

CONTEMPORARY CHARACTER DESIGN MADE IN ASIA

PAGEONE



## NEW SPECIES: CONTEMPORARY CHARACTER DESIGN MADE IN ASIA

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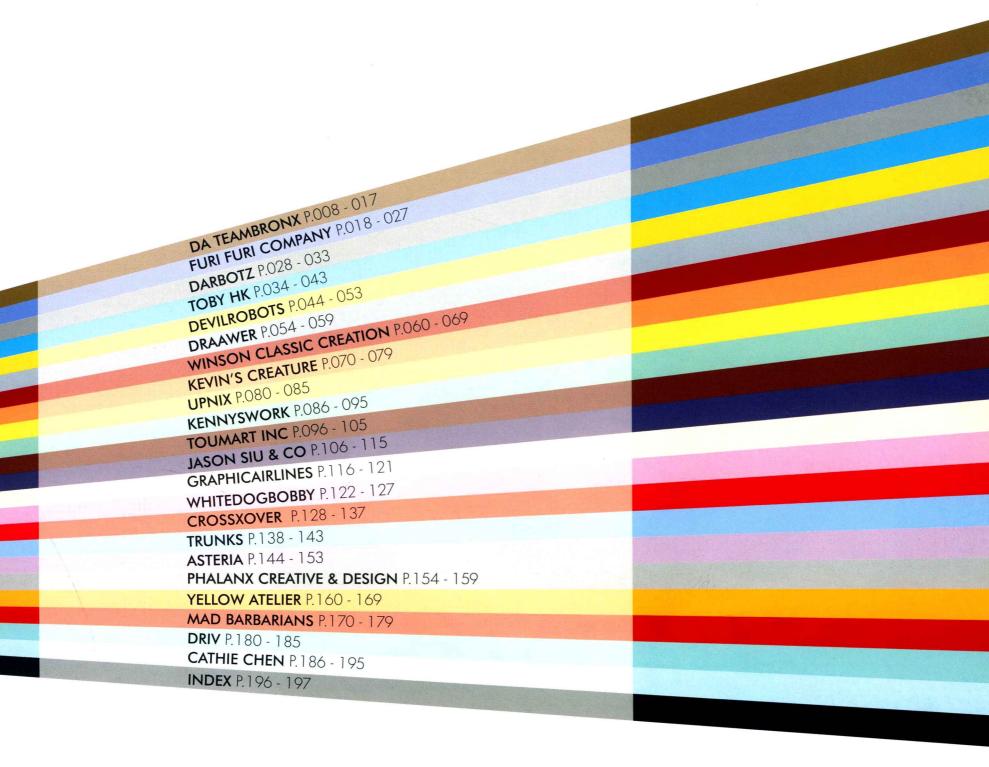
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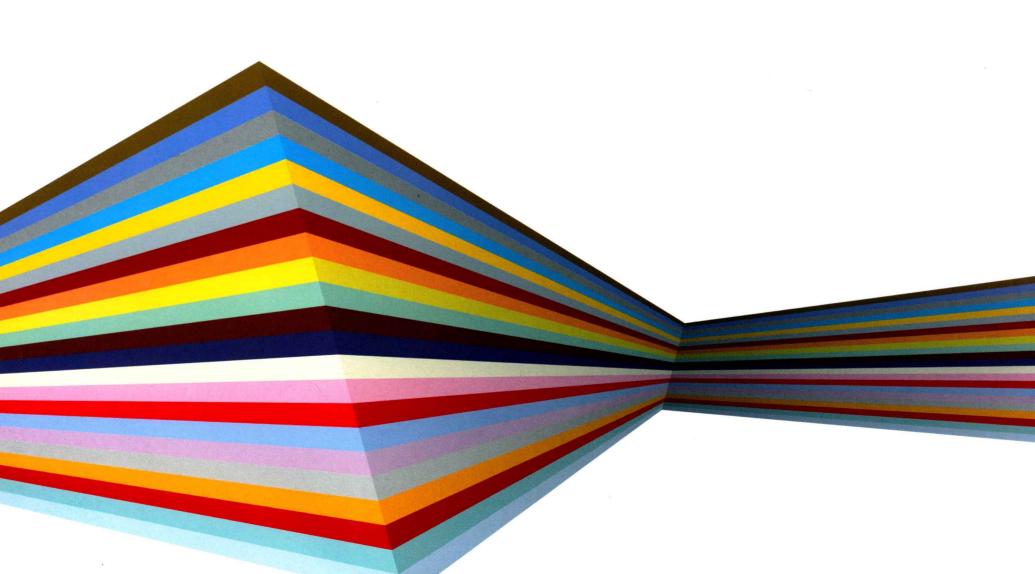
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That the character design arena is booming is no secret. The secret, however, is how these designs achieve a life of their own, from a simple desire in a designer's mind to a tangible product that traverses continents and cultures. For a creative field that is so often self-funded and dependent on luck and market conditions for success, character design is still largely driven by personal passion and initiative. Character design can work in myriad ways and on various creative platforms; and the magic that's required to make them work as characters and as products, as this book suggests, follows no set formula.

