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Jaime Hayon is a Spanish artist / designer. He has a new studio space in Barcelona. Photo, pages from Hayon's diaries. (Hayon studio)

Jaime Hayon's whimsical world of playful creations

By Alice Rawsthorn

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LONDON: Once they looked romantic, perhaps a little twee, but after Jaime Hayon had finished with them, the Lladró lovers, the porcelain figurines of a man scooping his sweetheart into his arms for a lingering kiss, seemed to have been recast as the stars of an especially steamy telenovela.

"It is absolutely telenovela," Hayon said, laughing. "When I go into the Lladró archive, it's like an Almodóvar movie, with the man looking this way, and the horse looking that way. It's fun. The figures are really sculptural and really beautiful. I played around with them in a decorative way, so you're like whaaaaaaah!"

Hayon is playing very productively right now. His supersized mosaic installation for Bisazza was a hit at this spring's Milan Furniture Fair. Lladró is so happy with his steamy take on its archive that it is launching a new collection of

porcelain objects designed by him in Milan next year. His first interior design project, for the Madrid restaurant La Terraza del Casino, is to open next month, and his first store, for Villa Moda, will be unveiled in the Gulf region in March.

Like all of Hayon's work, these projects will be a visual riot of exuberant colors, shiny surfaces, bold shapes and cartoon imagery. "Jaime animates his designs as if they are each creatures in their own right," observed Gareth Williams, a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. "A powerful and childlike," as distinct from childish, "imagination seems to be at work."

Villa Moda's owner, Sheik Majed al-Sabah, says he feels that Hayon's designs "automatically put a smile on your face."

He's right. It's hard not to smile at them, or at Hayon himself, a 32-year-old Spaniard, who

seems to have been sent by central casting to play the part of the wacky designer with bright blue specs and mad professor hair. The final touch is his quick-fire speech, although what he says seems endearingly sincere. "Jaime is like a book you can't put down, except that you're not holding the book and it's reading itself," said Jasper Morrison, his friend and a fellow designer. "On our first meeting he showed me a giant green chicken on rockers that he'd made for a Chinese collector who'd asked him to 'do something cool for me.' I think his work is fantastic - 100 percent genuine."

Hayon is among the most visible of a new generation of designers who have rejected the modernist role of the designer as a problem-solver in favor of self-expression. "I was educated to be a designer, but inside I'm an artist," he said. "I understand that I have to do something that works, but as soon as I've done that, I play - and that's what interests me.

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I am thinking, drawing and writing all the time, always going 'ping!' But I don't know when I'll use those ideas. My work is all about telling stories - my stories, not the brand's."

Luckily for Hayon, he is designing at a time when, after years of globalization, intensely personal work like that of the Dutch designers Studio Job and Maarten Baas has become marketable.

His disinterest in modernist convention is partly generational and partly nationalistic. There is no industrial design tradition in Spain, which left him free to develop his own approach after being introduced to design through his teenage obsession, skateboarding and its graphics. He studied in Madrid and Paris before spending five years at Fabrica, the design research center funded by the Benetton fashion company in Treviso, northern Italy, where he stayed for five years, launching the Qee series of graphic toys while

he was there. "But then I became too much of a manager," recalled Hayon. "I was like Dr. Jekyll with an angry Mr. Hyde fighting to get out."

The London gallerist David Gill, spotted the strange objects that Hayon was making in his spare time as "Mr. Hyde" and offered to exhibit them in the 2003 show Mediterranean Digital Baroque. Hayon then left Fabrica with his girlfriend, the Dutch artist Nienke Klunder, to open a studio in Barcelona. His first commissions came from collectors, followed by an approach from the Spanish bathroom company ArtQuitect. "I got crazy with the idea of the bathroom," he recalled. "I did six or seven proposals for them. They gave me a space in Barcelona and I attacked it - graphics everywhere."

Bold and vibrant, Hayon's bathroom struck a timely contrast with the delicate romanticism of early 2000s design. He was approached by

more collectors and manufacturers, including Lladró and Bisazza, and now works from studios in Treviso and Barcelona while living in London, where he spends much of his time poring over antiquarian books in the British Museum library.

Like Studio Job, Hayon uses digital technology to apply graphic images of historic and contemporary symbols to three-dimensional objects, but his dramatic treatment of shapes and contrasts evokes the drama of Moorish design. His influences tend to be "artists who work with design" like Franz West, Donald Judd, Ugo Rondinone and, above all, Jeff Koons, who shares his love of "a new kitsch - a really, really sophisticated kitsch in all its splendor."

Wherever he goes, Hayon takes sketchbooks and diaries in which he jots down ideas for actual and imaginary projects, which may surface in future work. Top of the bill right now

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is the circus - "there's so much there, the aesthetic, the graphical code and so much that's been lost" - and his and Klunder's idea of creating an American Château, a 21st century version of a Louis XIV pleasure palace stuffed with precious objects telling the stories of our time.

"Jaime is able to look at the world around him, read the signs and produce a very peculiar response from his imagination," said Guta Moura Guedes, director of Experimenta, the Lisbon design festival. "He's not copying, not trying to be trendy, not worried about beauty or ugliness. It's all about his vision."