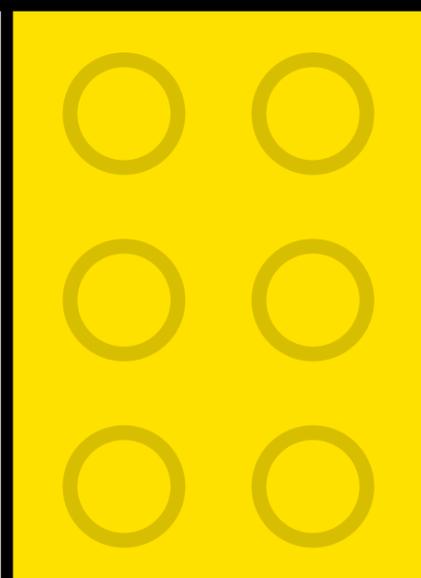


LEGO AS MEDIUM FOR ART

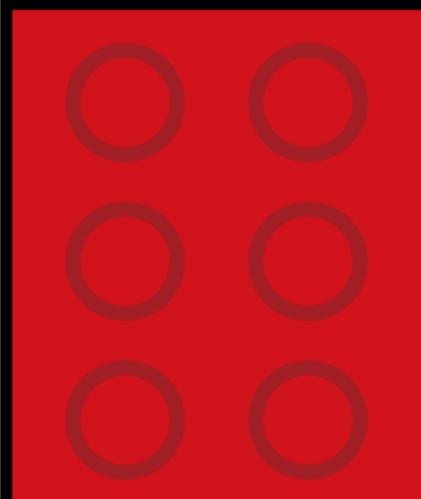


HOW DOES A BRAND EXPAND ITS VALUE BY COLLABORATING WITH CREATIVE FILEDS — LOOKING INTO THE LEGO CERIFIED PROFESSIONAL PROGRAM

LEGO has long been a household name that stands not only for the name of a toy company, but also, if not for all, bricks. It is among the hottest toy companies around the globe and always on the list of the world's top 10 toy sellers. In its 80-year history, its product is more than bricks, for sure. However, it is also from its systematic brick collections made of ABS engineering plastics that LEGO earns its name. The success of LEGO bricks lies in both its nature and the company's marketing strategy. LEGO bricks largely satisfy players' need for self-expression; its well-established system with various sizes and shapes of bricks one can imagine makes LEGO brick product hardly replaceable, especially for senior players; its flexible nature provides players with countless possibilities, breaking down the barrier of age, enabling adults to have equal fun; all of these features help generating customer loyalty, which tends to be unconscious and profound. For LEGO lovers and maniacs, LEGO is much more than a brand; it's a world they dwell, a kingdom they subject to, and a stage to display and express their ideas and to communicate. In this case, LEGO is no longer just the name of a toy; it is culturally connotative and iconic. It can easily be told that how much effort has been made by the company to maintain and develop such influence.

LEGO initiated its LEGO Certified Professional (LCP) Program with the assistance of some professional LEGO sculptors, or to be more precise, passionate LEGO fans by then. In year of 2005, Sean Kenney became the first LEGO Certified Professional. Up till now there are 13 LCPs around the world. These professionals use LEGO bricks and dedicate themselves differently in the creative fields such as art and design. They make art works, sculpture for kid's books and museums, and take commissions for various commercial occasions such as sculptures for shopping centre and selling LEGO-made products. LEGO has somehow been a symbol for creativity and childhood innocence, and LEGO professional is often thought to be the best job ever.

There is a rather subtle and complicated relationship between LEGO the brand and the LEGO professionals. The professionals consume LEGO, not just the bricks but also the brand value. If it were not LEGO but just some random plastic cubes, their works might not have attracted so much attention. One typical instance is how popular LEGO professionals are among child centres and museums, since LEGO is somehow an ideal spokesman for children's creative education, and it is rather appealing among kids. However, this consumption is positive, because the brand value will not be impaired but being nurtured instead. LEGO professionals are doubtlessly the walking advertisement for the brand, yet they are independent and they do not actually work for the brand.



Following are interviews with 4 LCPs. Let's have a look at their works and enter the world of the LEGO professionals.



