



KOONIN

text and photos by
Kristen Doherty

FAMILY ♥ PETS

Thailand is rapidly becoming a force in the lowbrow art toy movement, and nowhere is this more evident than at the many weekend street markets attracting throngs of foreign tourists. The artists hawking their wares work all week to make their t-shirts, buttons, plush dolls, paintings and more, and then spend the weekend hoping that the fruits of their artistic vision will be purchased. It is in just such a market in Bangkok that Nirun "Run" Kooninthong got his start making and selling what Kamibashi calls "The Koonin Family Pets."

Despite my frequent trips to Thailand, I came across Run's work not while wandering around a market, but instead by happening upon a website that connects Asian businesses with potential wholesale buyers in the West. The little plush dolls that I saw online were fun and unique, and I excitedly e-mailed Run to make an appointment to meet him during my upcoming trip to Thailand.

The apartment of Run's fiancée Noi serves as his art studio when he's in Bangkok, and when I arrived for our meeting the floor was strewn with his creations – plush dolls of all shapes, each expertly sewn together by his mother using different scrap fabrics that Run picks out. After they are sewn and stuffed, Run gives the doll life by gluing on buttons or screws for eyes, sewing on their mouths, and accessorizing them. Some pets are adorned with necklaces complete with charms, and most have either numbers, shapes, symbols, underwear or neckties painted on. Each creation is a unique piece of art, and no two dolls are ever the same.

I returned home with almost every doll he had, and my husband, friends and coworkers were quick to fall in love. We decided to name them after the Kooninthongs and include a tag that tells about Run and his family. We also decided to give each Koonin Family Pet a birthday and motto, but to let the pet's owner be in charge of naming his or her new plush buddy. In an e-mail Run wrote after he first saw the tag he said, "I feel great and very happy than ever because, before now, no one was interested in where the dolls come from, who produce, and how hard they are to make...In the past, I make the dolls because I enjoyed it, but now I feel love and more happy to do it." We couldn't be happier ourselves.

meet the Koonins at: www.kamibashi.com



