

ToysЯArt



Martha Savage

What can be seen in two display cabinets during the same week, one at a design museum (Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City) and the other at a skateboard store (at Channel 1 in New Haven, Connecticut)? Answer: Figurines known as designer vinyl, designer toy, urban vinyl—a phenomenon of the last fifteen years. They are collectible toys in limited or small editions created by artists, designers, comic artists and graffiti artists.

An art exhibit featuring work by a former student brought me to the address on lower State Street, formerly the National Cash Register Company, now a renovated retail space occupied by Channel 1. There, co-owner Louis Cox spent an hour with me explaining his experience

with this appealing art form. The toys, clothing, video and other artwork displayed in his store and gallery bring together a unique blend of people of widely differing ages with diverse interests and cultural identity.

Having collected a few designer vinyl pieces in the last few years and reading an article in the *New York Times* ("I Am Plastic: The Designer Toy Explosion by Paul Budnitz"), I began to build in my mind an art unit for my middle school students. I continued reading and researching.

Introduction

I made a PowerPoint presentation to familiarize my students with the history and characteristics of vinyl toys. By their very nature the toys are transgressive to varying degrees. Vinyl toys appear to be cute and

ordinary, but on closer examination, are anything but typical! I carefully selected the inclusions for my introduction to this art form rather than creating a WebQuest permitting students to roam sites. My presentation for my middle school audience was attention-grabbing and entertaining, leaving everyone excited and eager for what might happen next.

Hands-on Experiences

What followed was a sequence of experiences with product design using the following elements, not unlike any other lessons in three-dimensional art.

1. I photocopied "blanks" (designer vinyl toys such as "Munny" which are bought in basic white to be customized by the purchaser) and contest templates for students to modify with colored pencil and markers.
2. Small boxes were constructed to transport soft polymer clay home to be baked. I provided templates and a container idea I created.

3. Planning involved making sketches and lists of colors.
4. Construction followed using polymer clay cut into small "bricks" limited to five pieces. A metal pottery rib works well.
5. The small sculptures were packed up and taken home with baking (curing) instructions.

Interdisciplinary Extensions

Language Arts: Fictional biography writing. Actual vinyl toys come with stories, essentially biographies.

Mathematics: Constructing an effective carrying container, involving geometry and

abstract thinking. Actual vinyl toys all come in designer boxes.

Economics: Understanding supply and demand with limited editions.

Multimedia: video animation.

Social Skills: Making and trading Artist Trading Cards depicting vinyl toys.

Science: Physics and chemistry of polymer clay. ☺

Safety

Polymer clay is nontoxic EXCEPT when toxic fumes occur when heated above 390°F. (www.polyclay.com/PolymerFAQ.htm) Supervision when heat curing is necessary.

Martha Savage is an art teacher at Thomas Edison Middle School in New Haven, Connecticut. msavage@aces.k12.ct.us

NATIONAL STANDARD

Students select and use the qualities of structures and functions of art to improve communication of their ideas.

WEB LINK

www.cooperhewitt.org

edgewoodskatepark.org

www.ruthannzaroff.com

mirkwooddesigns/templates.htm

www.polymerclaycentral.com/cyclopedia/pc_safety_th.html

www.polymerclaycentral.com/cyclopedia/polymerclay_safety.htm



From the Toysrevel blog: 5/26/2006

toysrevel.blogspot.com/2006/05/vinyl-is-new-canvas_26.html

com/2006/05/vinyl-is-new-canvas_26.html

Vinyl is the New Canvas
The vinyl figure is literally a blank canvas for the artist to embellish his or her own perception of graphics, concept, or of character. It might be an extension of an imagined character/persona or a deviation from existing design themes. It might even be a completely new creation. Every surface inch or centimeter is not wasted. The new canvas is no longer "flat" (i.e.: paper on a horizontal drawing board, or a vertical wall) and the new canvas is a blank sculpture waiting to be colored.