

TIME

SMALL BUSINESS



Fans of Kidrobot, founded by Paul Budnitz, are endeared by toys like Ice-Bots



KIDROBOT'S FIGURES CAPTURE A GENERATION ENTICED BY THE CUTE, THE BAD AND THE UNCUDDLY



The Next Toy Story

BY COCO MASTERS

Barbie would never invite them to a pool party. They're categorical misfits in the realm of toys—Munny with hunched shoulders and a potbelly; Gloomy Bear, a pink cub with claws and a bloody muzzle. Unlike mass-produced, cuddly balls of fluff, these figures, once known as urban vinyl toys, have street smarts, loitering in the neighborhood of consumable Pop Art.

They aren't robots, but they are all products sold by a four-year-old company called Kidrobot. With an aesthetic that might be termed cute with attitude, Kidrobot's toys have built a following among kids and adult collectors, with sales last year of \$6.2 million. Founder Paul Budnitz is a bit of a misfit in toyland, but his outsider aesthetic won Kidrobot admirers from the worlds of art, fashion and nightlife. "Paul Budnitz is the Warhol of this generation," says Peter Gatten, a New York nightclub promoter whose new Toronto spot, Circa, will devote an entire floor to Kidrobot's trademark vinyl figure, Dunny. "He's so brilliant, he's scary—in a good way." Just like his toys.

Budnitz, 38, a restless polymath from Berkeley, Calif., works from a Manhattan office that looks like a cross between a designer workshop and Peewee's

Playhouse. "I've discovered something that uses all the things I've done," he says.

That's no small feat. At 17 he was helping his father's colleague write risk-analysis software for nuclear power plants; by 21 he had an art degree from Yale. He got inspiration for his toys from artists in Hong Kong and Japan.

The result is a "balance between cuteness and blackness," says Tokyo-based design team Devil-robots. The toys can be unsettling. You start to imagine what Budnitz describes as their "complex emotional state." A rabbit-shaped figure with the face of Lenin and his own copy of *Das Kapital* will join such Dunnys as a smoking Mao Zedong and "Mrs. Mao" on April 27. Fastidious refrigerator natives, Ice-Bots use crampons and ice picks to navigate your

freezer. "Purely happy is completely uninteresting," Budnitz says. "Cute and mad, cute and scary are interesting." At Kidrobot's three boutiques, the toys range in price from \$6 to \$2,000, but there's only one copy of each displayed, to prime a sense of exclusivity and ownership.

That combination is proving irresistible to creative types on the lookout for a collaborator who is utterly commercial without sacrificing cool. Japanese design icon Takashi Murakami and artists from Brooklyn to Hong Kong have designed toys sold by Kidrobot. Its vinyl characters have sported clothing by Marc Jacobs and Jil Sander, and New York City's Barneys sells an exclusive line of Kidrobot sneakers.

Budnitz's breakout deal, though, could be the one he just signed with the San Francisco digital-animation studio Wild Brain. It opens the arena of TV shows, animated shorts and feature films to Kidrobot's characters. "It's going to blow everything away," says Budnitz. Says Wild Brain CEO Charles Rivkins, former head of the Jim Henson Co.: "A portion of Paul's vision has been capital constrained."

That's about to change. The Kidrobot empire may soon include a "lifestyle store" in New York City, selling everything from large-scale art and clothing to, perhaps, furniture, as well as a new boutique in London or Paris. "We're kind of being set loose," says Budnitz—to wherever his imagination can take him. The doll business may never be the same.

A palm-size freezer skier by artist Dalek