New Species: Contemporary Character Design Made in Asia features 22 of the most successful and engaging character designers from Asia, though the selection here certainly isn't premised merely on the simple formula of popular success and fame. Some of these designers are forerunners in the character design field, like dynamic Japanese team DEVILROBOTS, or the edgy, ever cool Jason Siu, or veteran Cathie Chen whose series, Cathy, has been around for over a decade. Others like Darbotz and Whitedogbobby, Upnix and Draawer are just beginning to dip their toes in the pool – yet their potential and dedication are clear. Others designers like MADBARBARIANS are feverishly creative with delightful madcap characters, for example, the Gas Curry & Spice series with chefs decked out in prank suits.

But first we must ask: what is the potential of character design that we are witnessing today? Besides the characters themselves, *New Species: Contemporary Character Design Made in Asia* showcases a broad spectrum of products that are quite often the result of highly productive collaborations. Take for example, Winson Ma's Apexplorers 2106 that has collaborated with Canon Hong Kong to produce cameras as accessories for Ma's characters.

Hong Kong's Michael Lau revitalised the use of vinyl in toys and sparked a wave of vinyl and toy craze. Many of the character designers in this book, if not all, have been influenced by the recent renaissance in designer toys. Cartoons and characters have been around for a long time, but these toys have traditionally been relegated to the era of childhood, innocent playthings you outgrow once you are over five feet tall in favour of more sophisticated things.

These new toys are no longer for kids: they are oftentimes worldly and complex, pricey collector items with genuine street cred. Tim Tsui's REAL Bling figure from the popular Da Ape series was fitted with real diamonds and rocketed to a price of US\$4,500 on eBay. Touma's KNUCKLE BEARS\* attracted a cult following around the world and many of his characters are only available in limited editions

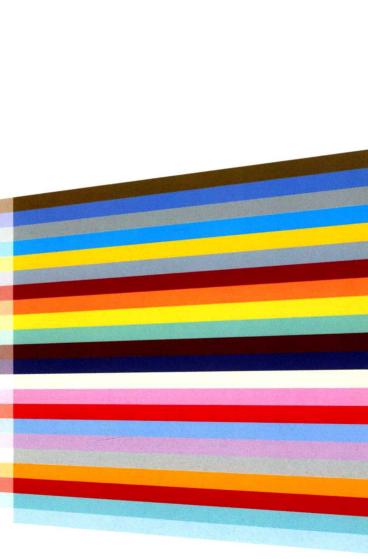
Characters have also found a place not merely as collector items but in brand tie-ups. Alice Chan's Asteria, a fashion icon with eclectic looks, has set a precedent for character design with tie-ups with global fashion brands. Pop star Jay Chou designed a toy for Mark Chang's SoWhat series, while Danny Chan's Spooky Cat character was chosen by watchmakers o.d.m. to be used as an advertising character.

Of course, there are other designers who stand by an original formula for characters. These characters retain their cuteness and child-like appeal like Chapman Tse's colourful Geegeejerjer series or Driv's happy Robonut characters. Kenny Wong's Little Molly series was inspired by a young girl he met at an event who dazzled him with her love for art.