Sean Kenney

Sean Kenney is a renowned, award-winning artist and "professional kid" who uses LEGO pieces to design and create contemporary sculpture for high-profile clients, major corporations, and venues around the globe. He is the first LEGO Certified Professional, and also the founder of MOCpages, the most popular online community for LEGO players. In using LEGO bricks as an art medium, Sean hopes that children will become inspired to visualize their imagination and create great things themselves.



INTERVIEW

• What is LEGO? Please define LEGO from your perspective.

To me, LEGO pieces are a creative medium. Like a pencil, clay, or paint, LEGO pieces are simple enough for a three-year-old but versatile enough to create serious, thought provoking, beautiful works of art.

Fundamentally, they are a children's toy. Yet unlike play-dough or finger paint, LEGO pieces retain their shape when they are used, which gives children who play with LEGO a direct connection to a more profound piece of art created with LEGO bricks. This also gives the children a common bond with the art or with the artist, inspiring them as they imagine themselves doing the same.

• What is so special with LEGO that you use it as the material for art making?

I love that whether a 2 year old child or a professional master builder snaps two LEGO pieces together, the end result is exactly the same. The final product is visually identical. I think this lowers the bar for entry and makes it more accessible, but also shows people that mastering the medium is more about using your brain and having creative ideas than about eons of honing a physical technique.

I also love the whimsical nature of the results. The bright fun colours, the cartoonish nature of the final piece. There's just something about LEGO that makes people smile.



This is Sean's current touring exhibition: Nature Connects.

• Is there any LEGO-art-making methodology, for instance the pixelate approach? What is your usual and favoured approach?

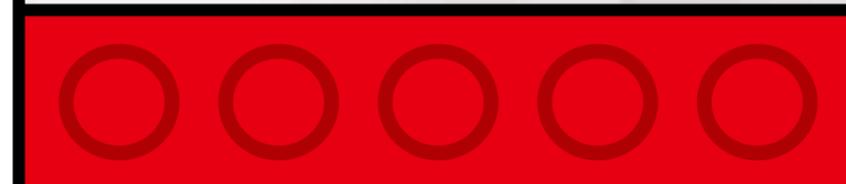
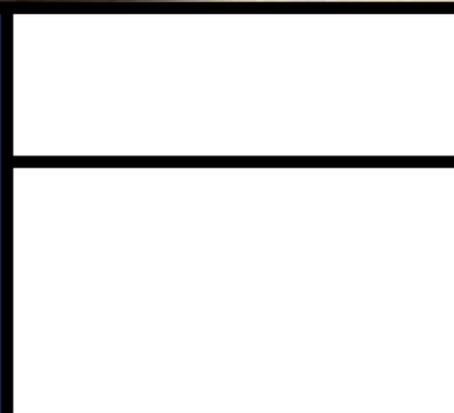
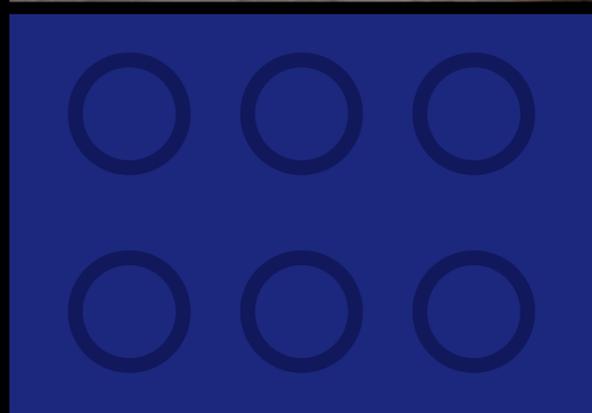
When working on 2-dimensional mosaics, I see a lot of people who rely on computer programs or pixilation algorithms to create a schematic. But a person's face is more than just what their nose is shaped like, and my portraiture and mosaics are always hand-drawn so that I can do my best to try to capture the spirit and essence of the original. No computer in the world can get that magical glint in someone's eye.

The same applies to three-dimensional sculptures. We often start with miniatures and drawings on graph paper, lots of little prototypes, and so on. Having experience and the right tools at your disposal makes the process easier and faster, and over time you eventually get the hang of how to apply various building techniques to create complex organic curves with hard little plastic rectangles.

• Please describe your relationship with LEGO.

