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Lisa Frank, Design Pioneer

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CDE 504: Design Pioneers

Professor Kate Clair

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Introduction

For most Americans a major portion of childhood is spent surrounded by school walls made of white cinderblock. Unfortunately the US educational system isn't usually known for its emphasis on aesthetics. In a bland daily environment even something as simple as a colored notebook can offer momentary relief from chronic dullness. If it's a Lisa Frank™ notebook, the bold colors and lovable characters can practically light up a classroom, potentially offering a springboard for daydreams, or a jolt of energy to weary students. This powerful contrast may explain why Lisa Frank's artwork has been celebrated across multiple generations of kids, and remains a facet of popular culture.

Lisa Frank (b. 1955) is an American artist who founded the massively successful Lisa Frank Incorporated in 1979. The company is best known for producing school supplies though they also made stickers and apparel. The overall aesthetic of the products were inspired by Frank's original concepts and art. Her roles in the company have included artist, art director, product developer, and CEO over the years.

The Lisa Frank™ style is practically its own art movement. It features saturated, colorful everything, but mostly animals such as bears, tigers, dolphins and unicorns. Her artwork is known for its unbridled color palette full of intense hues. Her compositions could be described as maximalist, overflowing with elements that dance throughout the picture plane.



Carousel, 1995. An example of artwork that contains common characteristics of Frank's products. The piece depicts two unicorn merry-go-round mounts adorned in saddles that are decorated with stars, hearts, and tassels. Their manes and horns are rainbow swirls. The central structure of the carousel is covered in musical notes, hearts, and a kitten. In the background fireworks erupt above a distant circus tent.



1990s-era products in the Lisa Frank archive as photographed in 2015. A leopard cub on a zipper binder oversees various items from the "Dream Writers" and "Stamp-a-lots lines." "Dream Writers" are multi-colored magic markers packaged with a variety of accessories including: stationery, books, stickers, and paper pads. The "Stamp-a-lots" sets contain rubber stamps of Lisa Frank art as well as a selection of colored ink pads.

Frank, a self-described "big kid," lets her personality overflow into her art and her company's products. She's the embodiment of her brand. Rondi Kutz, head designer for Lisa Frank Inc. from 1987-2002 said, "Lisa is her brand! She lives, breathes, and quite possibly eats

colors” (Ruiz, 2012). At the same time she sustained a business that made billions between 1979 and 2009.

Frank admits to being obsessive when it comes to her product line. “I’m crazy. I’m like, I’m a lunatic. I mean we have to stop me and say, okay, it’s enough because one illustration gets hundreds of hours in it. It’s really, you know, kind of madness (Williams, 2012).” She’s also known to be reclusive. Only a handful of photos of Frank can be found online. When giving video interviews to both Urban Outfitters (2012) and Great Big Story (2015) she refused to show her face on camera, opting for voice-over and silhouette. “In my own little way, I understood Michael Jackson. [...]We think about it a lot, how well known the name is, but I’m very, very low-key” (Ruiz, 2012).

Early Life

Frank grew up in Bloomfield Hills, a suburb just north of Detroit, Michigan. Her father ran Detroit Aluminum & Brass, which was founded by her grandfather in 1925. This successful company manufactured automotive components (Morrissey, 2013). Her parents were both interested in art and they enrolled Frank in art classes starting around age five. “My dad was an art collector, my mom had a little kiln in our basement and we would make pottery” (Williams, 2012).

In 1972 Lisa Frank graduated from Cranbrook Kingswood High School, an all girls school located in Bloomfield Hills (Adkisson, 2019). The prestigious school was designed by renowned architect Eeliel Saarinen (1873-1950). Some classrooms contained furniture designed

by Eeliel's son, Eero Saarinen (1910-1961) whose work includes the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, MO.



Eliel Saarinen, Dormitory at the Kingswood School for Girls in Bloomfield, MI. Most buildings on campus utilize brown brick and copper colored roofs. The structures are multilayered with flat planes, and feature stylized ornamentation. These are characteristics of Prairie Style of architecture. Photo by pinehurst19475 on Flickr.



Eero Saarinen, Auditorium and Dining Hall chairs for Kingswood School for Girls, 1929-1931. The dining chair (right) is inspired by ancient Greek klismos chairs with slightly curved legs and a high, concave backrest. In contrast, the auditorium chair (left) utilizes tubular steel and a cantilevered seat cushion. The concept was first developed by German Modernist designers. Photo by the Cranbrook Art Museum.

