

Big head, big eyes and big heart



Above: Gina Garan's photographs of Blythe launched the once-neglected doll into superstardom. PHOTO COURTESY OF GINA GARAN
 Top, clockwise from left: Inspired by popular TV character Chiang Hsiao-hua from the pop idol opera *Miss No Good*, Karen Chou's Blythe doll won second place at a cosplay contest during a party for Blythe collectors on Sunday of last week at a cafe in Ximending. A Blythe sporting Qing Dynasty garb is ready for her close-up at the party. Dressed up as Captain Jack Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Claire Teng's Blythe won first prize at the cosplay contest. Blythe fan Li Wen-liang's store Summertime sells dolls, clothing and accessories.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU AND RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES



Blythe tugs at the heartstrings of collectors all over the world, who find creative inspiration in her quirky looks

BY CATHERINE SHU
 STAFF REPORTER

As cameras snapped, 19 cosplay competitors made their way up and down a runway in a Ximending cafe on Sunday of last week, inspiring murmurs of appreciation among spectators. Costumes included a buxom Marilyn Monroe, members of the pop group S.H.E and Hello Kitty. Each young lady sashayed down the runway, posed and then returned — borne aloft in the white-gloved hands of two event organizers.

This wasn't your run-of-the-mill contest. All cosplayers were Blythe, the 30cm-tall doll with a giant head, big eyes and devoted worldwide following.

Voting was heated, but ultimately Claire Teng's (鄧淑如) doll prevailed by a wide margin. Teng, a schoolteacher, had dressed her Blythe up as Captain Jack Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, with realistic stubble made from bits of fake hair and double-sided adhesive.

Afterwards, the competitors (and their humans) mingled at the event, which was organized by Summertime (夏天來了), a Ximending store that specializes in selling Blythe dolls and accoutrements. "We're all friends here," said Iris Chen (陳淑樺). "We might not know each other personally, but we're all Blythe friends."

First introduced in 1972 by Kenner Products (now merged into Hasbro), Blythe features eyes that change color and direction with the pull of a string, switching her expression from wide-eyed and innocent to sassy, thoughtful or enigmatic. Considered outlandish even by the standards of the 1970s and pulled out of a production after a year of meager sales, Blythe languished in obscurity for nearly three decades. But the melon-headed beauty found fame at last after the 2000 publication of *This Is Blythe*, a book of photographs by New York City-based Gina Garan, who is revered by fans as Blythe's fairy godmother.

With her quirky looks, which some detractors find "creepy," and Cinderella-like backstory, Blythe often endears herself to people who consider themselves out of step with mainstream tastes.

"I think Blythe appeals to people who are slightly different. It gives you a sense of belonging," says Garan. "For now she's still pretty underground, even though there are a lot of people who know her and collect her. People who feel like they don't quite belong in certain situations see something in Blythe that appeals to them and want to be a part of that."

A lifelong doll collector, Garan discovered Blythe in 1997. "Someone said to me, 'I saw this doll that looks a lot like you,'" remembers Garan. "So I went on eBay and thought, 'Oh my God, she does look a lot like me!'"

Enchanted by their changeable eyes, she started snapping up Kenner Blythes, which then sold for a few US dollars each. When Garan moved into a new apartment and found that a previous tenant had abandoned a 35mm camera in a closet, she got out one of her Blythes to test its macro lens.

"I shot some pictures, got them back and was like, this is so cool, she is so photogenic," says Garan. Her work as a video producer took Garan around the world and Blythe started tagging along as her constant companion and model. Encouraged by friends, Garan sent out a book proposal with several of her photos. To her surprise, publishers responded enthusiastically.

A few months before the publication of *This Is Blythe*, Garan met Junko Wong, the founder of Japan-based creative agency CWC, at a party. Through Wong, Blythe was cast in a series of commercials for Parco, a Japanese department store chain. In 2001, CWC and Japanese toy company Takara (now known as Takara-Tomy) re-launched Blythe dolls. Thanks to buzz created by the Parco advertisements, the initial limited-edition run of 1,000 dolls sold out in one day.