Many people assume I must work for LEGO, but I don't. I'm just their best customer. I have a professional working relationship with them and everyone from the CEO to the worker bees have, for many years, expressed their excitement and enthusiasm for the great things I'm doing with their products.

Having access to company resources like purchasing LEGO pieces in bulk and fostering good long-term working relationships with their marketing and design teams has been a wonderful resource to grow creatively and to expand my offerings to my clients. These perks come with a lot of strings attached; however, there is always a balance to make sure that everyone goes home happy.



• Do you think you are consuming the brand value (in a sustainable and renewable way)?

I certainly don't know what The LEGO Company considers to be their brand values. In fact, I'm sure if you asked 10 LEGO employees what the company's brand values are, you'd get 10 different answers. But to me, the point of LEGO is creativity and fun. To that end, I do have fun creating my work, and I can only hope that people have fun viewing my work and are inspired to go home and create something themselves.



• Can you tell us the upcoming plans of your LEGO creation?

My award-winning show "Nature Connects" is travelling to botanical gardens across the United States and Canada over the next few years. The show includes dozens of larger-than-life sculptures of plants, insects, and animals that showcase the connections found in nature. A 7-foot tall rose, a Monarch butterfly with an 8-foot wingspan, life-size Bison, and much more were all built with nearly a million LEGO pieces over the course of 10,000 hours.

This fall, my eighth children's book, "Cool Creations in 101 Pieces" were released. I used the same 101 pieces to show kids how to build robots, cars, cities, animals, crazy faces, etc. In the vein of my other seven books, the book showcases that you don't need a million pieces to make something cool; you can just use your imagination and the pieces you already have around the house.

• Where do you see the LCP program in the future?

LCPs occupy a funny zone somewhere between "fan" and "subcontractor". Some days, we play the role of an official marketing mouthpiece, other days we're a hobbyist making things for our own edification. The discussions between LCPs and LEGO always centre on where on this spectrum we really belong to, and whether the company should either align or distance themselves with the projects that we do, and to what degree. It's hard, therefore, to say where we may end up in the future, since the program is ultimately driven by The LEGO Group's desire to support us, and in what way.



Dirk Denoyelle

Dirk Denoyelle is one of Flanders' (the Dutch speaking half of Belgium) best known and versatile comedians. Despite a mathematics background, Dirk is passionate with languages. He performs in six languages and keeps on learning other foreign languages. Dirk is also one of 13 LEGO® Certified Professionals in the world.



Dirk Denoyelle and himself | Dirk Denoyelle | 2000
Photography by Alex Deyaert

This head was his third to make and was part of an exhibit that accompanied his theatre tour as a comedian. It was basically the start of his entire business. That exhibit contained 25 heads of people that he impersonates in his show on stage.

It was meant as an experiment to test himself in two ways: he wanted to check if he could make a pretty dull face like his own. Because if he could, that would mean he could build just anybody. Secondly, he wanted to know what celebrities would feel if they were confronted with themselves made out of LEGO.



Rubens Parody | Dirk Denoyelle | 2010
Photography by Ruben Boidin

This mosaic is a parody on one of Rubens' most famous paintings: The Adoration of the Magi. The original work is in the Museum for Fine Arts of Dirk's hometown Antwerp.

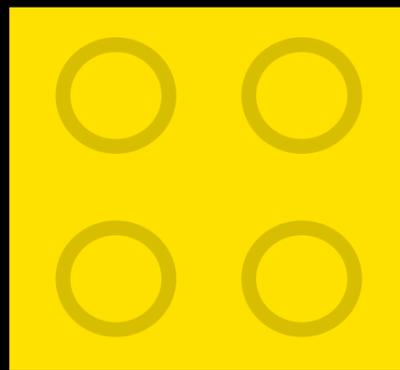
Dirk wanted something big and amazing. It has only been on exhibit 3 times: twice in the Netherlands, once in Belgium. It is huge, about as large as the original. It contains almost 300,000 LEGO elements and took 500 hours to build. It measures 4.8 x 3.6m, and is said to be the largest mosaic made by a private art studio, without help from the public. The colours are magnificent. Because it is LEGO, it has a shine to it that the original just does not have anymore.