Her time at this exclusive school made a big impression on Frank. She said, “I can tell you I wouldn’t be who I am without that experience.” Frank’s foray into professional art

happened during a senior show. Her paintings sold out and she took what she described as “a ton of commissions” as well. One piece was purchased by Lee Iacocca who was president of the Ford Motor Company at the time (Mark, 2015).

As Frank put it, after graduation she “sort of just followed my passion right out of high school, and everything kind of evolved for me.” Though she was accepted at more prestigious art schools, she opted to attend the University of Arizona. The decision disappointed her father. He told her, “That’s fine, and I love you all the same but I’m not going to support you” (Mark, 2015).

During college Frank started a business selling Native American art and jewelry. She attributes this experience to discovering her commercial sense. “I would later tell them what to make and realized that everything I told them, versus what they wanted to make on their own, sold. A light bulb went on. I thought, “Oh, I guess I have a really commercial sense” (Mark, 2015).

Eventually Frank started creating her own original products. She sold necklaces, earrings and pinback buttons under the company name Sticky Fingers. Soon an acquaintance connected her to overseas manufacturers who could put her art on other types of products. Frank leveraged this to add a line of pinback buttons (Morrissey, 2013).

In 1983 a sticker craze broke out in the United States. *People Magazine* called it “Stickermania” (1984). The eruption of this sticker trend can be traced to a woman named Mrs.

Andrea Grossman who ran a stationery business at the time. When an order of stickers were printed on rolls instead of the flat sheets she requested, she decided to go ahead and sell them in the unlikely format. “Customers went wild” and bought dozens of stickers at a time. Soon Grossman introduced her “Stickers by the Yard” at a national stationery show and kicked off a nationwide phenomenon (*Meet Mrs. Grossman*, n.d.). Established companies like Hallmark joined the trend as well, along with newcomers like Sandylion Sticker Designs which was established in 1981. In 1983 over one billion stickers were purchased amounting to over 500 million dollars (*People Magazine Staff*, 1984). Sticker albums and sticker collections were available everywhere. A publication dedicated to the hobby called *Stickers Magazine* was published in 1983.

It was Spencer’s Gifts that nudged Lisa Frank into the sticker business in order to capitalize on this demand. They told her, “If you can turn those buttons into stickers I’ll give you a million dollar order” (Williams, 2012). This prompted her to start Lisa Frank Inc. in 1979 at age twenty-four. Frank’s first in-house illustrator and designer was James Green who was hired in 1982. Green and Frank developed a romantic relationship in ‘83 or ‘84 and eventually married. In 1992 Green was named president and CEO of the company (Morrissey, 2013).

When the sticker trend cooled off after a couple of years, Frank was left with millions of stickers in her inventory. The solution was to change the sales strategy by packaging the remaining product for mass market retailers as opposed to the smaller gift shops and stationary stores. The sticker by-the-roll system was largely replaced by multipacks and sheets of stickers.

“We had like, millions of units of stickers, and when the bottom falls out of the industry, what are you going to do with all the goods? So we started packaging the stuff for mass market” (CNN, 1998).



Bear Piano sticker roll, 1982. This mostly used roll is an example of the “stickers by-the-roll” format that launched the self-serve à la carte method of buying and collecting stickers. Some gift shops, card shops, and stationary stores contained large wall displays made up of hanging rods that served as sticker rollers. Sticker albums were usually offered nearby. Customers were encouraged to purchase a wide variety of individual stickers for both personal use and for trading.



Sheet of stickers from the 1980s. This format was adapted to be more compatible with mass market retailers that utilized traditional shelving and store displays. The individual sheets came in a variety of sizes and often featured repeated sticker designs. Stacks of the sticker sheets could be packaged together as sticker bundles. They were also combined with a variety of products including: stationary, activity books, and school supplies.

The next part of the solution was to expand the line of products into school supplies. Children were no longer going out of their way to buy her stickers, so Frank put the artwork on necessities. Frank's designer school supplies cost up to four times the standard price; still they were successful. In 1996 Frank built a 300,800 square foot building in Tuscan, Arizona. Every bay was filled with trucks shipping products by 1998 (Great Big Story, 2015). During the company's peak in the late 1990s, Frank was bringing in 250 million dollars a year (CNN, 1998).

