



paul budnitz

I AM PLASTIC, TOO

the next generation of designer toys



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the next generation of designer toys

abrams, new york

.....

This book is dedicated to the many talented artists
and dedicated fans who make Kidrobot wonderful.

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Front cover: **Painkiller 8-inch Dunny**, 2006
(designed by Thomas Han; manufactured by Kidrobot)

Back cover: **Da Minci**, Secret Version, 2007
(designed by Tim Tsui; manufactured by Teamzero)

Pages 2–3: **Kidninja**, Kidrobot 14, White Edition, 2008
(designed by Huck Gee; manufactured by Kidrobot)

Page 5: **Dirty Affonso**, IWG Movie Icons Series, 2009
(designed by Patrick York Ma; manufactured by
Rocket World)

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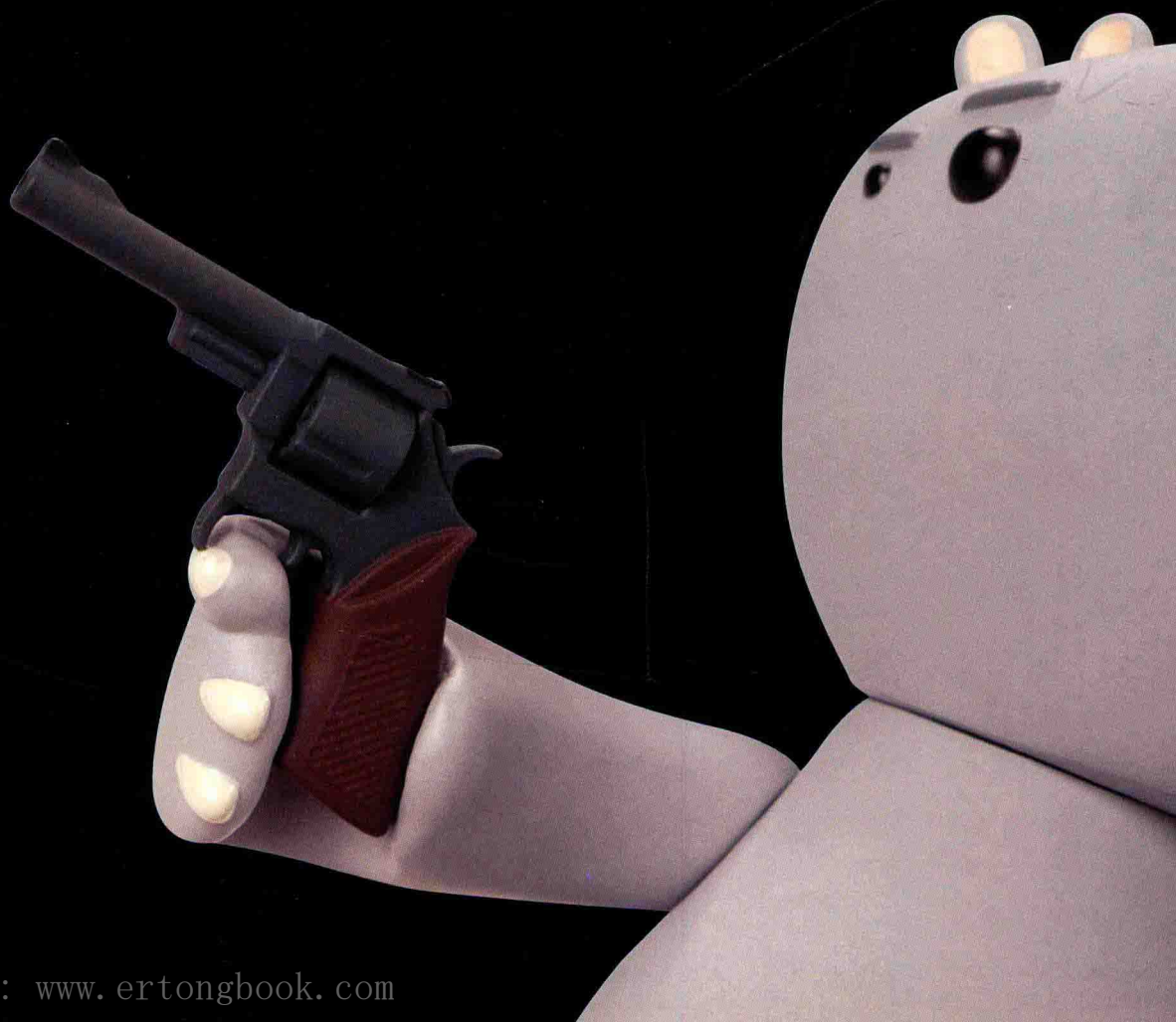
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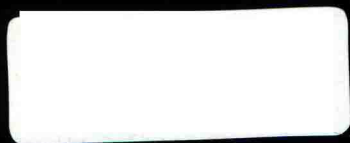




