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Bear market

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A toy competition to celebrate the Vocational Training Council's 30th Anniversary broke records and showed how fine art and popular culture can be combined to spectacular effect. As **SUMMER CAO** reports, the contest also revealed how the region's most established design school works to promote the reputation of Hong Kong's design industry.



QEE BEAR OUTLOOK DESIGNED BY CHAN LAITING, THE WINNER FROM THE KWUN TONG DISTRICT

BEAR MARKET



JUDGE PANEL (AT THE BACK) OF THE QEE BEAR IMAGE DIY DESIGN COMPETITION WITH CONTESTANTS FROM YUEN LONG DISTRICT AND THEIR DESIGN. THE PANEL INCLUDES RAYMOND CHOY, CREATOR OF QEE BEAR (THIRD FROM LEFT), BERNIE TING, CHAIRMAN OF HONG KONG Q-MARK COUNCIL, FEDERATION OF HONG KONG INDUSTRIES (ON THE RIGHT), C.K. YEUNG, VICE CHAIRMAN OF BLUE BOX HOLDINGS LTD (THIRD FROM RIGHT), KELLY SZE, CHAIRMAN OF HONG KONG DESIGNERS' ASSOCIATION (2010-12) (SECOND FROM RIGHT), JOHN TONG, VICE CHAIRMAN OF HONG KONG TOYS COUNCIL (FOURTH FROM RIGHT), ALEX FUNG, THE RECENTLY RETIRED PRINCIPAL OF HKDI (FOURTH FROM LEFT), EDWIN WONG, PROGRAMME LEADER OF HIGHER DIPLOMA IN VISUAL ARTS AND CULTURE OF HKDI (FIRST FROM LEFT)

"I MIGHT APPLY FOR A PLACE in the Guinness Book of World Records," says Dr. Raymond Choy, commenting on the Qee Bear do-it-yourself design competition organised by HKDI for all secondary students in Hong Kong. "This is the biggest toy DIY design competition in Hong Kong, maybe the world."

Choy was one of the competition's judges and is the founder and president of Toy2R, a Hong Kong based toy company that gave birth to the urban vinyl toy Qee in 2001. Choy is no stranger to awards, having been showered with them over the last decade. After Qee's initial success he created blank black or white figures, giving Qee fans the chance to design and paint their own toys.

A DIY Qee competition was

the next logical step and more than 1,000 designs from 18 districts in Hong Kong were received. In phase one each participant had to submit their entry on paper with a short description of the design concept, which was required to include iconic cultural elements from their district. On July 14th the winners from each of the 18 districts gathered at HKDI's Design Boulevard, to render their designs for the judges and spectators on 1.80 metre-tall Qee Bears.

The final awards will be given on December 9th after a round of online voting during August. The combined size and number of the Qee Bears set a record in the toy DIY field, and brought Hong Kong's urban vinyl movement into the spotlight.

In the mid 1950s the Pop Art

Movement, which originated in Britain and the United States, started to bring fine art and pop culture together, as a counterpoint to an elitist culture in art that had kept the two strictly separate. Pop Art's style depicts images and icons from daily life in an ironic way with works such as Andy Warhol's Campbell soup can and Roy Lichtenstein's cartoon canvasses being prime examples.

Inspired by Pop Art and by the region's highly developed animation and comic market, artists in the east began movements of their own, such as Neo Pop in Japan, which combined animation and comics in art works. After Japanese artist Akashi Murakami coined the word "superflat" in 1999, to describe the practice of connecting fine art with manga and



MAIN FIGURE: 60-INCH TALL QEE BEARS DESIGNED AND PAINTED BY THE WINNERS FROM EACH OF THE EIGHTEEN DISTRICTS OF HONG KONG AT HKDI'S DESIGN BOULEVARD; BELOW LEFT: CONTESTANTS FROM THE SHAM SHUI PO DISTRICT AT THE FINAL COMPETITION ON JULY 14TH; BELOW RIGHT: A CONTESTANT FROM THE KOWLOON CITY DISTRICT DECORATING HER TEAM'S QEE BEAR



animation it was then only a short additional step for toys to become creative platforms for Pop Art practitioners.