Lisa Frank's Art

Much of the earliest merchandise was entirely conceived and illustrated by Frank herself. As the company expanded she hired other artists to bring her ideas to life. Even in the early days the company supported a team of thirty artists (Great Big Story, 2015). Nothing went out the door without Frank's input and approval. "I'm looking at so much art, and I'm really the company's sole eyes. I'm the art director." Most of her products were developed by a team of designers under Frank's art direction. Some pieces crossed the desks of three or four different artists including Frank (*Stickers Magazine*, 1983, p.28).

Frank's aesthetic is self-described as "a little fantasy or dream" (*Stickers Magazine*, 1983, p.28). The subject matter is cheerful and cute with a color palette to match the mood. The most common subjects are animals and sea creatures. While some are semi-realistic, others wear clothes and perform human tasks like driving cars and dancing. The world they exist in is overflowing with hearts and rainbows and surreal dreamscapes.

A number of the creatures are original recurring characters. Some are named after people in Frank's life. Hunter, a leopard cub and Forrest, a tiger cub are based on Frank's two sons. Hunter was drawn before the human version was born. Both the character and the child received the name Hunter on her son's birthday. Frank says the boys' personalities turned out to match their respective characters. Casey and Caymus are dogs that were based on Frank's first golden retrievers. Another unspecified character serves as a tribute to a deceased family friend who died young of a heart attack (Mark, 2015).



Hunter and Forrest activity book, c. 2000s.

This piece portrays two adorable wild animals, a leopard cub and a tiger cub, sharing the spotlight. The leopard is covered in spots while the tiger is marked with bold stripes. While they are different species, they share some characteristics including: white triangular chests, orange fur underneath their



Casey and Camus folder, c. 1990s.

Two bright yellow golden retriever puppies gaze with gluttonous awe at a gigantic sundae, complete with scoops of brightly colored ice cream, whipped cream, sprinkles and doggie treats. One puppy, a female in appearance, with rainbow heart barretts, a bow around her neck and a stylish purse nearby, knows how to

markings, purple heart-shaped noses, green eyes and paws joined together in front. The background combines the stripes and spots into a unique alternating pattern. While the design is visually overwhelming, it stops just short of being discordant. The leopard cub stares straight ahead, with the focused gaze of a predator. The tiger cub, however, looks uncertain, glancing uncomfortably upward, as if confused by the words above it which are quite difficult to read.

use a straw. However, it doesn't seem functional given the lack of liquid in the dessert. The other puppy, who seems to have left his sunglasses on the floor, simply stares at the wondrous dessert rather than partaking. Above the animals are some roundish shapes that resemble an awning or umbrella. A colorful placemat is present presumably because puppies are sloppy eaters.

Since the beginning, Frank also incorporated several licensed characters, mostly from King Features cartoons, into her products. These licensed characters included Betty Boop, Popeye, Mighty Mouse and Felix the Cat.

In the early 2000s Frank introduced a lineup of young, stylish, big-eyed girls into the mix (Ruiz, 2012).



Big-eyed Girls, 2001. This art depicts three young girls, drawn in exaggerated, cartoon-ish fashion with large eyes and disproportionately large feet. Their attire pays homage to fashion from the 1970s, with platform sandals and bell bottom pants. There is a psychedelic usage of color, with a tie-dyed background made of swirling, neon rainbow colors. The girls are the center of the radiating background. The expressions on these multi-ethnic subjects are coy, chins downward and smiling at the viewer. They have their arms placed on one-another's shoulders, exhibiting what seems to be a fun, casual friendship.

The company has dabbled with other subjects such as aliens, skaters, and psychedelic imagery. However, according to market tests, Frank's customers consistently prefer the animals. When it comes to art concepts, Frank has been mindful of commercial viability from the beginning. She admits, "At first I didn't want to do unicorns. The artist in me said no. Then I thought, wait a minute, this is commercial art. Let's do what's going to sell. So that's how that happened" (Mark, 2015).

