

Print Magazine

March/April

What follows is the March/April issue of Print Magazine. While Sportogo itself is not mentioned there is quite a bit of information about the Skywalker Parade we supplied the balloons for.

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Cuddly:
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Magic Kingdom

What happens when Miami meets Japanese culture? Lots of toys, parades, and playgrounds. Behold the power of Friends With You!

By Caleb Neelon

All work by Friends With You, unless otherwise noted. **This page:** Cloud City: an installation/playground for Art Basel 2005 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami. Photo by Sebastian Grey

Once upon a time, there was a parade featuring a 60-foot-tall rainbow-colored dog, a white beast called Murbit, and a red and yellow pyramid with a sharp nose.

The parade, titled "Skywalkers," included blimps designed by David Choe, Paper Rad, Mumbleboy, Devilrobots, Ara Peterson, and Misaki Kawai as part of Art Basel Miami last December. But the real stars of the show were the two local boys who dreamed it up—big, jovial Tury Sandoval, 30, and the equally amiable Sam Borkson, 27, partners in the art and design entity known as Friends With You.

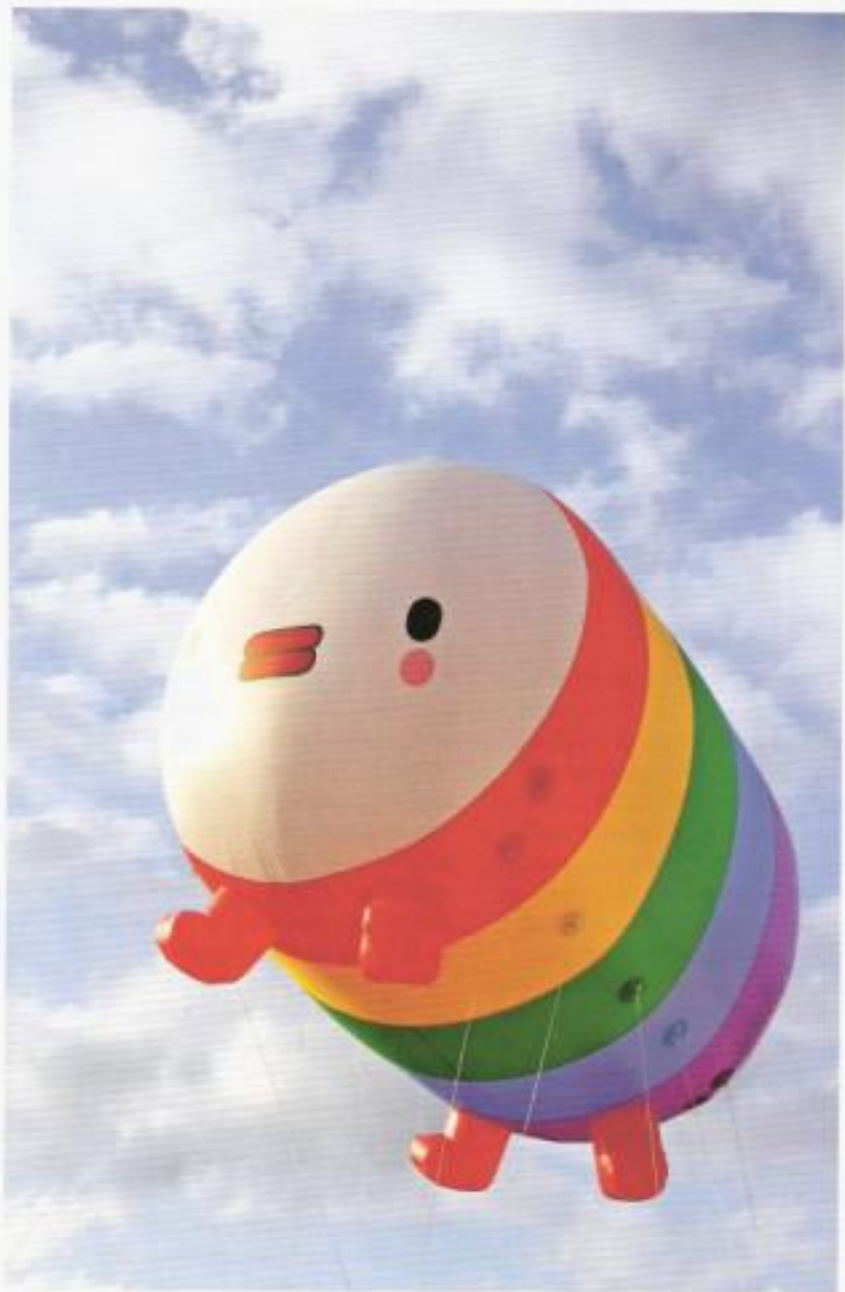
Meet Friends With You and you'll come away hugged, happy, and full of energy. The Miami-based duo became friends after meeting in the rave scene during college; for the past four years, they have been blurring the line between art and design with a frenzy of toys, balloon parades, and epic installations that emphasize luck, togetherness, and magic.

