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Beyond Ultraman: Seven Artists Explore

October 10, 2007 – January 6, 2008



David Horvath, *Bossy Bear* (juxtaposed with prototype), 2007, vinyl figure, 4" H. Photo courtesy of Gary van der Steur

Pasadena, CA – The Pasadena Museum of California Art (PMCA), in conjunction with the Los Angeles Toy, Doll, and Amusements Museum (LATDA), is pleased to present the first-ever museum exhibition devoted to exploring and contextualizing the current wave of artist-designed vinyl toys, sometimes known as “urban vinyl.” *Beyond Ultraman: Seven Artists Explore the Vinyl Frontier* explores the work of seven artists who have elevated the vinyl art toy movement and captured the attention of two audiences: the mainstream art community and the toy community.

The exhibition traces the roots of the contemporary vinyl collecting culture back to Japanese vinyl collectibles of the 1960s and '70s, which were ultimately the spawn of a clever marketing innovation: manufacturing toys based on popular television show characters like Ultraman. Included in the

exhibition are many examples of these vintage toys, whose trajectory reveals the similarities and differences in the vinyl collecting culture of today. While G.I. Joe could be credited as the progenitor of the “action figure,” it was the Japanese monsters, robots, and aliens that widened the scope of the genre, thus sparking the imaginations of an entire generation of children. From this “vinyl generation,” seven of the toy artists featured in *Beyond Ultraman* came of age in the fertile mix of Japanese, Mexican and American pop culture found in California.

Each of these artists represents a unique dimension of the still-burgeoning and widespread scene, but all have remained in California. The cartoony characters of Gary Baseman, the Emmy award-winning creator of the *Teacher's Pet* series and a Los Angeles art scene fixture, epitomize the commercially successful philosophy of multimedia pervasiveness enjoyed by popular brands such as Ultraman and Hello Kitty. Like their Japanese counterparts, Baseman’s Toby and others translate well into a variety of media, from animation to consumer products, but unlike them, they have infiltrated the fine art world as well, in the guise of Baseman’s canvas paintings and gallery installations. Likewise, Tim Biskup’s friendly-seeming monsters belie their psychological symbolism in his works made for galleries. These more expensive and exclusive works are often displayed alongside affordably priced collectible figures, and while the work of Baseman and Biskup is sometimes classified as “lowbrow” art, their ethos of accessibility coincides with art world luminaries such as Warhol, or his Japanese equivalent, Murakami.

Meanwhile, the creators of the immensely popular Uglydolls, the husband and wife team of David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim, began their ascent as major players in the vinyl scene from the humble beginnings of creating unique plush homemade dolls. Originally hand-sewn by Kim,



Brian McCarty, *Vespa Va Vroom* (detail), 2004, photograph.
Courtesy of the artist.

the ugly-cute little monsters have now become so in demand that Uglycon opened at Giant Robot this past year to throngs of fans who bought out the whole gallery of limited editions within an hour. The skyrocketing popularity of David Gonzales' "Homies" also allowed them to transcend their station as quarter-machine collectibles in grocery stores to become icons of Chicano art, encompassing more than 300 unique characters, each with their own backstory, which as a whole capture a slice of real life from the *barrios*.



Tim Biskup, *War Dragon* (detail), 2007, vinyl figure, 10" H.
Photo courtesy of Gary van der Steur

Within the community of vinyl artists, Brian McCarty and Mark Nagata inhabit more documentary roles while still producing artistically skilled and creative work of their own. As a toy photographer, McCarty brings his own vision to toys designed by others, allowing them to inhabit their own real spaces and narratives outside of the display shelf. His still photographs have led him to a new phase of his career as a producer of a television series, and sometimes the toys chosen for his compositions are so-called "one-offs" by the toy designer; essentially a one-of-a-kind miniature sculpture in painted plastic. Nagata, on the other hand, is first and foremost a kind of Ultraman historian, owner of the largest Ultraman collection in the Western hemisphere. *Super 7*, the magazine he co-founded, was a kind of archive for vintage Japanese vinyl. His passion has since led him to becoming a renowned toy designer and

painter in his own right, and his inclusion of the "old school" Japanese aesthetic in his work provides the missing link between today's vinyl collecting culture and that of yesterday. Vintage pieces from Nagata's collection, along with other vintage toys, are included in the exhibition to help illustrate the similarities and differences between past and present vinyl toy collecting.

Beyond Ultraman: Seven Artists Explore the Vinyl Frontier is on view at the Pasadena Museum of California Art (PMCA) until January 6, 2008. The PMCA is located at 490 East Union Street, Pasadena, CA 91101, and is open Wednesday through Sunday from 12 – 5 p.m. A full-color exhibition catalog is published by Baby Tattoo Books and features essays by Maria Kwong, curator of *Beyond Ultraman* and Director of the Los Angeles Toy, Doll and Amusements Museum (LATDA), and Ivan Vartanian, author of *Full Vinyl*.

Related programs:

Opening Reception at the PMCA

Thursday, October 11, 2007

7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

\$5 admission, free for PMCA and LATDA members

David Horvath and Sun-Min Kim Reading and Book Signing

Saturday, October 13, 2007

1:00 p.m.

Free admission

The Uglydolls creators will release a special limited edition set of Flatwoods Monster and Mothman. Only 40 of these special toy sets will be available, and only in the PMCA bookstore. In addition to the toy release, David Horvath will give a reading of his book *Bossy Bear*, with a book signing to follow.