

STYLE

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The largest event of its kind in Asia, the Taipei Toy Festival celebrates the link between art and toys — and gives collectors plenty of opportunities to empty their wallets

BY CATHERINE SHU
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▶ Lo Siu Kong and Little Cat.
▼ La Petite Mu Mu by Hong Kong designer Fion Ko.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Sculptures by Kaohsiung artists.

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— Ziv of graphic design group Half Dozen



A Bearbrick figure based on cartoon character Stimpy of Ren and Stimpy.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

For the seventh year, the Taipei Toy Festival swept into town, bringing the heady smell of fresh vinyl and plastic to collectors. The event, which focuses on designer toys and is the largest of its kind in Asia, ran from July 8 to July 11 at Huashan Culture Park (華山創意園區) and drew an estimated 10,000 visitors.

This year's lineup featured more than 200 artists and designers from Japan, Hong Kong, the US, Taiwan, Canada and France. For the first time, the Taipei Toy Festival also included a graphic novel and comic book fair, which paid tribute to the art form that is most closely linked with designer toys.

"Dali played with toys. Picasso, in his heart he had the spirit of toys, only he played with oil paints," says Jen Huang (黃仁謙), the founder of the festival and owner of more than 7,000 figures.

The start of the designer toy trend is commonly attributed to Michael Lau (劉維文), a Hong Kong artist who in the late 1990s began making limited-edition vinyl figures based on a comic he had created. The term designer toy and "urban vinyl" are often used interchangeably because many of the figures are made from high-quality plastic and vinyl. Their creators often have fine arts, graphic design or animation backgrounds, and toys are usually produced in limited runs.

The Taipei Toy Festival was launched in 2004, when Huang, director of toy distributor Monster Taipei (台北怪獸國際有限公司), and fellow members of Toy League Taiwan (台灣設計師玩具創作核心) were inspired by Hong Kong's Toycon. They wanted a similar way to bring Taiwanese and Hong Kong toy artists together in Taipei. The first event featured 30 designers.

Though the Taipei Toy Festival has exploded in size, participating designers still laud its relaxed atmosphere, which makes networking a pleasure rather than a chore.

Ziv (徐祥庭) of Taiwanese graphic design group Half Dozen (半打) says the festival is a chance for him to catch up with his friends in the business. The Taipei Toy Festival is crucial to getting Half Dozen's work noticed, he adds.

"All of us [in Half Dozen] have day jobs, so this is an outlet for us," says Ziv. "We get a chance to show our work to collectors and hopefully get some exposure within the industry."

Ziv's own creations, a colorful menagerie of cubical animals with big eyes, are inspired by his work as a children's theater performer.

"They combine all the different skills I've learned from my career," says Ziv. "In children's shows, everything has to be over-the-top. My characters have those qualities, plus they are cute."

Huang says he's careful to update each edition of the Taipei Toy Festival to keep it relevant to fans. In addition to the graphic novel and comic exhibition, more vendors arrived with clothing and accessories, including T-shirts, baseball caps and tote bags.

Micky Chu (朱志凱) of Bubbleyum Creative and Paul Leung (梁沛樂) of Giveme5 shared a booth adorned with limited-edition jeans created by a company called Denim Addiction that had contacted the Hong Kong-based designers to create wearable "crossovers."

"My stuff is more 'fashion-style,' so I think of my friends' styles when I'm looking for inspiration," Leung says of his intricately detailed limited-edition figures.

When asked why toys still figure in the fantasies of so many adults, Huang says that no matter how sophisticated the design, there is still an element of childlike glee when it comes to creating or collecting a figure.

"For a lot of kids, toys are something you only get when your parents are willing to buy them for you or when you earn good grades," says Huang.

While some people count sheep to fall asleep, Huang remembers that as a boy, he lulled himself into slumber by mounting imaginary battles with toy soldiers from British company King and Country.

"The figures were hard for me to get, because they were expensive and imported from Europe. So when I grew up, I became their Taiwanese distributor," Huang says with a smile.

A rainbow of bears by Danke Schoen.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



▶ A tiger by BananaVirus.
▼ Handpainted C.i.Boys figures.

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Vinyl dreams and plastic fantasies