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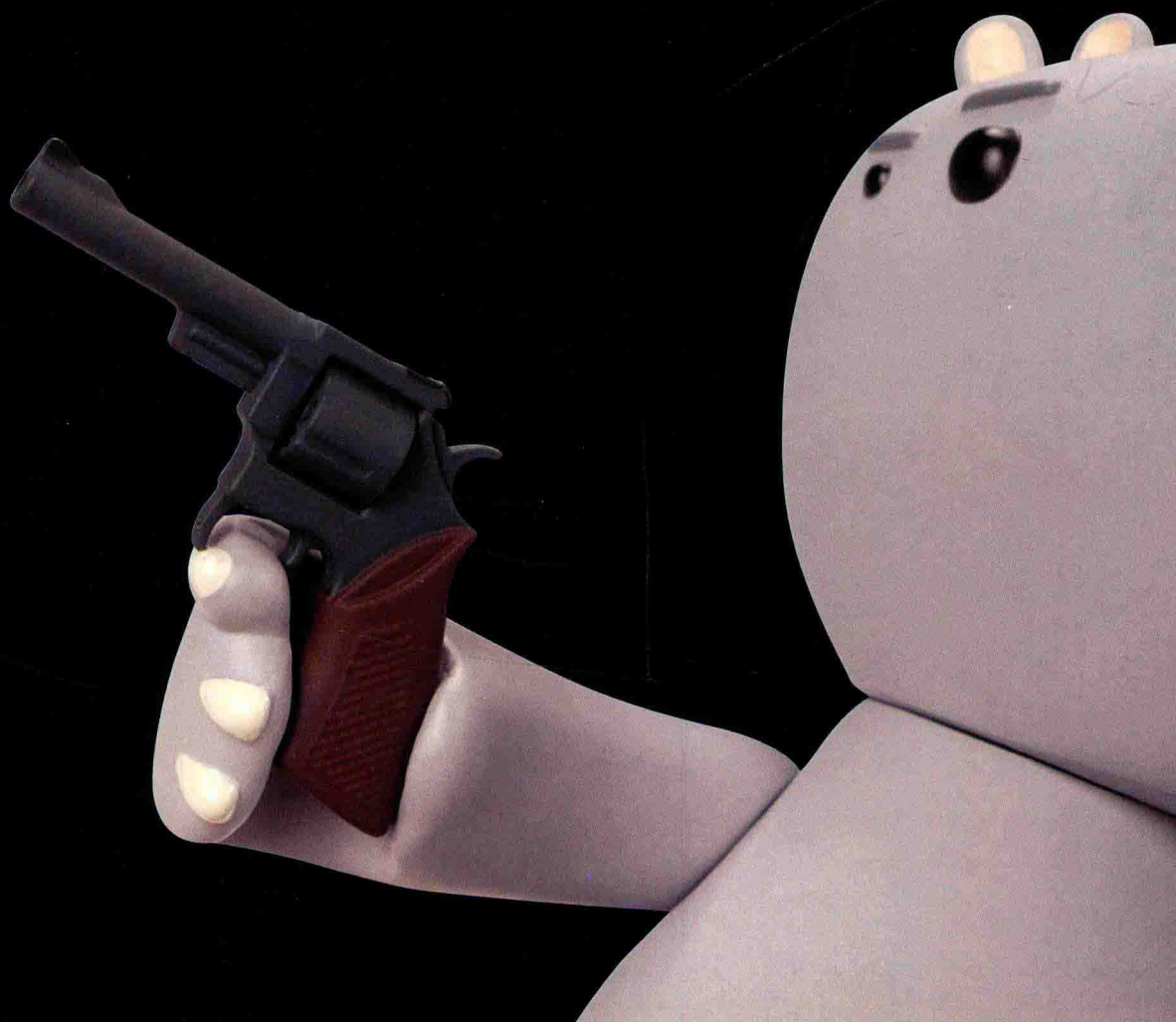
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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION BY PAUL BUDNITZ

