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An Interactive Toy Story

Sophisticated thinking creates novel effects in the toy market.

By Ricci Shryock
 Posted April 24, 2007

2 comments

Have you hugged your designer toy lately? No? That's probably because it doesn't hug you back. In fact, your designer toy probably doesn't *do* much at all. Innovative toy designers are changing that. They want their toys to interact with you as well as other toys, and they want them to do it with sophistication.

Banana Design Lab founder Yuri Gitman is one of those designers, and he has combined his tech savvy with an artistic flair to create, [My Beating Heart](#). The plush, \$120 toy uses microchip technology to mimic a human heartbeat. Gitman says users feel as if they are hugging a pet or a loved one when they hug the toy, and it soothes their heartbeats to a meditative state. He developed the idea while attending a ten-day, silent yoga retreat in the mountains. "I felt my own heart beat after meditating for five hours straight," he says. "It was incredibly moving."

Gitman believes designer toys have oversaturated the market and are ready for updates that add interactive features to spice up the consumer's options.

When Asian-inspired, designer toys first entered the market five years ago, the plush toys and [Kidrobot](#) figures were heralded as new, affordable art for the playful at heart who had sophisticated style. Now, there are dozens of toy-based online stores and publications, such as [Vinylpulse.com](#), which provides daily news about industry trends.

As the co-founder of [Strangeo](#), an online designer toy publication and shop, Gregory Blum cites the [Needies](#) plush doll as a great example of the interactive trend. The "Needies" are large plush dolls that can sense when another doll is getting some love. The unattended doll will then sing and call out for the attention it craves.

"If you had two of these toys in the room, and you're playing with one of them, the other will sense that it isn't your getting attention," says Blum. "And I think that's a smart way to go. It's kind of a real trick to figure out how to still retain the aesthetics without being gimmicky."

[Strangeo](#) is developing its own answer to the interactive designer toy, though they are still in the developmental stage and can't go into much detail of the new toys. But Blum adds the trick is to develop the function of the toy along the same lines as the toy's artistic appearance— "To market it as a whole, we have to present these as pieces of art rather than just toys, and these functions should be the kind of thing that can develop tangential with that design."

Gitman, who also teaches a wireless plush toy design class at Parsons New School for Design, debuted another addition to his interactive designer toys at New York's Toy Fair in February, the "ChuChi: the Plushie Night-light." He predicts this is just the beginning.

"There's going to be much more action going on at Kidrobot and Strangeo. I'm betting on it, and I think it will change the market."

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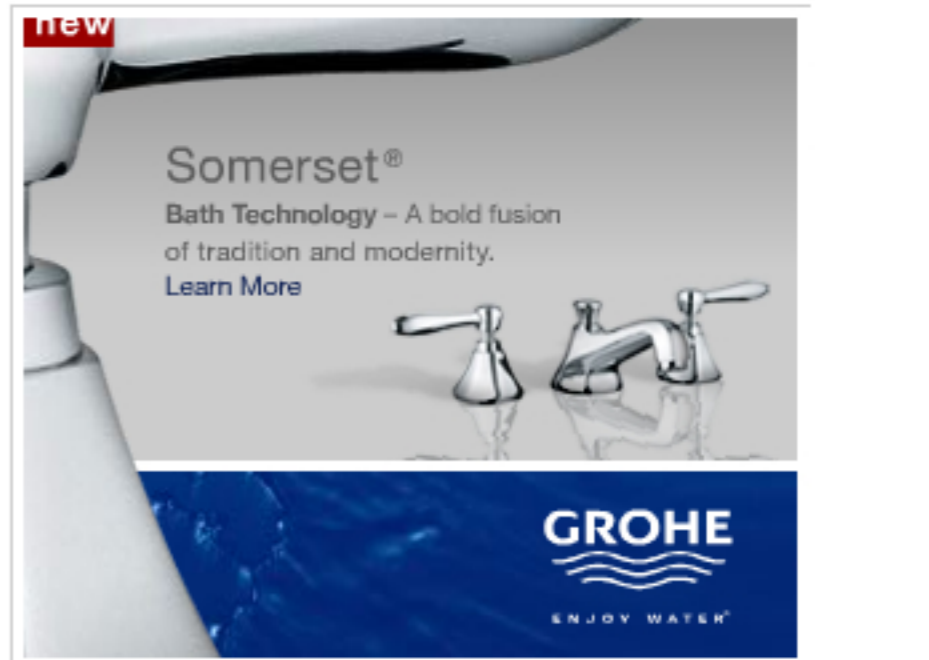
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