Since then, Takara-Tomy and CWC have launched more than 100 new Blythes (known as neo-Blythes to fans), while the original Kenner Blythes that were once rejected by kids can now command more than US\$1,000. And Blythe's big-eyed visage has made appearances in publications ranging from *Vogue Nippon* (dressed in miniature couture outfits created by top designers) and *Women's Wear Daily* to *Forbes*.

Blythe is often portrayed as an offbeat fad that has entranced hipsters all around the world. But ask most fans what they like about their little buddies, and they won't say her collectible value or the fact that she is trendy. They see Blythe in the same way that Garan sees her: as a creative muse.

In the seven years since the first neo-Blythe came out, fans have made photographing, customizing and designing clothing and accessories for her into a mini art movement, displaying their creations on Web sites like Flickr and Garan's ThisIsBlythe.com, and selling them on eBay, Etsy.com and their own Web sites.

"There have been people who have said, 'I was able to quit my day job because I can make doll dresses full-time now.' I think that is so amazing," says Garan.

And in Li Wen-liang's (李文亮) case, Blythe inspired his store, Summertime, which is located in Ximending mall Shinjuku Plaza (西門新街) at 72-1, Xining S Rd, Taipei City (台北市西寧南路72-1號), tel: (02) 2389-7796.

Li first laid eyes on the doll in 2001 when her photos were used in a department store's advertising circular. "I had never seen anything like her before. I thought she was so adorable," says Li, who as a youngster collected *budaxi* (布袋戲), or traditional Chinese puppets. A few years later, Li thought of Blythe when he and a friend were drafting a business plan for a new store, a dream they had had since high school.

"We wanted to specialize in something that is unique, but all we knew was that we did not want to sell clothes," says Li. "Finally, I mentioned Blythe and my friend thought it was a really great idea."

Li's store carries Blythes (adoption fees range from NT\$2,000 to NT\$3,000, except for limited-edition and rarer dolls) and Blythe clothes, shoes and furniture, most of which are handmade by local designers. He also customizes dolls and sells them in the store or on eBay. The fun of Blythe for many fans is that her giant head and big eyes offer ample opportunity for makeovers: new make-up can be applied, lips and eye sockets can be carved, eye color can be changed with plastic "eye chips" and hair can be rerooted.

Li estimates that 90 percent of the customers who visit his store are women, but male fans also make an appearance, including his friends Allen Chen (陳惠新) and Xavier Chu (許昌蒲), both of whom work at the store and helped organize the Blythe cosplay contest. Chen taught himself how to sew in order to make Blythe clothes, but so far has been unable to convince his girlfriend to become a Blythe fan herself. But "she thinks it's impressive that I can customize them," Chen says.

The slowing economy has affected business at Summertime, which used to sell as many as 10 dolls a month, but now sells only three to four on average. But Li says that Blythe continues to make new friends in Taiwan, even if they cannot afford to buy new dolls, and fresh faces show up regularly at his store. Nearly 10 years after the publication of *This Is Blythe*, the doll still tugs at the heartstrings of those who just cannot resist her big, sparkling eyes — or who feel a connection to her tale of rejection and ultimate rebirth into an international icon of plastic fabulousness.

Garan recently received an e-mail from a woman who bought a doll for her six-year-old daughter; the little girl, like Blythe, had been teased for her unconventional good looks. "She was being made fun of in school. Her mom sent me a picture of her daughter, who is absolutely gorgeous, but she has a big forehead and big eyes," says Garan. "She said that seeing Blythe in these great locations and looking so good has really brightened her daughter."

Despite having run Summertime for the last three years, Li says his love of the doll has not changed one iota. Like many fans, Li dresses up his Blythes and takes them for photo shoots to scenic locales like Yangmingshan, the Taipei Zoo and the beach. "At first it was kind of embarrassing, especially because I'm a guy," Li says of the occasional stares from passersby. "But then I thought, if I am doing what makes me happy, then who cares?"