The influence of Neo Pop quickly expanded to other cities in Asia including Hong Kong, and found popularity among young artists working in the toy industry. Urban vinyl is an extension of Neo Pop, and it features a toy that has been used as a canvas for art work. The urban vinyl trend was initiated by Hong Kong-based artist Michael Lau, who first created urban vinyl figures in

Hong Kong in the late 1990s, an innovation that inspired Takashi Murakami whose urban vinyl work has been exhibited in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

An offshoot of hip-hop and other forms of popular youth culture, urban vinyl often represents real-life figures. Two examples are Lau's depiction of the LMF rappers from Hong Kong.

As the fame of urban vinyl began to spread Qee Bear and the Qee series became one of the most

successful toy concepts to emerge from Hong Kong's commercial art scene, inspiring internationally renowned artists to design new looks for Qee figures.

In 2007, a 60-inch Qee Bear designed by Choy and a 36-inch version by James Fong aka Ultraman were featured in Sotheby's Chinese Contemporary Art catalogue. More recently, the original hand-painted 8-inch Brain Pattern Qee raised 1,050 euros for the Foundation Against Aids during a Sotheby's auction at Swab Barcelona 2012 in May.

HKDI's encouragement of urban vinyl through the DIY toy competition is part of the institution's mission to improve and enhance the Hong Kong design environment, its global status and the health of its industries. The competition has offered an opportunity to elevate awareness of local culture, explore the potential of young design talent and promote Hong Kong's design industry.

Choy says, "By including the cultural background of each of Hong Kong's 18 districts in the designs, the competition has





thoroughly explored the deep and sophisticated cultural roots of this area. They were brought together, and united under the name of Hong Kong, like a well-advertised brand."

The cultural elements in the Qee bear competition designs included landmark buildings, the city's skyline, political emblems, folklore symbols, religion, customs and key events. Arranged in a variety of creative combinations they brought out the unique aspects of the culture found in the city's districts and of Hong Kong as a whole.

Some of the most striking designs sought to show the changes between the present and the past. For example Pui-yu Chien, the finalist from Wan Chai vibrant east-meet-west culture, juxtaposing the wet market and a signpost for the Lan Kwai Fong entertainment district.

The father of the Qee Bear says his favourite design came from the Kwun Tong District. "The designer [Lai-ting Chan] used a bold black and white colour scheme to bring out the development of Kwun Tong, with the gear wheels used for the ears and legs and other parts of the Qee bear's body telling the story of Kwun Tong's industrial

history. A blooming flower at the front torso seems to invite people to see the character of the new neighbourhood now that its industrial era has faded away."

The most challenging phase of the competition came when entrants had to convert their designs on paper into a 60-inch Qee. In order to ease the process students participated in a seminar where they learned how to put their designs on an 8-inch Qee. Choy continues, "After the seminar, all the students had grasped the method regarding linking connecting colours, adjusting designs from 2-D to 3-D and finding an appropriate prop."

After seeing his goal of training young talent and promoting Hong Kong culture accomplished, Choy now hopes that the competition will help cultivate the local appetite for Hong Kong toy design.

"The Hong Kong market has a preference to foreign toys, mostly ones from Japan, Europe and the US," he says. "Hong Kong has a lot of excellent designers and toys, but they lack promotion and support."

An exhibition of the 18 60-inch Qee Bears is scheduled to tour around Hong Kong later this year, after the winner has been announced. Maybe Choy will then see the city's toy industry move a few steps closer to his dreams. ☺



THIS PAGE: A CONTESTANT FROM THE KWUN TONG DISTRICT POLISHING THE BACK OF THE QEE BEAR. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: CONTESTANTS FROM THE NORTH DISTRICT; OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM: CONTESTANT FROM THE TUEN MUN DISTRICT