Animal imagery may be common in products marketed to school age kids, but Frank's way of drenching both her characters and canvases in color distinguishes it from the competition. The color palettes are bright, and the number of colors are never limited. The effect is eye catching, energetic and extreme. There is heavy use of purple, fusha, and pink, tipping the scales into the traditional young girl market. Frank revealed a dichotomy between catering to the market and her personal preference when she said, "People have tried to tell me bright colors aren't in, you should do pastels. And it's not who I am" (Great Big Story, 2015). The same statement reinforces the notion that even Frank considers her products to be an extension of herself.

Frank's art appears polished, shiny and sleek because her early work was created in airbrushed paint. In the late '80s the creative director learned to use the company's only computer, and soon after, the rest of the artists came onboard. By 1989 all of the art was created digitally, but they managed to continue emulating an airbrushed appearance (Heyward, 2012). In the early, pre-digital days, the artists created two versions of each artwork, a large scale piece followed by a manual reduction to accommodate the small sticker and button sizes. This could take nine to thirty-six hours to complete. (*Stickers Magazine*, 1983, p.28)

Soon after the company was formed, they developed a proprietary ink formula designed to keep colors brighter. "It's typical of a four-color process, but we use a special mixture to make those colors." The mixture is a closely guarded secret. Thus all of their licensees must sign a confidentiality agreement (Williams, 2012).

Lisa Frank's Artistic Influences

Frank laments that her father didn't live out his creative dreams. He did however, invest his corporate salary into a respectable art collection. Frank fondly remembers work from artists such as Josef Albers, Richard Anuszkiewicz, and Peter Max, all of whom had their own unique focus on color. Frank's high school work, composed mostly of colorful abstractions, reflected this (Mark, 2015).



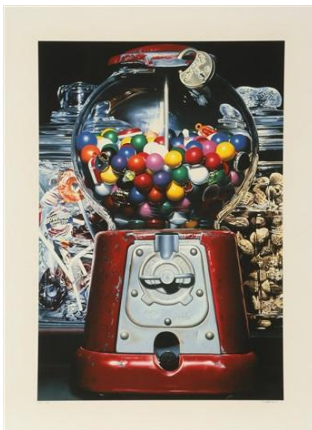
Lisa Frank, Early abstract work, Acrylic on canvas, c. late 1970s. While created with acrylic paint, the soft outlines and floating forms are reminiscent of a watercolor piece. The cloud-like shapes, more formed at the top, dissolve into less concrete forms towards the bottom. The color palette lulls one into a sense of peace with gentle hues of pink,



Lisa Frank, Early abstract work, Acrylic on masonite, c. late 1970s. Psychedelic blobs of primary color appear exuberant, though they compete with bold darkness surrounding them. The darkness looks as if it is slowly consuming and absorbing the color. The organic forms create a melting effect. There is movement in this, a slow seepage, as if the colors give in to

yellow, peach, blue and lavender. In contrast, the creeping darkness. The color palette brings an ominous looking violet cloud in the top right corner gives weight to this otherwise ethereal piece. The many hues foreshadow Frank's future career.

Frank borrowed the emphasis on color from her dad's collection and then applied it to fun, pop culture imagery, just as her three favorite artists did. Charles S. Bell focused on toys, gumball machines, marbles, and pinball machines. Davis Cone painted street views featuring theater marquees. Don Jacot covers complex street views, times square, subway systems, and mechanical toys. All of these artists have hyperrealism in common (Mark, 2015).



Charles S. Bell, Gumball XV, Silkscreen, 1995. A photorealistic gumball machine stands central



Davis Cone, Time Theater, acrylic on canvas, 1983. This piece, which could be mistaken for a photo,



Don Jacot, 49th and Broadway, Gouache on board, 1988. This highly detailed street scene offers a view of New York City's

among jars of lollipops and peanuts. The shiney candy surfaces seem to pop off the canvas. The intricate details and variety of textures show off the artist's ability.

depicts the Time Theater of Mattoon, IL. A 1970s era car is parked in front of the Art Deco exterior. The marquee is adorned with a large octagonal clock.

Times Square during a period when it was overrun with eroticism. Foot traffic and cars are sparse in front of the sun-lit exterior of the Pussycat Theater. It will be a different story when the sun sets.

Frank's tendency to create outlandish and psychedelic imagery has raised accusations of drug use as inspiration. Frank's response is, "If I were a drug addict how could I have possibly done all this" (Great Big Story, 2015).

