



# HELLO DOLLY!

WORDS BY **DIANNE DREW**

**From bargain-bin to modern day subculture phenomenon and making Forbes' list of hot collectible investments, this is the dissolution and resurrection of 1972's fabulous Blythe!**

**In the year 1972, more people than ever before were tying the knot, the average house price was £7374, petrol cost only 35p per gallon and, believe it or not, Led Zeppelin's concert in Singapore was cancelled due to uptight government officials refusing to let them off their aircraft because of their long locks. It also gave us London's first Gay Pride march, Donny Osmond's five-week number one hit 'Puppy Love' as well as the births our beloved homegirls Geri Halliwell and Miranda Hart.**

Peppermint Blythe



Neo Blythe

Meanwhile far across the ocean, the Blythe doll was born. Rumoured to be inspired by artist Margaret Kean's forlorn and cultish depictions of young children (popularly known as 'Big Eyes') and their iconic popularity in the 1960s, these dolls were a creation of Allison Katzman of leading toy designer Marvin Glass and Associates. Manufactured by American company Kenner, Blythe hit stores across America retailing for \$5.96 (approximately £2.25).

Although Blythe was accessorised with four fashionable wigs of various colours and a groovy bohemian style of dress, along with additional frocks, wigs and sunglasses that were, naturally, 'sold separately', to Kenner's disappointment she failed to make her mark on the American toy market and thus Hong Kong production was discontinued after a year. It is thought that the doll's design, of a rather sizeable head with disproportionately large 'blinkable' eyes that changed colour courtesy of a pull-cord at the back of the head, was more disturbing than appealing to children and adults alike. With the population not warming to poor Blythe, she was banished to departmental stores' bargain bins.

Fast forward twenty five years later in 1997, a vintage Blythe doll was acquired via EBay by budding photographer Gina Garan after a friend claimed it was Garan's doppelgänger. She soon developed a passion for the doll and bought several more for around \$10. When, a year later, she needed small test subjects to try out a newly acquired camera and macro lens, her by then large collection of big-eyed Blythe dolls seemed the perfect models.

It wasn't until 1999 that Garan met Japan-based Junko Wong, founder and president of Cross World Connections (CWC) International (an agency representing creatives across the globe) at an exhibition commemorating the

opening of its new New York hub. There she presented Wong with her vintage Blythe travel photographs taken in several locations during her travels. Wong was instantly taken with Garan's work and subject matter, and felt Blythe would could be the next star of the Japanese market, where Manga and Anime (with a visually similar style to Blythe) are ingrained in pop culture. Soon afterwards, CWC acquired the licensing to use and remake Blythe, from American toy company Hasbro (who had bought out Tonka Toys, which had itself taken over Kenner in 1987).

In 2000, not only was there a enormously successful Japanese department store Christmas TV and print media campaign featuring Blythe as the model, but Garan also celebrated the release of her book of photography entitled 'This is Blythe'.



Kenner Blythe 1972 magazine spread (Google Images)

By the following summer, CWC and Japanese manufacturer Takara were well into production of a new Blythe doll inspired by the vintage Kenner design. Their efforts yielded a massive resurrection and astounding success, with a new limited edition Blythe doll selling out

in less than an hour. The retail triumph continued with the release of the first generation of 'Neo Blythes', which were original concepts and designs by the CWC design team Junie Moon. These were followed by smaller versions such as Petite and Middie Blythe, which also proved to be a hit. Wong attributes this mass appeal to Blythe style reflecting current fashion trends, and the fact she's a fashion doll that appeals to adult doll collectors.

But where does that leave our original Blythe of 1972, the 'big eyes' vintage doll that is considered to be 'The Holy Grail' by collectors? Shortly after the release of the new Neo Blythe, renewed interest in the dolls saw prices of our vintage

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gal shot up from \$35 to \$350. (£13.24 to £132). These days, an original in mint boxed condition can be listed on eBay for £2500 plus. Not bad for a doll that originally sold for £2.25!

The newly-designed Neo versions, including limited editions, and custom-altered originals can range from £100 to £6607 on Amazon. A personal favourite of this writer, an 'Alice in Wonderland'-inspired Neo doll fittingly named 'Tart and Tea,' is currently listed at £570.

Not only are vintage clothes for the original dolls still found online, Junie Moon over the years has also released a virtual fashion cornucopia of outfits and accessories (averaging five outfits per year). If all of that isn't impressive enough, she has modelled fashions for, and by Vivienne Westwood, Gucci, Dior, Dolce & Gabbana, and been featured in collectors' publications and magazines worldwide

including 'Forbes USA', 'Bazaar Australia', 'Stylist UK', 'Cosmopolitan Taiwan', 'Rolling Stone', 'Vogue' and 'Marie Claire' in Japan. In addition there are now bespoke Blythe clothing designers all over the world trading their wares on sites such as eBay, Amazon and Etsy, individuals that do custom cosmetic alterations on dolls themselves, collectors who have acquired hundreds of dolls and continue to do so, and others like Garan who are simply inspired and love taking photographs of their plastic princesses. This has resulted in not only a massive subculture, but industry, self-employment and a wonderful camaraderie within in the world of Blythe. She has created, inspired and captivated an entire new generation, and for her numerous fans here in Britain there's even BlytheCon! Endorsed by CWC and Junie Moon, BlytheCon is the UK's annual conference (now in its seventh year) bringing one-and-all together under one roof every October.

But what do her fans really think? In the words of one online collector from Asia, "She is unique. She is innocent. She is naughty. Like a wild child just went outdoors for a whole day playing in the mud, on the beach, on the grass in the park. Her hair is a mess. Dirty stains and marks all over her body doesn't weaken her soul. Your job is to help her regain her beauty. And when you do it, you will only be craving for more." And what about Gina Garan on the subject of her muse? "She is a true extension of myself. She is my companion, travel partner and best friend." 🐾

**Dianne Drew is a freelance writer, bon vivant and lover of vintage based in Stamford Lincolnshire. She does not currently own a Blythe doll, but may soon.**

**Modern photography of Blythe is courtesy of Johnathon Venable [https://www.flickr.com/photos/natura\\_naturata/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/natura_naturata/)**

**Junie Moon official website: [www.junemoonshop.com/blythe](http://www.junemoonshop.com/blythe)**

**BlytheCon takes place on 1st October, 2016 in Edinburgh, Scotland. See [www.blythecon.co.uk](http://www.blythecon.co.uk) for more details.**

**If you are interested in purchasing an authentic Neo or vintage Blythe doll, there are many resources and social media groups and communities willing to help and answer questions.**

*"She is unique. She is innocent. She is naughty. Like a wild child ..."*

