

# Luck of the draw

**Will Broome, creator of the Marc by Marc Jacobs icon, has made a career of being unpredictable, writes Abid Rahman**

**W**ill Broome is an unapologetically normal bloke. Stocky, bespectacled and built like a rugby prop forward, Broome has an unpretentious air to match his no-nonsense Nottinghamshire accent. In person, the artist couldn't be more different than some of his creations, or indeed, the fashionista circles he now works in.

The man behind the Miss Marc character, now the ubiquitous icon of the Marc by Marc Jacobs fashion label, Broome is an alumnus of London's Central St Martins fashion school and a contemporary of such storied names as Phoebe Philo, Matthew Williamson and Stella McCartney. Yet he never saw himself as part of the London fashion set. "St Martins was and is an interesting place... My best friend was a Methodist sheep farmer's son from Cumbria and there's me from Nottinghamshire, and then there was Stella McCartney. All these weirdoes thrown together."

The outsider has made it to Hong Kong with his solo exhibition, "Black Rose Garden", at New Town Plaza in Sha Tin, running until October 31. A curious stage for his work, perhaps, but Broome has made a career out of being unpredictable.

After graduating from St Martins, Broome took up various teaching jobs and a stint as a gardener before becoming the professional artist he is today. This



unusual career path, along with his northern English background, has informed his work. On the influence of his upbringing on his work, Broome believes "there's a certain kind of observational drollery, dryness; a sense of humour which Londoners don't get and people in fashion don't get." The Alan Bennett of the art world, perhaps? "More like Thora Hird!" he says.

It quickly becomes clear looking at Broome's work that he just loves



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to draw; he has spent a lifetime doodling on textbooks, walls and just about any available surface. His process, however, is deliberately "old school" in execution. He prefers the graphic process of drawing and eschews computers and other processes he feels lack the human touch. Broome's artistic influences include Keith Haring and Stephen Sprouse, who has also worked with Marc Jacobs, and even fantasy artist Boris Vallejo, who inspired his adolescent dreams of creating the perfect Meat Loaf album cover. Comics were also an influence, with Broome taking a particular shine to the Thing from *Fantastic Four*, as "he was really grumpy, miserable, he was dour. You can imagine him sitting at the end of the bar with a pint of bitter. A flat-capped superhero."

Broome's most widely known work, Miss Marc, came to life in 2003. Although initially intended as a one-off, her success has snowballed into something of a phenomenon, with Miss Marc adorning everything from T-shirts to bags and jewellery. Broome recalls: "There was no master plan

for Miss Marc; well, they [the Marc Jacobs design team] may have had a plan for it, but they didn't tell me!" Miss Marc has been followed by Mr Marc and turned into an open-ended project that has proved very fruitful for both artist and client.

Miss Marc, like Broome himself, is a bundle of contradictions; playful but with dark undertones. "The design evolved. When I first drew her she looked strung out, like she had just landed from a 12-hour flight. There are lots of cutesy characters but we wanted her to be cooler than that." Miss Marc has an edge that is part of the artist's own personality. "I am quite dry, but the things I draw are quite jolly," Broome says. "I have things in my head but I'm wearing a Mickey T-shirt." Broome doesn't worry that people will misinterpret Miss Marc or his wider work. "If it was cutesy it would be just another Hello Kitty!"

A serial collaborator, Broome has worked with the likes of Gucci, Missoni, Topshop and English fine porcelain maker Wedgwood, bringing his disarmingly spirited cartoons and illustrations to more staid and established brands; a clash the artist relishes. The unpredictability of collaborations is another attraction for Broome, who is not keen or bothered to plan too much. "My life is a mixture of happy accidents. I don't think you can have a big plan," he says.

Despite showing in front of the demanding art audiences of London and Paris, and becoming increasingly popular for collectors, Broome still has some misgivings about exhibiting his work. He confesses that collaborating is much easier, as the artist has more support and can "hide" a little behind the partner brand. With exhibiting, which he does enjoy, Broome, like other artists, feels the anxiety of his work standing or falling on its own merits as well as revealing itself to an expectant public.

The Hong Kong exhibition is the first time Broome has worked with a shopping mall and he has created four new characters for it in 3-D, another first for the artist. Broome has also designed a limited run of tote bags and iPad cases that shoppers at New Town Plaza can redeem with their purchases.

The exhibition is in the main atrium of the mall and is dominated by a black and white colour scheme with Broome's signature big-eyed characters, as well as a ghoulish collection of pirates, pigs and even a Sherlock Holmes-type character. Broome's work for Topshop and Marc by Marc Jacobs is showcased. "It's a loose theme - fashion and Halloween. I've never collaborated on this scale and in this environment before. I'm always interested in doing something new."

The 3-D element excites him and he would like to explore animation or a short film of some of his characters. Has Broome given thought to giving Marvel Comics a call and reviving the Thing as the world's first truly northern superhero? "Yeah right, that would be dead good!" lifestyle@scmp.com

**Will Broome at his exhibition at New Town Plaza (above right); Broome's Miss Marc for Marc by Marc Jacobs (below). Photo: Jonathan Wong**