Welcome to *I AM PLASTIC, TOO*, the second volume of Kidrobot's survey of designer toys.

This book covers what I believe are the very best toys to have come out of the designer toy movement in the last few years. Yet so many toys have been released since the publication of our first volume in 2006 that it would be impossible for me to include everything good, or even great, in this book.

Since our first book was published, the international designer toy movement has exploded. The number of artists working in the medium has grown, as has the number of devoted fans who collect these toys. Fans often wait in front of stores for hours—or even days—to buy the latest limited toy on the day it is released.

Some toy artists have truly reached the status of rock stars. Giant lines snake around the block when artists such as Huck Gee, Tristan Eaton, Frank Kozik, Tara McPherson, and Kronk appear at toy signings. Fans even tattoo themselves with images of toys their favorite artists have designed.

The movement has come a long way since 1996, when two Chinese artists, Michael Lau and Eric So, began selling their handmade limited-edition toys at toy conventions in Hong Kong. At almost the same time, in Japan, Hikaru Iwanaga, the owner of a small gothic/punk clothing boutique in Tokyo called Bounty Hunter, began making limited-edition vinyl toys to sell along with his clothing line. The toys had immediate appeal as collectibles because they were so rare, but also because they were urban, beautiful, and edgy.

When I first began collecting toys in about 2001, they were extremely hard to find. I spent

days hunting for them on obscure Websites, in the corners of basement toy stores in Kowloon, and in little boutiques in Tokyo's Harajuku district. I founded Kidrobot in 2002 because I wanted to make my own toys and collaborate with my friends, many of whom happened to be some of the world's greatest graffiti artists, fine artists, fashion designers, and illustrators. Some were already famous but many were not.

Today, designer toys are still produced as limited editions and in small runs and are primarily designed for and collected by adults. The toys *feel* adult. They combine "a little cuteness and a little blackness," as my friend Shin from the Tokyo character studio DEVILROBOTS often says.

The greatest shift in the movement over the last several years is that the majority of toy designers and their followers are now in the West—in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America, Europe, Australia, and even South Africa. Asia still has many exceptional designers and a strong toy culture, but it is clear that the center of gravity has moved firmly westward. While our first volume began with toys from Japan and China, this new volume begins in the United States, which is a reflection of this change.

The toys in *I AM PLASTIC, TOO* have evolved to be less urban and more pop, edgier and often more abstract than the toys in the first volume. Local artists naturally refer back to their own cultures—so, for example, toys designed by Mexican artist Saner have a Mexican color palette and flavor. Frank Kozik's plastic bust of a smoking Joseph Stalin in a Bolshevik baseball uniform (Smokin' Joe Stalin) looks ironically at the outside world through the eyes of American

media. Nevertheless, designer toys remain an international movement, and artists from different parts of the world frequently collaborate. Collectors are also international, not regional.

Another big change is that one-of-a-kind custom toys frequently appear in the pages of this book. Several years ago I noticed that people were buying stock Kidrobot toys, modifying and repainting them, and posting their designs on the Internet. Customs blew up when artists began selling these original creations on eBay, sometimes for thousands of dollars. Many blank toys have since appeared on the market (MUNNYWORLD, MAD*L, blank Qees, and several others), allowing just about anyone to create their own toys. The lines between consumer and artist are now blurred to the point where the two are often indistinguishable.