Evolution of Lisa Frank's art and products

Many of Frank's visual characteristics have remained consistent, however, as the company grew, the products, style, and marketing evolved. Emerging in the marketplace at the height of the stickers by-the-roll fad, at first the Lisa Frank™ brand was trendy, and it targeted both children and adults. Their customers were hip and their products were sold in boutique shops. Their stickers were priced accordingly at one to five dollars each (*People Magazine* Staff, 1984).

The scope of the subject matter went beyond the cute animals the company is known for. There were more fantasy scenes, and inanimate objects such as shoes and hot air balloons. They also connected with nostalgic shoppers by featuring the aforementioned cartoon characters, along with visuals that evoked the 1950s like cars, diners and sock hops.

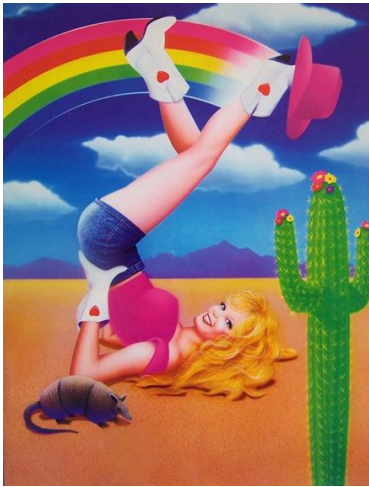


Classic Car, 1989. This scene depicts a breezy, warm tropical sunset, complete with palm tree silhouettes. The subject elicits leisure and relaxation. The focal point is the front headlamp and fender of a classic car, painted a cool mint green. The chrome detailing reflects the surroundings, and mirrors more of the purple, orange and yellow environment. The white wall tire aptly frames a lovely blond surfer with an '80s permed and dyed 'do. She poses in a skimpy purple two-piece bathing suit.



Felix the Cat, c. early 1980s. This sticker showcases the character described in his theme song as, "Felix the cat, the wonderful, wonderful cat." This bright-eyed skamp is a known entity that embodies a sense of light-hearted fun. His head is placed in the center of the piece, just as he might appear in the opening of a cartoon. There is a rainbow-hued circle surrounding Felix's head along with a starburst of white rays. His gaze is impossible to escape. His expression invites the viewer to ponder his motives. What is he thinking of? What adventure is next for him?

Some early products had more adult appeal that would be considered off-brand by later standards. Several pieces depict girls in pinup poses, and a sheet of exclusive stickers for Spencer's Gifts included phrases like "Smut letter" and "Nastigram."



Art inspired by a pinup girl, 1988. A smiling woman poses in a provocative position in a desert landscape. She uses her elbows to brace her body as she lifts her legs in the air. The kicking movement of her left leg is emphasized with a rainbow. She wears boots and the gloves of a cowhand both of which are adorned with a single red heart. Her cowboy hat balances on the toe of her boot even though it is in motion. The proportions of the model's torso appear



Risque stickers, c.1980s. An assortment of more than twenty stickers include aggressive phrases such as "Send Money!" and "Slime Line," as well as suggestive expressions like, "Hot!" and "X Rated." They are printed on a black background, uncharacteristic of Frank's usual color choice, communicating an "after dark" theme. The stickers were designed to match other racy products that Spencer's Gifts is known for.

unrealistic and distorted. Rounding out the western motif is an armadillo that rests near the subject.

When the company shifted into the general market they narrowed their focus primarily to school-aged girls (CNN, 1998). The pinback buttons and individual stickers took a backseat to notebooks, pencils, erasers, and most every other type of school supply. Frank enjoyed the larger formats. “We went to school supplies because a sticker is an inch to three inches. So it was more fun to get the art bigger” (Great Big Story, 2015). During the 1990s, wildlife and sea life became the most common subject matter. This reflected a nationwide trend that manifested in toys and in the Discovery Channel’s *Animal Planet* programming, as well as Disney’s *Animal Kingdom* theme park. Frank’s animals proved to sell well, and getting her product in front of children throughout schools across the US took her to a new level of notoriety.

In the late ‘90s space aliens began to appear on Frank’s products at a time when society reevaluated what the future may hold as the turn of the millennium approached. The introduction of big-eyed girls also marked this new era. Frank said she thinks her trips to Japan and exposure to Japanese art had a big influence on this concept. She also likes to make it clear that they were “pre-Bratz” meaning her characters narrowly pre-dated the massively popular Bratz dolls which were first sold by MGA Entertainment in 2001 (Mark, 2015). The large eyes in both the girls and the animal characters may strengthen the bond between the viewer and the subjects. The same technique can be seen in the work of Margaret Keene, and more recently, in Funko Pops.

