only meaningful if they punctuate the life inherently in a piece – if they continue where the doll itself leads onwards off – where you could actually see the doll come to life. The life and story has to be in the doll in order for you to be able to tell it."

Crump is in full agreement. "No, I never do a story – when I was a kid I would hate it when a stuffed buddy would come with a name tag unless it was from a cartoon or book. It drove me nuts! I wanted to name them myself, give them my own story, decide who they were and where they came from. To me that takes away from the fun of owning one. I'd get a big kick finding out what names people have given my creations!"

Where next for Plush?

There's been plenty of talk recently about the glut of colourways and a lack of interesting new designs in vinyl. Many of these criticisms have been levelled at the major producers and certain artists. But is plush likely to be up to the task or to go the same way?



Jill Penney



1-3 by Maz, 4 by Shawnimals, 5 by Grüssli & 6 by Heidi Kenny (MazPenney)

"I think you'll always see independent artists making plush because it's relatively easy to do yourself. No contracts or factories needed to make a few plush," comments Shawn Smith. "But I do think we'll see more kinds of manufactured plush from artists and designers. Hopefully the plush market won't be as flooded as the vinyl market, but I think you'll see more. And hopefully stores will buy more shelving to accommodate this plush!"

Jill Penney is less sure about the future and sounds a more cautionary note: "Plush is a trend. There is so much stuff being made and no improvement or development. Unless plush becomes more than a fad and moves past the stagnancy of trend it is doomed to burn what little life there is to it until people get bored."

Dennis Douven agrees with Penney's thoughts on development: "Plush won't ever exceed vinyl popularity. Plush hasn't really changed much in years both in design and materials, so hopefully this will change and people will challenge themselves to create more innovative things. There might be electronic parts, or perhaps more interactive...but that's just my imagination!"

Accessibility is something plush has in its favour – there seems to be less attitude attached to it. Fewer designers who are too busy trying to prove how edgy they can be while reproducing something that's been done to death already.

Hopefully that will mean more artists looking at plush in a new light and pushing it forward with some great designs. That would bring a new wave of people to the scene who then discover other designers. "Then they're hooked, get the shakes and constantly need a sweet plush fix. Mwa ha ha ha!" chuckles Maz.

TIPS FROM THE TOP

Shawnimal

"Start off hand sewing if you don't have access to a machine, just so you can see the fruits of your labour, even if it's a bit crude at first. Think about your concepts and designs and make sure the plush thing you make looks like them. Also think about the technical devices and accessories that can really make your character stand out...maybe it's the type of stitch or thread you use, a particular kind of fabric that evokes a certain emotion, or adding something to the mix that people might not expect?"

"But on the flip side of this, which is my aesthetic, sometimes less is more. Simple designs can really be effective, especially when people look at your character and start personifying it, giving it fairness and overall connecting with it on an emotional level."

Jill Penney

"Learn how to make patterns. Learn how flat pieces create form. The best way to do that is how I started – start by making dolls from store bought patterns. Challenge yourself. Once you see how others do it you'll understand the basic formulas and be able to make up your own."

"Start by learning the fundamentals and look beyond the now for inspiration and aspire to your own vision and personal best, not just what others are doing and what you can get away with. Always work to keep raising the standards."

Etoile

"Experiment and do your own thing. Everyone is different so use your experiences and life to inform the work. Push yourself to make characters...you'll have a lot of fun and satisfaction."

Crump

"Sharp scissors, good music and roommate who work during the day. Always dig through the scrap bins...there's treasures to be found!"

Maz

"Just try it – if I can do it, then you can too! Concentrate on the design, keep it basic at first and then experiment. All you need is a design, material and some enthusiasm...so go get cracking!"



Jill Penney