Sandoval got his start at a Miami ad agency, where he discovered just how influential marketing strategies and brand management can be on public opinion. After four years, though, he says, "I learned that if you don't have a savvy brand or brand manager, it doesn't matter how good the creative is. The clients will shit all over it."

So he left for the agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky, where, he says, "I got to see how well-thought-out campaigns and marketing strategies were implemented, and had a tremendous success rate in the marketplace." Borkson, on the other hand, has worked in a fine-art setting while also creating video graphics for Viacom.

In 2002, the two decided to establish Friends With You, and their style seems to have sprung forth fully formed. They began by making toys; Borkson was attracted to the idea after he traveled to Japan and saw kids incorporating playthings into their clothes and backpacks, taking them everywhere. "We really love the reach of toys," he says. "That's why we started disguising our art as such in the first place." One of their first creations was Malfi, an eminently huggable, pear-shaped





Opposite page and this page: "Skywalkers," a parade of 18 blimps for Art Basel Miami, December 2006, including Paper Rad's "Seeing Eye God," named Neddrick Dogsthum (opposite, bottom), and Friends With You creations "Grebubba" (above left) and "Seeing Maffi" (bottom). Photos by Ning Ansa and Abraham Katz. **Above:** "Rainbow Valley," a playground permanently installed at the Aventura Mall, Miami, in December 2006. Photos by Chris Cutro.



Above: The Good Wood Gang, modular toys that are also magical amulets. **Opposite page:** Malfi, the duo's trademark creation, who is said to bring luck and adventure.

character who, the story goes, brings luck and adventure.

Paul Budnitz, founder and president of designer-toy hub Kidrobot, can't get enough of the Friends With You creations. "Their toys are totally, completely mad, a little cute, a little dangerous, and utterly out of the box," he says. "For some reason I can't explain, we sell tons and tons of them." After first launching their line, Borkson and Sandoval found themselves unable to keep up with the demand, and they hired a mother-and-daughter seamstress pair in Miami's Little Havana to help make the plush toys like Malfi, Mr. TTT, Albino Squid, and Shoebuca.

The art-toy market has its downside, however. It's oversaturated, and its obsession with exclusivity and packaging has nearly robbed the word "toy" of its meaning, creating a system where Comic Book Guys collect every edition of a specific item, then wait for its value to skyrocket on eBay.

In response to this increasingly precious and commodified turn of the market, Friends With You created The Good Wood Gang, a collection of colorful, wooden "transformazoid" toys; it took them two years to design and create a fully modular toy that children can pull apart and reconfigure. "It's just our philosophy that

toys are to be played with," Sandoval says. "They need to have a degree of functionality—either physical or spiritual—that most artists who are designing toys simply choose to ignore."

Since then, they've produced motion graphics, animations for Sony and MTV, logos, illustrations, posters, and a short film for Nike in which their magical cast of characters play starring roles.

From the beginning, though, Borkson and Sandoval weren't content to create a new Mickey Mouse if he didn't have a Disneyland to play in. A few galleries let them run wild making walk-in productions, but Friends With You faced the same problem that all such artists and their galleries encounter. Large-scale installations, like their giant "Get Lucky" shrine at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in L.A.—which provided a quick "wish response system" and face-to-face time with God—are expensive to make and nearly impossible to sell.

