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Zombies for children?

Local artist garners attention with unusual plush toys

Zombabies created by Elizabeth Anderson of Fond du Lac are making a name for themselves as a plush toy for children. (Patrick Flood/The Reporter)

Business plan includes direct and online marketing

By Monica M. Walk
Special to The Reporter

Small zombies in colorful footed pajamas have taken up residence on a quiet street in Fond du Lac.

Creator and caretaker Elizabeth Anderson is introducing her plush "Zombabies" to welcoming arms and new homes through a business plan that incorporates both direct and online marketing, punctuated with publicity in a high-end magazine dedicated to hand-made soft toys.

"I make art and plush for kids, pets and adults," said Anderson of her 4-year-old Artess Designs company.

Her creations include Zombabie plush dolls with fur-ringed faces, square-bodied Zombabie Monsters, Little Guys mini monsters, orb-shaped Blobs, a variety of elephants, cats and birds, catnip-filled plush fish, and woven-fleece Boondoggie and squeaky Give a Dog a Bone toys.

Elizabeth Anderson of Fond du Lac has built a business by making colorful dolls for children with zombie faces. (Patrick Flood/The Reporter)

Polka-dotted, striped and patterned pastel fabrics combined with stylized black and white screen-printed "zombie" faces give the toys a unique look.

That special Zombabie style and Anderson's willingness to share details about the creative process have twice landed her in Stuffed, the premiere magazine dedicated to plush artwork produced by Stamp-

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ington & Company, publisher of a series of niche publications dedicated to crafts. Initially featured in the Winter 2011 issue, Anderson again appears in the July 2011 edition, soon available locally at JoAnn Fabrics and BookWorld.

"With the variety of exceptional plush artwork out there, it can be very difficult to choose which pieces get published in Stuffed," said Stampington & Co. Managing Editor Amber Demian. "I am always on the lookout for new and exciting techniques and that certain inexplicable something that just catches my eye. When I first saw Elizabeth Anderson's Zombabies, I was automatically drawn to her bold use of color, and the detailed, hypnotizing eyes that she achieves through screen printing and stitching.

"Her Unizombabies (unicorns featured in the July 2011 issue) were just as unique, with their vibrant patterns, free-motion stitching and inventive story. Elizabeth's originality definitely shines through her artwork," Demian said.

"I really loved the magazine beforehand," said Anderson. "This is an emotional accomplishment. For me, it's an actual, physical thing I can hold and say, 'I made it into this. These people thought I was good enough.'"

Canvas to plush

Initially a screen-printer and painter who incorporated fabric on her canvases, Anderson is sometimes surprised to find she now sews the majority of her artwork. Her plush creations developed from paintings of imaginary creatures who looked simultaneously sweet and off-kilter — much like comrades of the character Max in Maurice Sendak's book, "Where the Wild Things Are."

The childlike paintings became three-dimensional dolls during Anderson's master's degree thesis and 2010 art show at Milwaukee's Cardinal Stritch College. The initial Zombabies had ceramic faces, a result of the coursework Anderson was completing. She created a back story for the creatures: An animated short documenting the "history" of Zombabies in the land of Zo can be found on the blog, www.zombabie.com .

"They evolved," Anderson said of the current plush Zombabies. Each receives a unique name.

The website also links to Anderson's Etsy shop, where she sells products via the popular online artist community. After researching the Etsy process, she invested in photography equipment to ensure photos of her carefully made wares looked equally professional. She learned that Etsy works best when artists list new items with regularity, as new listings show up first in customer searches. And, she has seen how being "liked" and added to Etsy "treasuries" — visual collections of related items — provides valuable connections to both customers and other artists.

Her wares range in price from $5 to $25, plus shipping. "That's what people have in their pocket and are willing to spend," Anderson said.

Wisconsin shoppers can find Anderson's designs at the DIY Studio in Green Bay and at various art fairs, including the upcoming July 24 Summer Craftacular at the East Side Club in Monona, and locally at Sigma's annual Holiday House and Windhover's Windows of Opportunity.

Anderson participated in the recent Art on the Island in Fond du Lac, and caught the attention of father-daughter duo Jon Mark and Ivy Bolthouse. Ivy borrowed money from her dad to purchase a Zombabie Monster named Minnie.

"I loved the art and wanted to support this artist," said the 10-year-old, who also enjoys making plush toys.

Smart marketing

Anderson uses Square, a new app that allows small merchants to accept credit card payments and process them via smartphones. Most small merchants previously found credit card fees unaffordable and accepted only cash and checks, which limited sales.

"It's reasonable and really user friendly," Anderson said of Square. "You swipe the card and get a signature. I can get the buyer's information, and send them a photo of what they bought, a location map, my information. I can keep track of what people buy."

"This type of device is going to save America," said Jon Mark Bolthouse, who researches technology and its uses for libraries. "It lets people afford to be entrepreneurs."

Participating in art fairs provides great opportunities for feedback, Anderson said, noting that she always expected to combine her artistic ability in both teaching and business.

Anderson is the daughter and granddaughter of artists and has taught art at Laconia High School in Rosendale for six years, where she covers a range of creative skills including painting, ceramics, drawing, design, graphics, Photoshop and photography.

"I love it when kids pick up a Zombabie at an art fair and the parent asks, 'What are you going to do with that?'" Anderson said. "And the child says, 'Use it at night-night time.' They have a plan. They have decided, 'He belongs with me. I need this monster.'"

That attachment to a stuffed animal resonates with Anderson, who still treasures her own special Pink Ellie, a much-loved plush elephant from childhood.

"In anything you do for kids, you have to be careful. I reinforce everything when I sew it. I want to make sure things are done right," she said of Zombabie construction, which no longer includes buttons for child safety. "What if it becomes somebody's Pink Ellie? I want it to last. That's important to me."

business SPOTLIGHT

This series appears each Tuesday. If you know of a business that you think we should write about, contact business reporter Heather Stanek at (920) 907-7909 or hstanek@fdlreporter.com.

INFO

- Who: Elizabeth Anderson, Artess Designs, Fond du Lac
- What: Zombabies and other plush toys
- Where: Zombabies.com
- Tip: Buy fabric in fat quarters to satisfy the urge for pattern and color, while keeping purchases small; organize in plastic bins