The parody is in the fact that Dirk has changed most faces of the painting. Back in his days, Rubens also used faces of existing people, sometimes famous ones, or people who paid for the painting. Dirk has replaced them by people those are still famous today, or could be, and who have a reputation for being wise to some extent. He never reveals the identity of all of them, because he likes to challenge the audience to find them all. But to get you started, there is Socrates, Einstein, Ghandi...

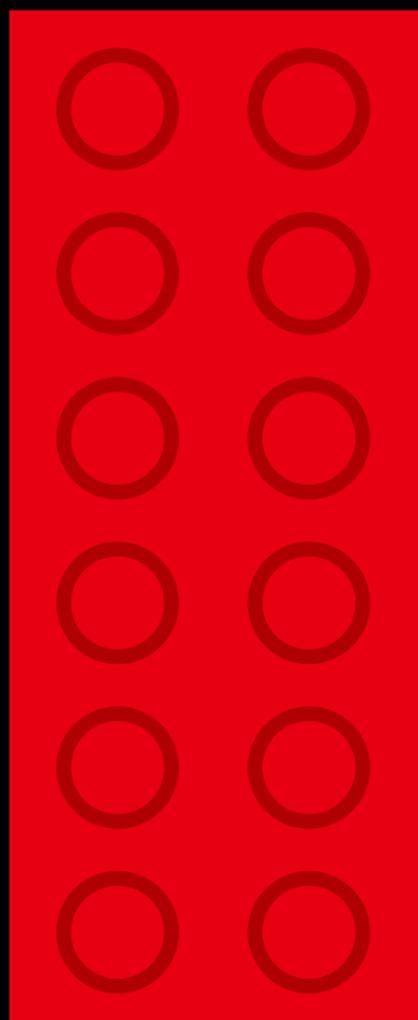


The Skydral was created as a result of a true cross-fertilization of ideas. For quite some time, Dirk wanted to create a mosaic of an old building that would generate a new one. When discussing this idea with new co-worker Simon Callaerts, he proposed to make a 3D version. Dirk had been reluctant before, because he knew how much more time consuming 3D can be. But Simon is young and enthusiastic, and of course the idea was appealing. They then started looking for the right buildings to build. They chose the Saint Baafs Cathedral in Ghent, Flanders, Belgium for the "old" building. For local people it is very recognisable, one of the city's main landmarks. And for outsiders it's a symbol of Gothic architecture. The new building is also very new in reality. It was finished less than a year before we built the LEGO version, and is the only modern skyscraper-like building near Ghent.

It took them 160 hours to build and they have no idea how many bricks are in there. It has not been on exhibit yet: they keep it as a surprise for an exhibit at the end of 2014 or probably even later.



Skydral | Dirk Denoyelle and Simon Callaerts | 2013
Photography by Dirk Denoyelle



INTERVIEW

• Please define LEGO from your perspective.

To me, LEGO of course is a medium. It's like paint for the painter and rock for a sculptor. But LEGO is nostalgia as well: especially the face of a smiling mini-figure takes me way back to memory lane, remembering a (in my case) very happy and carefree childhood. More recently, LEGO has become also more visible as a company, as a brand name, as "the big box" I negotiate with in Denmark, in the Czech Republic and here in Belgium/The Netherlands. In that box are both very kind people on the one hand, but corporate structures on the other. Oddly enough, the last thing that the word "LEGO" brings to my mind, is actual LEGO sets. Most people, both kids and adults, think in LEGO Sets. I do not (anymore).