As was always inevitable, a wider audience has begun to take notice. As I write this, toys designed by Tristan Eaton, Huck Gee, and myself are on display on the design floor of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, sitting next to a poster series created by Andy Warhol. Many artists, such as Frank Kozik, Gary Baseman, FriendsWithYou, and Tara McPherson, have gallery exhibitions where their work is sold for tens of thousands of dollars. Other artists, like Sket One, Huck Gee, and Chuckboy, have begun focusing on custom toys made exclusively on commission for collectors. Huck recently purchased his own mold-making machinery so that he can produce small runs of toys in his San Francisco studio. So even the production of toys is leaving Asia and moving westward.

These new developments have led to one of the most tiresome questions just about every toy

artist I know has been asked by an interviewer: "Is it a toy, or is it art?" Why people care about distinctions like this is mystifying to me. The walls between product and art crumbled when Andy Warhol began selling his own wallpaper; they were obliterated completely when producer Danger Mouse released his bootleg masterpiece, *The Grey Album*, which remixed Jay-Z's *The Black Album* with the Beatles' *The White Album*.

Designer toys are serious works of art; they are also plastic, mass-produced products that sit on store shelves. Adults put them behind glass while kids play with them. Product, logo, and design are art. They're all one.

What I truly love about the toys in this book is the anarchic spirit of joy and freedom they still represent. The designer toy movement thrives without any serious curators, without important gallery owners, and without grim-faced or sunglass-wearing arbiters of style who decide what

is good and what is bad, what is important and what is trash. Anyone with a few thousand dollars and a lot of patience and willpower can make a couple hundred toys in China. Anyone with twenty dollars and a paintbrush can make a custom toy, post it on the Internet, and sell it on eBay.

The toys in this book are arguably the first examples of a truly international folk art in which artists, fans, collectors, galleries, manufacturers, and stores blur within a shared, continuously evolving medium and aesthetic language.

The walls that divide us continue to crumble—geographic, aesthetic, economic, linguistic, and cultural.

We are becoming one.

Vive le plastic!

Paul Budnitz
New York City
2010



Photo by Brent Nelson

UNITED STATES

SSUR EMPIRESTATE

Ruslan Karablin, better known in the art and design worlds as SSUR, emerged from the New York downtown art scene fifteen years ago. Karablin was born in Russian-occupied Odessa, Ukraine, in 1969, but later moved to Coney Island, New York, where he spent most of his young life. In 1989, though an outside artist with no formal training, Karablin introduced himself to the art world when he released a series of paintings that have now become sought-after collector's pieces. In 1990, under his SSUR brand, he pioneered what is known internationally today as "streetwear." Since this venture began, the SSUR name has traveled the world and become synonymous with both innovation and quality.

Designer: Ruslan Karablin

Manufacturer: Kidrobot

Nationality: Ukrainian

Based in: New York

Website: ssurempirestate.com



SSUR Real From the Cradle
to the Grave, 2010

ANTON GINZBURG

Anton Ginzburg is an artist and designer based in New York. He received a classical art education in his native city of St. Petersburg, Russia, before moving to the United States in 1990. Ginzburg graduated from Parsons the New School for Design in New York. His work was featured in the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Triennial in 2003 and is represented in the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among other public and private collections worldwide. Totem Doppelgänger was conceived as a sculptural installation and was originally presented at the first Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2005. It was later acquired by the Moscow Museum of Modern Art for its permanent collection.