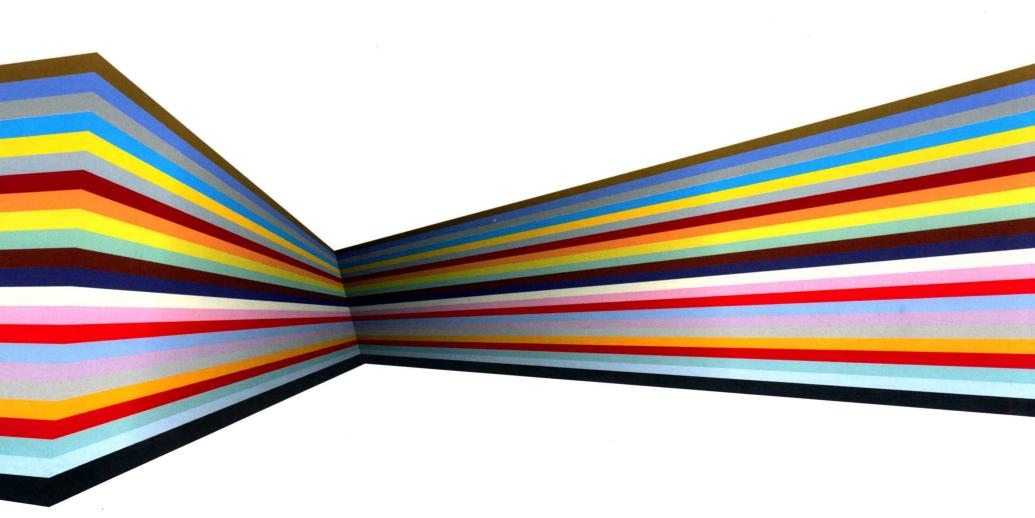
The internet has also been pivotal in the proliferation of characters, like Trunks who maintains a site that showcases his work in character and emoticon design. Kevin Husky also maintains a strong web presence with a blog for Husky X 3.

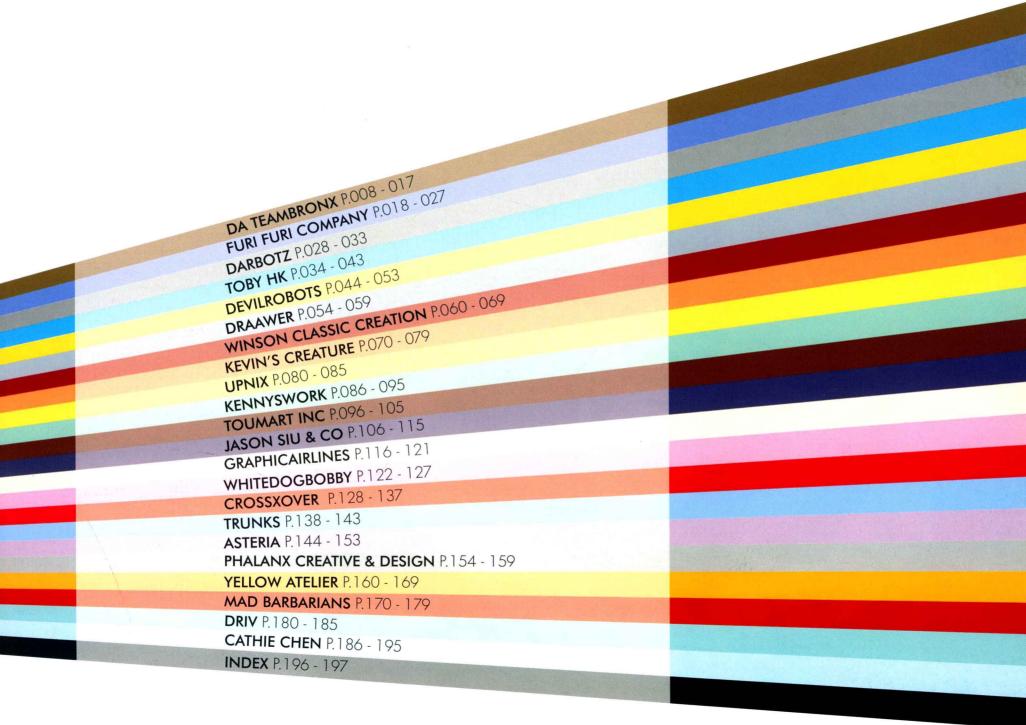
Finally, there are designers seeking to deliver social messages. Toby Yeung's characters draw attention to social concerns like human cloning and environmental awareness. Kathy Kuk from Graphicairlines presents some of the darkest characters in *New Species: Contemporary Character Design Made in Asia* – fat, ugly and full of malaise about the modern world, Fat Faces reveals how character design can be a deeply personal project.

As a testament to the dynamism of this creative field, there is no clear limit to where characters can infiltrate or what they can express. Perhaps the designers from Japanese firm Furi Furi Company offer a brief hint of where character design is going: "The designers now active in the front line of the character design industry are the ones who grew up with characters around them. Thus the designs are even more sophisticated than before." In celebrating this generation of character designers, perhaps the designers in this book are also influencing a new generation of character designers, whose future has yet to be.











## DA TEAMBRONX

#### Tim Tsui

Tough-looking, street-smart, fashionable to a T: figurine designer and illustrator Tim Tsui's style of character design comes right from the heart of a global youth culture touched to the soul by street culture and hip-hop. Tim flexes twin identities, an Asian designer conquering foreign markets with his talents in illustration, graphic design and advertising, and a lover of American and Japanese hip-hop culture that have become the lifeblood of his work. He has single-handedly built up his company Da TeamBronx; to date, he has designed over 50 characters, some of which have yet to be released.