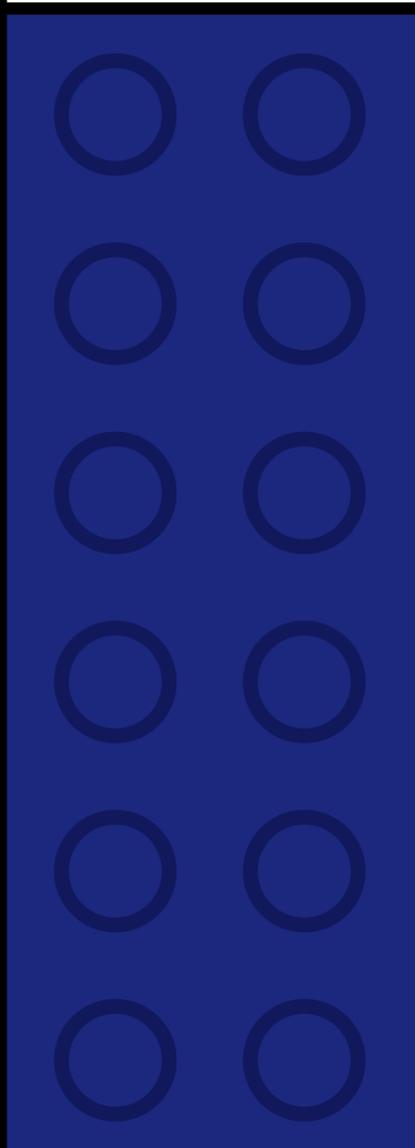


• What are the desirable features of LEGO in terms of art making?

LEGO is also a feeling. It is the smell of plastic; it is the touch of hundreds of bricks going through my hands. And that is really the biggest thrill. Working with LEGO is actually a very physical experience. In a world in which we spend hours behind computer screens, the mere touch of a 3D object is satisfying, and calming. I would probably have the same feeling with clay or paint. But then LEGO is also happiness and innocence, childhood revisited. On top of that, the LEGO colour palette is actually well designed. Almost every colour combination is nice on its own. In my Rubens Parody, the brightness and cheerfulness of the colours is astounding. I would never get that natural beauty with paint - I never learned how to paint properly. And LEGO is not messy, like most "normal" materials. Except when you start gluing, that is a completely different story then.

• Is there any LEGO-art-making methodology, for instance, the pixelate approach? And what is your usual and favoured approach?

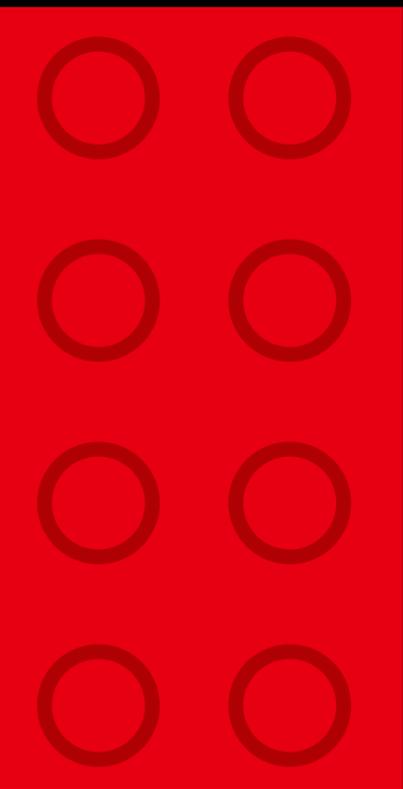
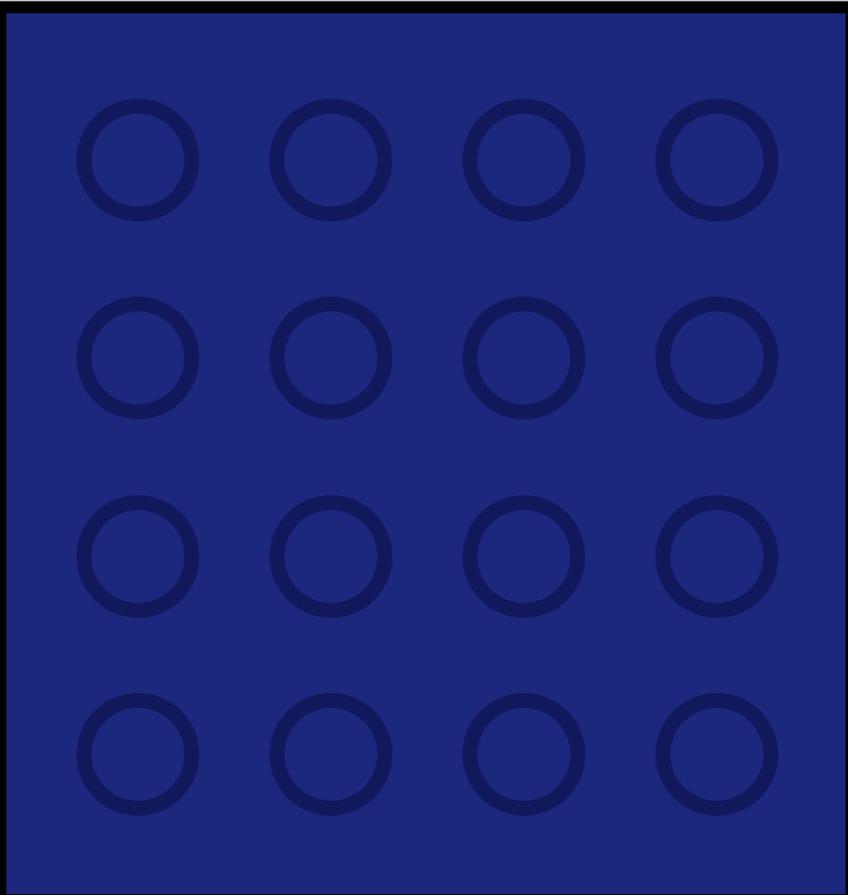
There are heavy discussions between LEGO fans of all kinds, both amateur and professional, about whether it is allowed or considered "better" or "higher art" if one uses computers in a design. In some artworks, I like to use the computer to speed up the process, or to explore ways of creation that I could not come up with manually. I like to think that the idea behind a specific work of art is more important than the actual craftsmanship. On the other hand, I am proud to say that all my LEGO heads are made without computer assistance. So there is no favourite approach, it's an "and-and". If a computer can help me create a mosaic, then why should it not? But the craftsmanship is also important. There are quite a few software programs out there that help you pixelate a picture. But first: you need to create that picture. And second, not all these programs lead to the result I want as an artist. Quite the contrary, in fact.