In 2005 the Lisa Frank™ logo received an overhaul. The rainbow colored script was exchanged for flared serif lettering contained within an oval. It looks to be inspired by 1960s design. The oval logo was tweaked in 2011 before being replaced by the original in 2020 (Logopedia, n.d.).



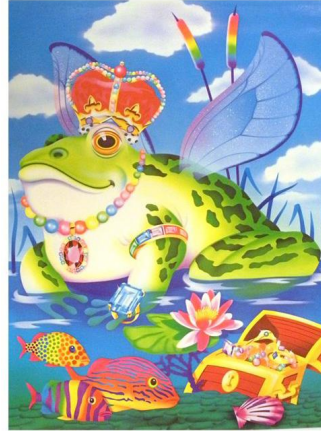
Logo, 1987-2005, and 2020 to present. Frank's original logo resembles a signature though it is not based on Frank's actual autograph. The logo features a mixture of both printed and cursive letters filled with a multicolored gradient that adheres to the true colors of the rainbow. A bold white outline follows the contours of the name and is surrounded by a second outline filled with the same rainbow pattern that occupies the central type.



Logo, 2005-2011. The updated logo did away with the signature approach in favor of a distorted, flared typeface. The letters all have a thin white outline and are colored with one of five alternating hues. The background is cast in a five phase gradient that is decorated with a field of sparkles and bubbles, like a glass containing a carbonated beverage. Highlights and shadows create the illusion of a convex, clear button. The top and bottom are highlighted by lens flares, and the oval shape is emphasized with a thick purple outline.

Frank's popularity began to wane in the 2000s, however she rode a new wave of nostalgia in the 2010s. She began collaborations with various brands like Urban Outfitters to put her art on a variety of products that appealed to buyers well beyond elementary school. Changing formats may not simply be a matter of surviving a changing world, it's also an indication of the way she thinks. Frank said, "I think we made so many products because I get bored easily" (Williams, 2012). In another interview she stated, "We've sort of looked at the world as a canvas and if there's not one thing to decorate, we find something else" (Ruiz, 2012).

The type of products weren't the only thing that changed through the years. The approach to the art itself made a transformation. In short, it became more complex with time. Frank described the early designs as "very simplistic" and went on to say, "those pieces of art are like one tiny element in a Lisa Frank illustration today" (Williams, 2012). An early sticker might feature a single heart, while a more recent folder could include hundreds of them. Frank's Facebook page pointed out an instance of this where a stand alone frog prince was later used as a detail in a complicated scene. Perhaps this level of complexity is there to offer kids a visual playground to explore, rewarding those who take the time to study every corner of the design.



Facebook post illustrating how the main subject of an early work became a single detail in a later work. In the image from the 1980s a crowned, winged, and bejeweled frog prince swims in a body of water. His form dominates the canvas and obscures a blue sky full of puffy white clouds. Two rainbow colored cattails tower behind the main subject. The view under the water reveals three curious tropical fish and an open treasure chest. These riches are likely the source of the frog's accoutrements. The later Super Coloring Activity book also depicts a frog, however the creature is a mere footnote in a picture plane that is brimming with complexity. The central figure is a princess donning a tiara and a rainbow striped gown. The surrounding environment is a hodgepodge of foliage, flowers, a pond, a castle, and of course, a frog.

The backgrounds got busier to the point that they sometimes interfere with the primary subject. Throughout the 2000s the compositions increasingly demonstrate the concept of “horror vacui,” or fear of empty space.



Bears and heart, 1986.