Since launching his first character series, coincidentally carrying the same name as his company, Tim has gone on to collaborate with an illustrious host of major brands, including adidas, MTV, Coca-Cola, Royal Elastics, Tower Records and Colette. A frequent guest speaker at exhibitions and events, Tim is planning to go on several world tours and exhibition by 2009 in order to introduce his works to a wider audience and to meet more of his fans.

# OUT OF DA STREETS



#### Tell us how you first started out.

I have been an avid figurine collector since I was a kid, and I still enjoy playing with toys, like Sid from Pixar Animation's *Toy Story*. I guess I never grew up.

I became interested in design and was a multimedia producer with a large company; and my work involved graphic design, game and character design for clients. However some designs I had to do were not really my cup of tea.

One day, it suddenly dawned on me: "Hey! Why don't I try designing a figurine, or better still, a whole team of them?" Let me tell you, having a flash of inspiration was the easy part. To design a figurine, you have to learn sculpting and moulding techniques. After much trial and error, and several hundred attempts, I finally learnt the rules.

#### What difficulties did you encounter?

The main difficulty I encountered was one any new artist would face, which was: how to introduce yourself and your work to the world.

To be noticed, you need to make something outstanding and eye-catching. Only then will people notice and recognise that it is Tim Tsui's work, and not just the figurine's price tag of, say, US\$70. So, I decided to produce a vinyl toy called King. The packaging was modelled after a plastic spray can; the set was a big hit and was recognised for being innovative. I was the first artist to create a special packaging for vinyl toys, instead of using the usual box.

### All your designs come with angry, snarling expressions. Do they reflect your personality?

Ha ha! Some people feel that I look angry but after they got to know me better, they realise that I'm a kind person. Perhaps that's why I create my figures with angry faces. After people take a closer look at my designs, they will find that they are lovable and endearing. Art, like life, always needs a deeper look to understand the real message.

### How do you come up with those expressions – do you observe apes or humans?

I just observe humans. I observe human emotion in all its facets and try to add them to my apes. After all, scientists tell us that we humans evolved from apes, so why not try some reverse evolution and humanise apes – at least in vinyl.

### How do Hong Kong toy designs differ from the American ones?

Just talking about market acceptance alone, I think American toy collectors are more adventurous than the Hong Kong ones. Americans easily accept new designs, styles and topics. In Hong Kong, artists need to worry about the market, not just about their art. The US collectible market is also much bigger than Hong Kong's. This tends to influence artists who need to derive their income from their art. American artists can afford to concentrate on creativity with freedom while Hong Kong artists have to tone their creativity down for the local market.





## DA APE

As Tim was conceptualising the series, he realised that there were already many human characters on the market. He was also bent on creating a work that would make manufacturing fakes an uphill task for illegal manufacturers. With these two considerations, Da Ape series was born. By using unique fabric packaging and more intensive sculpturing techniques on Da Ape series, Tim has managed to curb any imitations of his beloved apes.

The stuff of classic comic-book plots, in Da Ape series, a group of guys mutate into apes. Out on a graffiti session at night, a smoker in the group drops a smouldering cigarette butt on the ground. A nearby spray-can catches fire, explodes, and the released chemicals transform the fated tribe into apes. You can still see traces of the ordeal from the shoes and T-shirts of the apes, which are split at the seams. A self-confessed fashion addict, the apes have become a great outlet for Tim's creativity. Decked out in outlandish street-wear and fashionable accessories, along with their gruff, tough attitude, Da Apes are the quintessential emblems of today's street culture.



DAVING





## BLING



#### Hi, Bling. I've been told you are the boss of Da Ape.

Yeah. It's obvious. I'm puffing on a fat cigar and have shades. I'm also much bigger than da rest. It's obvious.

#### Right. So what have you been doing lately?

Travelled to Taiwan, had some wild times. Planning to do some comics and products with Tim. He's also going to get me started on some world tours and exhibitions too.

#### What do you mean by "wild times"?

Tim got this model of me done. Wham! The Taiwanese were blown away. It was called REAL Bling, which was a shop opening gift for Concept Shop. There are only three pieces in the world. Get this: the model has teeth made of *real* silver and diamonds.

#### Wow!

I'm not done. I was featured on more than ten television programmes and shocked many in the local market. Maybe it was because it was the most expensive vinyl figure to have ever been created to date (it cost US\$1,500 and has rocketed to US\$4,500 on eBay.)

"The best ideas come suddenly when you are not really straining for creativity."