• Please describe your relationship with LEGO.

I like to think I am one of LEGO's best customers. A buy close to a million bricks per year, if not more. I think of myself as a trusted partner even. I have signed a contract that gives me a legitimation for my business that allows me to carry the "LEGO Certified Professional" label. This contract gives me some advantages, but it sets some limitations. Advantages are practical and financial, which I am not allowed to disclose more. Limitations are that not every single idea that pops up to my mind can be carried out.

As LEGO wants to protect its brand, and as LEGO values are naturally related to child friendliness, creativity and so forth, it is obvious that the LEGO Company does not want an LCP to build artwork that would confront the public (and thus children) with stuff they should not be confronted with. I have no problem with that, by the way. I feel exactly the same way. But it is a limitation that other people, the large crowd of LEGO fans, do not have.

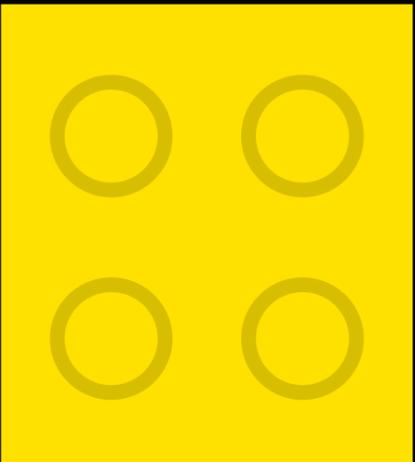


• Can you tell us the upcoming plans/ orientation of your LEGO creation?

My studio works on different levels. I myself like to focus on the development of new art for my exhibits, fine arts mainly, and the 3D heads. And combinations of those. I have then co-workers specializing in mosaics, and others working on architecture assignments. The idea is to expand and explore. I am also about to become a LEGO Serious Play coach, which will allow me to combine LEGO building with management coaching sessions. Already today my staff and I carry out team building events for companies. We want to take that to the next level.

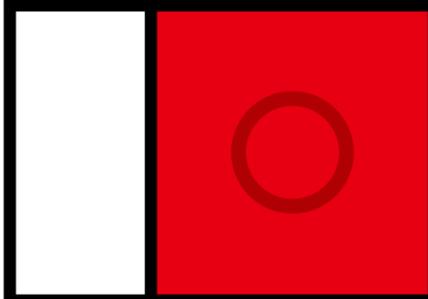
• Do you think you are consuming the brand value (in a sustainable and renewable way)?

