



# Confessions of a toy boy

Meet daddy blogger Joel Henriques who is putting a modern spin on traditional toy design

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LIKE MOST HOUSEHOLDS with young children, Joel Henriques' home is full of toys. But what makes the toys belonging to four-year-old twins Jack and Tess so different is that they are lovingly crafted by their father. A modern-day Geppetto, Joel has a knack for creating toys that are stylish, simple and innovative. There are cute fabric nesting dolls that look a little like egg cosies; a cool minimalist doll's house with open sides for easy access; puppets fashioned out of paper clips and cardboard; wooden animals that slot neatly together and a paper city populated by whimsical, line-drawn citizens. Joel posts his ideas on his craft blog *Made By Joel* alongside pictures of his cute-as-a-button twins playing with the toys and clearly having a ball. His are not just toys with aesthetic appeal, they are also ones that inspire and excite your inner crafter and make you want to have a go at making them, too.

Joel himself is a youthful 38 – a cool, easy-going guy with a quirky tattoo of an old Norwegian coin on his calf. "My mother's family is Norwegian, so I figured that was one tattoo that she might not get too upset about," he says. He was born in 1973 in southern California in the town of Loma Linda, where his father was at medical school, but then his family moved to Washington County, Oregon, when Joel was a

baby. A middle child, with a sister either side, Joel grew up in a house that had once belonged to his great-grandmother. His love of toy making began early, thanks to the discovery of his great-grandfather's stash of antique tools. "There was this shack that was full of old hammers and saws and sanders and things," he says. "I liked making activity toys and rigged up this zip wire to the clothesline pole so that I could jump out of my tree fort and slide down. When my mother realised I liked building things, she bought me a little scroll saw, which is perfect for making toys. I used to make

all these little pigs and ducks, and other animals."

That same stash of old tools also came in handy for creating Joel's very own arboreal chill-out zone. "I nailed up a series of wooden boards so I could sit up in the trees and listen to rap music on my Sony Walkman," he says. "The local radio station played this rap show at eight o'clock on a Monday night and I would be there waiting with my blank tape so I could record the whole show and listen back to it later."

Coming from a medical family – both his father and his grandfather were doctors, his mother was a nurse – the pressure was on for Joel to follow in their footsteps. But when he left for Walla Walla University in South East Washington State, it was with dreams of making it as a musician. "Unfortunately, they didn't do

**"Joel has a knack for creating stylish, innovative toys"**

Toymaker and house-husband Joel is inspired by four-year-old twins Tess and Jack's games





a major for a rock star so I took a degree in art and philosophy instead," he says. "By chance, I ran into two other musicians whose parents were set on them becoming doctors. So we formed a band and called ourselves Go Medicine." The band was a jazz, funk, rock outfit, with Joel taking the roles of singer-songwriter and bass guitarist. "We had songs with names like *Shooting Sparks* and *Get Along*," he says. "Our vibe was pretty James Brown and a lot of our songs were inspired by girlfriends I had, but it was all positive. I'm a really positive kind of guy."

After leaving college, Joel pursued a career as an artist. "People liked my art and were buying my paintings, which was cool," he says. "I do all these modern still lifes and abstracts in this graphic style. I like owls and trees, birds and bicycles." He moved to Portland, Oregon, and soon after married his wife, Shannon. Happily, Shannon was training to be a doctor and so was warmly welcomed into the family fold. "My dad and grandpa were so happy when I married a doctor. It was just as good as if I'd become one myself. Everybody loves Shannon in my family."

Following the arrival of the twins, Joel took on the role of house-husband while his wife went back to work. "I think it's more than twice as hard having two babies – when one baby wakes up and cries, the other one wakes up and cries, too," he says. "I think the first six

## “Many of my ideas come from watching my children playing with toys”

months were the longest six months of my entire life, probably because I was awake for most of the time."

It was the arrival of Jack and Tess that reignited Joel's passion for toy making. Among the first toys he made for them were little wooden animals coated in beeswax so that they were safe to chew on. "Many of my ideas come from watching my children play with toys and then seeing how I could improve them," says Joel. "They had these yo-yos, but were really frustrated because they couldn't make them work properly. So I came up with my own version made out of a pair of my old Paul Smith socks." Thus, with a little stuffing and stitching, and attached to a length of elastic for maximum bounce-ability, the yo-yo ball was born.

Other young relatives are also lucky recipients of Joel's passion for toys. "One of my nephews, Leo, likes to watch these Louis Armstrong clips on YouTube and he has developed his own Louis Armstrong dance. So, for his birthday, I made him a stuffed trumpet so that he could really look the part," says Joel. "He also has a real thing for catfish and so last year I made him this big black catfish with gold chiffon fins."

So popular is Joel's blog that in recent months he has been hard at work producing his own book, featuring entries from the blog as well as brand new ideas and designs. "Fitting in crafting the book has been a challenge, but mostly Jack and Tess play together nicely now, so



I'll take my laptop out into the yard and be working away on it while they run around," he says. Handily, Joel's back yard is home to a modernist play shed – of his own construction, naturally – that has proven the perfect shelter for his laptop from the odd spots of rain.

Among the projects for the new book is an innovative rubber-band car. "I came up with the idea of using runners like a sled rather than wheels, as attaching wheels to the car was a bit fiddly," he says. "It goes really fast and you can have fun with races and playing shuffleboard-style games." Another innovation is the abstract vertical puzzle, which has thin, coloured wooden blocks that can be pegged to a vertical



board. "It's a bit like decorating a Christmas tree and it's good for developing fine motor skills as children have to hold the pegs like they would a pen," he says.

Joel's children are also getting in on the toy-making act. "Often, when they are drawing a picture, they're like, 'Hey, we could cut this up and make a mobile out of it.'" Lego is another popular pastime for young Jack. "It's great because I get to play with Lego again," says Joel. Tess, meanwhile, is a prolific painter. "It's pretty early to tell her style, but she loves colour and detail, and has a huge passion for creating art." With twins and toys to keep him occupied, Joel has had to set aside his musical ambitions. "I don't want to be a rock star any more," he says. "I haven't got the energy" ■



## Paper Blooms

Here is a simple way to make a beautiful flower. The paper petal circles slide on and off without the need for glue or tape, which makes it a great building toy that can have many colour variations. It takes only minutes to make, and stands by itself, so you can use it for a decoration just about anywhere.

### Materials

- Coloured paper
- Wire (45cm of 22-gauge stem wire from the floral section of craft stores).
- Scissors
- One piece of clear tape

### Instructions

- 1 Cut out six circles about 7cm in diameter. The circles don't need to be perfect.
- 2 Take the stem wire and bend an 8cm-diameter circle at one end for the base. Make the wire flat against the bottom through the middle of the circle.
- 3 Bend the wire straight up at the middle to make the stem of the flower stand upright.
- 4 Fold five of the paper circles in half, then cut a narrow notch into the side of each fold.
- 5 Take the remaining paper circle and attach it to the top of the wire stem with clear tape. This is the centre of the flower.
- 6 Align the notch of each folded circle and slide onto the centre circle. Adjust the base so the flower will stand firmly.

