

Footwear designer Kobi Levi is famous for quirky shoe designs that often appear to have more in keeping with surrealism than with shopping, but he is in the process of preparing a new collection that outsource manufacturing partners will be able to make on a production line, making the shoes accessible to a wider public.

Kobi Levi to launch “factory-friendly” collection

He's famous for designing shoes that look like swans, toucans, violins, bananas and coffee pouring from a pot, but Israeli designer Kobi Levi has confirmed a more “factory-friendly” collection is on the way.

Within the next year, an easier-to-manufacture Kobi Levi collection could go into production. They will be artisan-made and will be far from cheap, but they will be easier for the public to buy, the designer says. Mr Levi insists the move is not about making his shoes more commercial and that the shoes in the new collection will be no less creative and no less fun than his previous work. “But they will have to work on a production line,” he says, “so they have to be technically less challenging. Two factories have been testing the ideas, one in Portugal and one in Spain. Lots of footwear producers looked at my shoes on the website and were scared off, but these two were not, so it's been interesting.”

Even a brief look around an exhibition of Mr Levi's work, which ran at the Northampton Museum & Art Gallery this summer, would have given some indication of what these manufacturers were scared of, with unusual animal, bird and fruit shapes immediately catching the eye among the exhibits, and the overall experience certainly living up to the title, ‘Kobi and the Playful World of Shoes’. Probing more deeply, though, you see quickly that it's about much more than play.

Kobi Levi describes shoes as “a piece of art you can live with and make part of your surroundings”. His firm belief is that people's shoes make more of a statement about them than their clothes do, for the simple reason that the shoes have their own shape (although he thinks it's important for them to look good on the foot, too, otherwise there is little point in taking them further than design and making them for real). “You can cheat with a photo; you can modify it,” he explains, “but to make a shoe means to put the real product in front of potential buyers' eyes, allowing them to see every detail close up, and that's really important”

Understand the process

He studied shoe design formally in his native Israel but decided it would be best if he taught himself to construct the shoes in his sketchbook. “I knew footwear companies would not let an intern make shoes like the ones I wanted to make,” he recalls. “You have to understand the shoe-making process



*Kobi Levi banana shoes.
Whoopi Goldberg is a fan, and a wearer.*

ALL CREDITS: KOBİ LEVI



Kobi Levi turned heads with a pop-up store in Selfridges at the time of London 2012, but shoppers were unsure if the shoes were really for sale (they were).

very well before you can take it in your own direction." So, starting in 1997, he set about learning the hard way.

Kobi Levi was pleased, if slightly surprised, by the reaction to some of his early ideas, such as a shoe that resembles a red shopping trolley. He reasons that people could relate to the idea because a shopping trolley is an everyday object. He started to design and make shoes because he likes shoes, but another surprise was feeling excitement when people began to order and wear his creations.

Wider circle

These days, with A-list celebrity clients including Whoopi Goldberg and Lady Gaga, he commands a much wider circle of interest, but he still goes about things in the same way. He chooses a theme, sketches to see if he likes what his ideas look like, makes one pair of shoes in each style, photographs them carefully and creatively, uploads them onto his website and waits to see if orders come in before making more. "I don't court press attention," he says. "I just make shoes, take photos and put them online." This is how Whoopi Goldberg and Lady Gaga became clients: the actress, a famous lover of shoes, saw some images and sent an email to place an order, adding a note to assure Mr Levi that it really was her. She wears his banana shoes relatively often and another famous style that has a heel that makes it look as if the wearer has stepped in bubble gum that has become stuck to the sole of her shoe was on Ms Goldberg's feet when she appeared on a television programme with President Obama. When Lady Gaga wore Kobi Levi boots for one of her videos, there was no direct contact with the designer, but she did confirm her choice on her Facebook page. "It's not that people will buy what she wears," the designer says, "but it was great promotion and helps attract attention to other shoes in the collection.

Dressed, but not to kill

His styles usually have high heels, usually to a maximum of ten centimetres ("ten centimetres is completely wearable; I don't want to kill people's feet"), but he says this is not because he has anything against flats and rather because he feels obliged to follow "whatever the design idea demands". He admits to being "too obsessed" ever to give up on any idea he starts to work on.



The man himself at the opening of the 'Kobi and the Playful World of Shoes' exhibition in Northampton in the summer of 2014.

For sale, for real

Interest doesn't always lead to sales. A recent Kobi Levi collection was a collaboration with the Disney Corporation. Disney called him and asked him which of its characters he'd like to base some designs on and he immediately chose the various witches that attempt to thwart the ambitions of the much more famous Disney princesses in each story. The company has forbidden him to make these shoes available to any client, but he confirms that he has had requests.

The Disney case was exceptional. Around the time of the 2012 Olympics in London, Kobi Levi had a pop-up store for a month in the host city's famous Selfridges store. He remembers that, at least at first, the public didn't know for sure if this was really part of the merchandise on offer: could you really try Kobi Levi shoes on and could you really buy them? Now, with the more "factory-friendly" collection in the offing, more and more consumers are likely to realise that the answer to both questions is yes. ☺



A celebration of China. Kobi Levi designs usually have high heels, but not so high as to be unwearable.