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ISSUE 99
£5.99



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TROLLS, TRASH AND TELLING STORIES

Thomas Dambo has made an international name for himself with his huge troll sculptures made entirely from recycled wood. He talks to Jade Beecroft about his work here



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THOMAS DAMBO

From a childhood spent collecting trash in a treehouse in his parents' backyard, Thomas Dambo has made an international name for himself as an artist, sculptor and creator of a network of huge troll installations made entirely from salvaged wood and other recycled materials – hidden in forests around the world for people to find. With approximately five tons of scrap wood going into each troll, Thomas is a passionate advocate for recycling and repurposing. 'I believe that anything can

be made out of anything and there should be no such thing as trash,' he explains. 'But the world is running out of resources at the same time as we're drowning in trash.'

Recycling starts at home

Thomas lives on a farm in the Danish countryside near Copenhagen, with his wife and twins, and even his studio has been built from recycled materials. Thomas explains: 'It's a big old farm that needed totally

renovating when we moved here five years ago, so I've tried to do as much of the work as possible using things that we've found that other people don't want to use.' That has included insulating his workshop with sheets of aluminium that were once used to display maps of Copenhagen's Metro. Thomas points to the age-old saying that 'one man's trash is another man's treasure' and now employs between 20–30 people at his studio, who source recycled materials



1 Thomas Dambo in his barn **2** Marit troll, It Sounded Like a Mountain Fell in Wulong, China **3** Wilson's Car in Santurce, Puerto Rico

and help him turn them into his world-famous troll sculptures.

The story behind the trolls

Trolls play a big part in Danish and Nordic mythology, and Thomas remembers listening to troll stories on cassette tapes as a child. A former graffiti artist and rap musician, Thomas was working for a shipping company when he became fixated on the ever-growing

pile of cargo boxes and pallets waiting to be scrapped. 'The company was paying money for another company to take it away and dispose of it – probably burning it or putting it into landfill,' he explains. 'It started me thinking of how I could turn it into some kind of street art project.' Thomas's first sculptures were made out of plywood, and he experimented with animals and human figures before settling on trolls. 'I thought about how the scrap wood had come from forests all around the

world, and how trolls are often protectors or guardians of the forest,' he explains. And after initially experimenting with colour, thanks in part to his background as a graffiti artist, he realised he needed to design an aesthetic around 'the brokenness and scrappiness' of the wood he was using. 'Anyone who works with wood keeps a scrap wood bucket at the end of their bench,' he says. 'I realised I needed to build an aesthetic based around what was in that bucket.'



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4 Little Nis troll, Bernheim Forest Giants in Kentucky, USA **5** Hans Hulehånd, Den Kæmpestore Troldefolkfest in Odense, Denmark **6** Røskva, Guardians of the Seeds in Maine, USA **7** Mama Mimi in Wyoming, USA **8** Jyttes Hytte, Giants of Mandurah in Western Australia **9** Santi Ikto, Giants of Mandurah in Western Australia

From forest – back to forest

Thomas firmly believes that materials are readily available – as long as you're not afraid to ask. He suggests: 'Whatever you need, think about who produces it, sells it and

consumes it. Those are the people who will be able to give it to you.' He has made 171 trolls to date, across 23 different countries, from Europe and the USA to Australia, and says that when he arrives in a new part of the world he often uses Google Maps to find the

nearest industrial area. 'If you drive around with a trailer, businesses will welcome you and invite you to take their pallets and scrap wood, because it saves them from having to get rid of it themselves,' he explains. Thomas also points out that many people like the thought



10 Curious Sue, Explorers of Sentosa in Singapore **11** Lost Finn, Way of the Bird King in Vermont, USA **12** Jakob Two Trees, Way of the Bird King in Seattle, USA

that their trash will be going towards another person's 'passion project'. 'If you say "hey man, I notice that pole or pallet has been in your yard for a while, and I'm looking for materials to build my kids a swing set", then that person will probably be really happy to give it to you,' he says.

Thomas's trolls start out life as unwanted pallets and other scrap wood. He and his team will visit the location for their next project, figure out what they'd like to do and take a photo of Thomas striking a pose that they intend to replicate. The trolls' faces and some other pieces are built in the farm workshop. 'I

have about 15 troll heads in my studio at the moment,' laughs Thomas. 'And so many feet! Little feet... medium feet... big feet... all different kinds.' They then transport the face and materials to the location to build the complete sculpture, with much of the wood sourced from around the site.



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13 Jacob Everear in Detroit Lakes, USA **14** The Golden Rabbit in Detroit Lakes, USA **15** Stig Findersti, Giants Legends Tour in Sonder Felding, Denmark

Telling stories

From his days as a rapper, Thomas has always loved telling stories, and says he now uses stories as a way of getting his messages across through his art. His trolls aren't just placed in forests – they are hidden, and fans of his work have to go looking for them, creating their own stories in the process. 'I wanted to make something gigantic – and then hide it,' he

laughs. An interactive worldwide Troll Map is available via his website, which includes rough locations and a list of all the trolls there are to find. 'Around 5–6 million people find the trolls every year,' says Thomas. 'They are free to visit, all I ask is that you pick up a couple of pieces of someone else's litter if you see it in the forest. If everyone picked up litter after everyone else, there would be no litter.' He also

involves volunteers in the installations. During a recent project in North Carolina to break his own record for the longest troll tail, Thomas was assisted by around 500–600 people to create a 320m tail winding through the forest, made from old bourbon barrels.

There's also a story behind his newest project, an exhibition at the ARKEN Museum of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen. Thomas



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16 Mrs Skipper in Rhode Island, USA **17** The Six Forgotten Giants in Copenhagen, Denmark **18** Mane Mor, secret location

explains: 'I created this story of a troll squad who break into the museum in the middle of the night and fill it with trash, so the museum is like a landfill site, then these eight trolls build a human figure in the middle of it, made out of garbage. I wanted to make the point that we usually fill museums with objects of value, but trash is highly valuable too.' The Garbage Man Exhibition opens in May and runs until the end of the year. Thomas adds: "The message of my art is that trash is destroying the world, but we can build a future from it.'

Start today

Thomas says his biggest message for other artists, woodworkers, crafters – or anyone who has a dream to make something – is to start straight away and use whatever materials they have around them. 'One of the things that makes me unique is that I try to remove all the things that limit me from starting now,' he explains. 'If you have a dream, ask yourself how you can take the first step towards that dream today. To be successful at something is just a matter of all

the steps you have to take along the way.' And he is always thinking about how he can make his art inspire people to rethink their views on what they throw away, as he continues towards his ultimate goal of building 1,000 trolls. 'It takes approximately five tons of scrap wood to build one of my trolls,' he concludes. 'Every year, in the USA, around 12 million tons of wood ends up in landfills – that's enough to build 2.5 million trolls!'

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