

Footwear designer Kobi Levi creates imaginative and humorous shoes which look just as much at home on the catwalk as they do on display in an art gallery.

Fantasy footwear

"In my artistic footwear design the shoe is my canvas," says Tel Aviv-based shoe designer, Kobi Levi. "The piece is a wearable sculpture. The result is usually humoristic with a unique point of view about footwear."

Working in collaboration with Israel-based shoe retail chain, Shoofra, Mr Levi takes his inspiration from "everywhere and everything" to design unbelievable footwear that has captured the imagination of footwear aficionados around the world. Not bad considering he has so far done very little to market his creations. He has a blog which has had just over 35,000 views since he started it in April 2010, and less than 5,000 people 'like' his Facebook page – and yet his shoes have featured on countless design and fashion blogs, and they were even worn by US popstar Lady Gaga in her music video for the song "Born This Way". "One day I saw an email from Lady Gaga's staff looking for original input for the new video," Mr Levi told media at the time. "I couldn't believe it. I mean, Lady Gaga is the most famous pop star in the world."

Israeli shoe designer Kobi Levi creates amusing and sometimes bizarre footwear inspired by "everywhere and everything".

ALL IMAGES: KOBI LEVI



Mr Levi began designing shoes when he was a high school student. "I was always fascinated with the shapes of footwear and saw them as wearable sculptures," he says. "My first designs were created when I was in high school. They were made from cardboard back then. I wanted to show my own point of view with my artistic designs."

He went on to study footwear design and development at Bezalel Academy of Arts & Design, Jerusalem, graduating in 2001. "Later I went to 'old school' shoe makers to learn the technical aspects of the craft," he explains. "This way I acquired the tools to create my designs by myself."

With the help of an assistant, Mr Levi handmakes his footwear in a studio in Tel Aviv using leather for the uppers and soles. He describes leather as "the most sustainable and nice looking material for shoes". "Sometimes I buy it in Tel Aviv but I also get some leather in China when I am there or anywhere else. A while ago a person who owns a leather tannery sent me a package full of different leathers to make shoes from. He just liked the designs so much that he wanted me to make something new from his leathers. That's nice!" he says.

Trial and error

Mr Levi currently offers seven styles in limited editions of 20 pairs per style for sale, producing them according to order. "Later on we will offer more styles in limited editions,"

he says. "I am also working on new styles all the time."

The design, development and production of a new style can take up to a month, he says. Many of his designs are very technical and require substantial thought and development to make them wearable. "I do change my mind during development stages," he says. "If something cannot be made the way I first planned to make it, then I have to find a solution and make it in another way. Sometimes this means that the design has to change also. It's all about trial and error for me."

"After the first prototype is ready, it's easier to duplicate it but sometimes there are modifications to be made, so that can take a few weeks as well. We commit to delivery within two to three weeks from order, depending on the specific style."

Mr Levi describes his creations as "something in between art, design and fashion". But however much his designs venture into the art sector, they are always functional, as he explains: "It's important to me that all designs are wearable. That doesn't mean they are comfort shoes". Wearing high heel shoes is always challenging for most women, so my designs are no different in this regard. Nonetheless, I will not compromise on creating the shape that is true to the essence of the design at hand. This balance is tricky and takes a lot of effort during development, but it's possible. I think finding this balance is the most difficult step in the design process."

From birds and coffee to contemporary Chinese culture and classic furniture design, Mr Levi's footwear take a humorous look at shoes and have been exhibited in art galleries for their sculptural qualities.





Many of Mr Levi's designs are technically challenging to produce, but they are always fully functional and can be worn and walked in.

Chinese inspiration

"Inspiration can come from everywhere and everything," Mr Levi says. "I like to take inspirations for my work from different aspects of life."

For several of his designs, Mr Levi was inspired by his visits to China, and he is fascinated by the massive development currently happening in the country. "It's the right place to collect ideas for the new collections," he told local media in China. "Guangzhou is an interesting melting pot in which you have the opportunity to observe trends from a privileged position."

One of Mr Levi's shoe designs is named 'Contemporary Chinese'. The shoe features a fire dragon and chopstick-like stiletto heels. "I chose very iconic, traditional Chinese images: fire dragon and chopsticks, and combined them to create a very Western and modern shoe silhouette," he said.

As for the future, Mr Levi is currently working on some men's footwear designs and a new women's collection inspired by the ocean, which he says is "very exciting". He has also found time to start marketing his work properly by creating a new website, which will launch in March or April this year – and anyone not yet familiar with his designs will surely be mesmerised and delighted when they see them. 🌐



Mr Levi's 'Chewing Gum' stilettos would surely draw much attention from passers-by on the street.