It is for sure that I am both living according to the LEGO brand values, and also expanding some of these values. The art pieces I create are usually of such nature that is unique and new. Most people relate LEGO to houses and towns and cars. They have never thought of making an actual portrait with them, or a giant painting, or anything else like most of the pieces that I create. It gives people therefore a new insight in the "creativity" value that is so closely related with the LEGO brand.



Christmas Tree for ArtScience Museum | Nicholas Foo | 2012

Nicholas Foo



As an Asia-based (Singapore) LEGO Certified Professional, Nicholas Foo creates unique gifts using LEGO materials. By tailoring his creations to the individual needs of his clients, Nicholas creates memorable gifts that delight both the giver and receiver. Nicholas also enjoys the challenge of creating large scale sculptures and models for trade shows and charity events. A few of his notable creations include the iconic Merlion statue of Singapore, and a scaled Monkey bike model.

Nicholas is also the founder of Blackbulb, a company based on the values of creativity, fun and quality.

This is a commission piece by ArtScience Museum. Drawing inspiration from the architecture itself that had clean lines and looks like a lotus flower with petals rotating from a base, Nicholas set out to design the Christmas tree. Instead of going with a standard looking tree, he wanted to present a more graphical and inspirational piece.

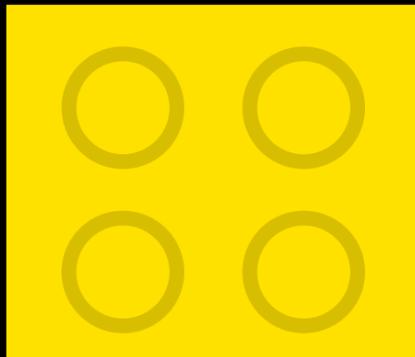
The tree was built live in front the public at the museum over 7 days. The final design consists of 12 very thin planes (each measuring 1.58cm in thickness) rotating to form the shape of the tree. The weight was calculated carefully to ensure the bricks could hold the tree on its own. There are cut-outs on each plane to insert baubles made of clear coloured pieces. Engagement in the form of building the baubles was open to the public over the week.

The completed tree stands around 3.5m. The play on using normal opaque bricks (for the tree) and clear coloured pieces (for the baubles and star) gives a good contrast and play when lights were shone on it. The tree was dismantled after Christmas and the 140,000 parts were donated to a charity home for children with special needs as part of the Corporate Social Responsibility program.



iilluummii is part of Nicholas's self-exploratory and lifestyle designs using only readily existing LEGO elements. The lamp is named iilluummii, derived from the idea of illumination and the stacking of letters much like the overlapping connected pieces of the design. The challenge was to create a minimalist spherical pendant lamp without the blockiness that naturally comes to mind when one thinks of a LEGO creation or model. The lamp must also meet his criteria on simplicity and balance in terms of form and function.

With LEGO elements being highly configurable, the lamp also adapted the characteristics and ability to size differently. Each size is based on a different pattern of connecting pieces, which also casts a different shadow when the lamp is lit up. The differently sized lamps can also be layered within each other to add depth.



INTERVIEW

• What is LEGO?

It's a childhood toy I grew up with, a good way to unwind, a medium I use to craft my creations and art in my profession.

• What is so special with LEGO that you use it as the material for art making?

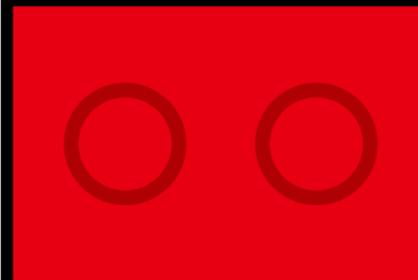
It is accessible and relatable to a lot of people regardless of age or gender. As a medium or material for creation, it is as versatile as one's imagination and creativity.

• What is your usual and favoured approach for LEGO art making?