But their experience in the corporate world gave them a useful sense of where to get funding. "We knew the kind of budgets that corporations have," Borkson explains. "It allowed us to dream bigger and bigger."

So the duo turned to corporate assistance, banking on the fact that the sheer



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spectacle of their installations would be a selling point. They were right. Big businesses are like modern-day Medicis faced with fickle (and savvy) consumers, and they'll do anything to get people's attention.

"Corporations are replacing the great kings trying to speak to the people," Borkson says, "and we are that bridge." Sandoval elaborates: "What clients are getting is a simple and compelling, positive statement, no matter how we serve it. And that does not change. . . . I think that clients come expecting a certain level of over-the-top 'we can change the world' attitude that is intoxicating for us and for them also."

Their refreshing lack of irony and wholesale exuberance is a reaction against today's general attitude of detachment. In their new book *Friends With You Have Powers!*, published by Die Gestalten Verlag, the two of them take issue with the spirit of the age: "In the sterile settings of modern society, spiritual outlets have become a low priority within our daily routines."

In response, they've created some truly mythic projects. For one of four guest rooms they designed in 2004 for Volkswagen's Project Fox hotel in Copenhagen, *Friends With You* surrounded guests with images of trees and thrift-store kitsch to create a modern-day fertility shrine; Borkson and Sandoval covered another room in tile and adorned it with a gilded bull's head that could have come out of *The Ten Commandments*.


They also created an installation based around the new VW Fox car, which they turned into a totemic, furry white monster called the "Albino Fox." Its soft pink interior was filled with votives, holiday lights, and flowers: "We brought a level of spirituality to a standard car," explains Sandoval, "making it important and raising it to the level of worship and homage."

Last November, Sebastien Agnecssens, curator and founder of New York agency Formavision, asked the guys to redesign the

Diesel Denim Gallery in New York City. Agnecssens says their intoxicating spirit and sunny disposition is a welcome change of pace, which he attributes to their hometown. "They come from Miami," he says. "In New York, you wouldn't be able to find that kind of energy in art."

In fact, it's in Miami where their work seems to take root best. In November 2005, real estate megadeveloper Turnberry Associates got word of a massive playground the duo planned for Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art and approached the partners to design a children's playground for the Aventura Mall complex in North Miami Beach. "Rainbow Valley," which opened last December, includes three mountains, secret tunnels, and rainbow bridges, enabling kids to manipulate their environment by turning rubies and diamonds inside the main mountain's console. Borkson and Sandoval expect to work on even "bigger and badder" playgrounds next year as well, and there's no doubt that deep-pocketed companies will line up to fund them.

One wonders, though: What do clients—like Toyota, which helped fund "Skywalkers"—actually get from bankrolling projects that blend art, design, and branding into one transformazoid of fun? Does it even matter? "We know that it is good for them," Sandoval says. "Whether it helps their bottom line in the long run or not, that is a whole different question. . . . But the immediate benefit is obvious—that through this funding they are making more and more art accessible to a wider audience and in turn elevating all of our lives."

The true focus of *Friends With You*, Borkson says, is to revive spirituality and belief in a disenchanted world. "We have energy sources and the absolute spirit all around us, so we should use its power to achieve and perpetuate greatness and friendship in ourselves and each other," he says. "It's real magic, and we want to share it with everyone." 

Opposite page, top: Exterior and interior of the "Albino Fox," a project commissioned by Volkswagen. From *Friends With You Have Powers!* © Die Gestalten Verlag 2007. **Middle:** "Natural Communications," a video piece commissioned by MTV and played in Times Square that visualizes the secret communications of the earth and nature. **Bottom left:** "Two Swans," a room in the Project Fox hotel in Copenhagen, Denmark. From *Friends With You Have Powers!* © Die Gestalten Verlag 2007. **Bottom right:** Cover of *Friends With You Have Powers!*, a new book of the firm's work. © Die Gestalten Verlag 2007.