Designer: Anton Ginzburg
Manufacturer: Kidrobot
Nationality: Russian/American
Based in: New York
Websites: antonginzburg.com;
studioradia.com



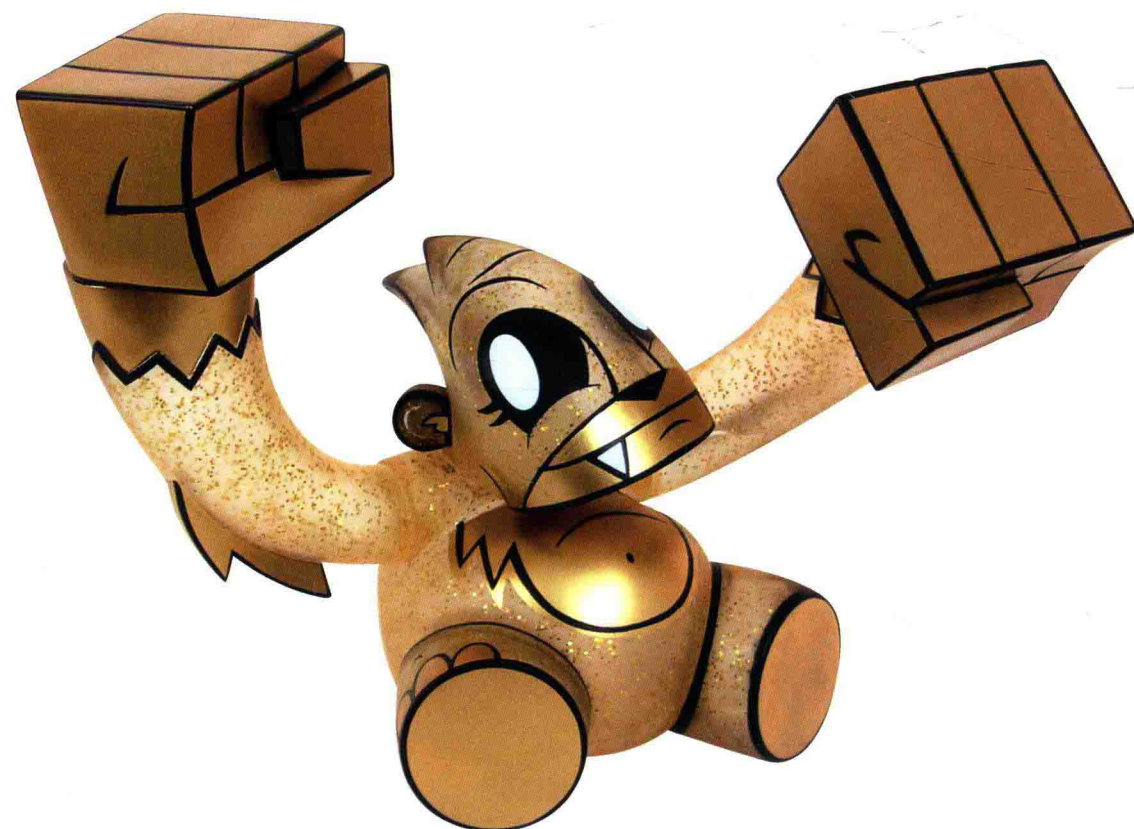
Totem Doppelgänger,
White Edition, 2007



JOE LEDBETTER

Influenced by classic animation, graphic design, and daily life, Joe Ledbetter's art is...well...a lot of things. Lighthearted in his approach, he often places cute and cuddly creatures in unfortunate—albeit humorous—situations. Though leaning toward the subversive and absurd, these scenarios are all too familiar and they question our tendency of taking life (and ourselves) too seriously. While working as a graphic apparel artist for three years, Ledbetter got involved in the Los Angeles underground art scene, beginning with group shows such as Cannibal Flower. By the summer of 2004, he had honed his trademark visual style of emblematic linework, vibrant colors, and endearing characters to the point of being able to quit his day job. His incredible cast of creatures has since been emblazoned on more than a hundred designer vinyl toys, as well as apparel and lifestyle brands the world over.

Designer: Joe Ledbetter
Nationality: American
Based in: Los Angeles
Website: joeledbetter.com



Smash, Lava Version and
Goldie Version, 2008
(manufactured by Toy2R)