Personally, my process is a constant distillation, simplification and refining approach from inception to close. I pay good attention to details and innovate ways to build better. A good creation to me is one that appeals to the senses; evoke emotions or thoughts while staying true to the theme or concept. Every piece of work tells a story.



iilluummii | Nicholas Foo | photography by Nicholas Foo | 2012

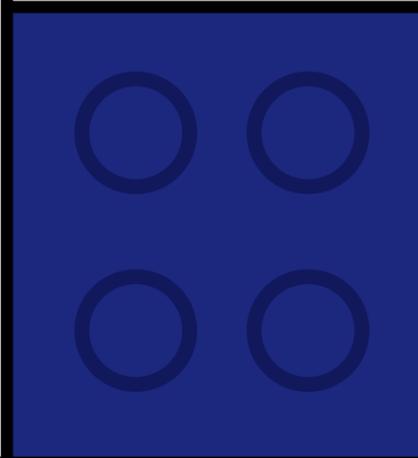


Can you tell us the upcoming plans of your LEGO creation?

I look forward to taking on more challenging projects and interesting commissions around the world, looking into projects for the less fortunate that could raise long term funding, something iconic for my homeland or having my own art show.

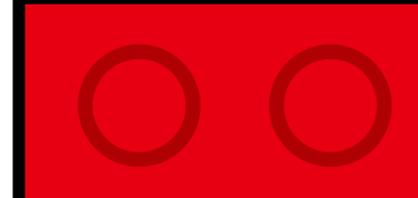
Do you think you are consuming the brand value in a sustainable and renewable way?

If delighting and putting smiles on different faces every time with my creations is tangible to validate sustainability, I would consider that as positive.



Matija Puzar

Matija's mission is to spread the joy of the brick among the adult population. He does this by designing commissioned models, mosaics, portraits, LEGO related team-building events, or other requests people may come up with. Matija is situated in Norway, and he is being active all over Scandinavia, Europe.



The Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, Croatia, is a neo-baroque building designed by the Viennese architects Ferdinand Fellner and Herman Helmer. The theatre was ceremoniously opened by the emperor Franz Joseph I in 1895, after 16.5 months of work. The model has been built approximately in scale 1:42, and it took a similar amount of time to build it (with no emperor to ceremoniously open it).

While designing the model, Matija tried to recreate as many details of the original building as possible, which was at times challenging given that he only had a limited number of photos taken from the ground level, and none of the roof.

The model's first public appearance was at LEGO World in Oslo in May 2008, and it has since featured at numerous exhibitions in Denmark, Norway, and later in its home country Croatia. It is currently part of the permanent exhibition in the Museum of Childhood in Rijeka, Croatia.





The Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb | Matija Pužar | photography by Matija Pužar

INTERVIEW

• **What is LEGO? Please define LEGO from your perspective.**

LEGO is a medium I use to express myself, just as others use paint, clay, stone, etc. It stimulates my creativity in ways other things do not. What I like most is to make detailed models in a small scale, which is challenging.

• **What is so special with LEGO that you use it as the material for art making? What are the desirable features?**

The beauty of LEGO is that it gives so many possibilities, while still having a certain amount of limitations given by the availability and shape of the elements. It is those limitations that stimulate my creativity. The fact that one can tear a model apart and build something completely different with the same parts is also an important factor and something, if not unique then at least very characteristic, to LEGO.

• **Is there any LEGO-art-making methodology, for instance the pixelate approach?**

When making plain 2D art, there are two basic approaches. One is having the LEGO studs towards the viewer, mimicking a computer screen. This method has a specific charm to it, as you can immediately see that it is LEGO. The second approach is building the image upwards (or in any other direction other than towards or away from the viewer). This gives a much better resolution or level detail, but you might not see that it is LEGO until you come very close. By combining these techniques you can (literally) obtain a completely new dimension to your models.

• **Please describe your relationship with LEGO.**

I have a twofold relationship with LEGO. One is with the LEGO brick, which I have had since my childhood. The brick has always been with me, in some periods less than in others, but it never went away completely. During the last 10 years, after I started showing my models on exhibitions around Europe, I started developing a relationship with the company as well. By becoming an LCP, this ended up as a business relationship.

• **Do you think you are consuming the brand value (in a sustainable and renewable way for sure)?**

Being primarily focused on adults and corporations, my creations increase brand awareness amongst people who might not be in contact with it otherwise, or who might only see it as a toy. By showing these alternative ways of using LEGO bricks, both groups can get new ideas for things they could do. I think that is why, in my experience, their reactions are exclusively positive. By doing that, I am indeed able to consume the brand value in a sustainable way.