This colorful image of two teddy bears clutching the top of a shiny, rainbow-striped heart exists on a simple, two step gradient of purple bleeding into blue. The bears' eyes are the main focal point. The bear on the left, male in appearance, with a jaunty striped baseball cap and matching bow tie, stares blankly off into the horizon. The other bear, female in appearance, is wearing a rainbow striped bow in her hair and a colorful beaded necklace. Her gaze is directly upon the viewer and her defined pupils render her as a



Cowgirl Cheyenne, 2002. The cluttered and chaotic composition leaves the viewer with no clear focal point. There is a cartoonish young lady, riding a horse. The Appaloosa's spots are visually competing with the stylized American flag (pink & fuchsia striped) in the background. The flag overflows with hearts, stars and speckles. The result is not entirely pleasant. There are too many elements for the eye to make sense of. The rider's face is the most clearly delineated object. She wears an expression of posed satisfaction. The horse's mild expression is overshadowed by the

more life-like being than her companion. Their grasp on the heart, suspended in space, does not seem desperate. Rather, they seem at ease, and both are smiling somewhat. This more visually relaxed and simple illustration exudes a relaxed and simple feeling.

cacophony of stars, stripes and spots. This is not a majestic animal exhibiting their full range of power. This is a pair who has given up trying to be noticed in the midst of a convoluted design that gives the viewer no separation of foreground and background, rendering the entire image a mess.

Business philosophies

Frank prides herself on the company's commitment to quality. She's described their fanaticism as "ridiculous." "My true passion is art so I don't want to just put trash out there. If it's junk I won't put my name on it. There's a big commitment to making beautiful quality work or else I really don't want to be involved. I mean, yes, it's a business but it's more important that the art is beautiful." She has said that rather than hear praise, she prefers to hear about any problems with her products so that she can correct them (Mark, 2015).

While Frank's creative whims can be found throughout their product line, it is evident that she listened to her target market, and directly applied their feedback to her wares. In 1998 CNN reported that Frank's product testers utilized entire classes of Tucson elementary school students as focus groups for upcoming projects. The testing went beyond favorite animals; children ranked elements like basic materials and fabric swatches. Product developer Carol Kern said, "We were completely surprised, the ones they picked out. We would not even have picked them." Frank attributed this scrutiny to the fact that they rarely had many "dogs" because they

were “much more focused and calculated about what we come out with” (CNN, 1998). This could explain how they were able to weather fluctuations in the market for so long, and appeal to multiple successive generations.

Though she produced designer products that were more costly than their generic counterparts, Frank aimed for customers with less money to spend, claiming they have a keener eye than the ones with more money because their purchases are more limited. Referring to her less affluent customers she has commented, “Why should they not be offered the best of the best, as well” (Mark, 2015).

Lisa Frank Inc. Controversies

In 2009 during the height of online blogging, a post on one particular site, *Children of the 90s*, (2012) drew comments from a number of people claiming to be former LFI employees. They said that it was “a miserable place to work,” and made accusations of toxic behavior including drug use, and James Green’s infidelity. More complaints subsequently appeared on a parenting blog that included harsh personal attacks against Frank herself, along with outrageous claims of corporate espionage, use of illegal workers, and stating the company pressured a worker to terminate her pregnancy in order to keep her job.

In 2013 the grumblings culminated in an article on *Jezebel.com* called “Inside the Rainbow Gulag: The Technicolor Rise and Fall of Lisa Frank.” The 5,800 word article delved into “a story of scandal, greed, and abuse.” The piece outlines the mismanagement of the business, the mistreatment of employees, and various destructive business practices. It goes on to

explore Frank and Green's divorce in 2005 which seems to have caused the downfall of the company. Their split resulted in multiple lawsuits between the couple, as well as one from Rhonda Rowlette, former vice president and love interest of Green. Ultimately, Frank was able to keep the business, but little was left of the company after the dust settled when the lawsuits were over (Morrissey, 2013).

The *Jezebel* article was widespread and received 637 comments. The fantastical nature of the World of Lisa Frank adds a level of irony, making the story even more appealing to the public. The bulk of the allegations were made against James Green, but it also painted Frank in an unflattering light.

After Frank regained control of her company, a number of artists including Geneva Bowers and Ursula Goff began to report that Lisa Frank Inc. had issued takedown notices to them, claiming copyright infringement. The general consensus is that the work doesn't overtly appropriate anything of Frank's beyond being very colorful. As the site *The Mary Sue* put it, "Lisa Frank Continues To Go After Artists as if They Own The Rainbow Palette" (Shotwell, 2022).

Current state of Lisa Frank Inc.

As of this writing Lisa Frank Inc. no longer manufactures products. Today they license art to other companies. "I don't think I ever want to be a manufacturer again. That takes away from who I am and what I really love to do is to do artwork." says Frank (Great Big Story, 2015). The number of employees has dwindled from 350 at its peak to just six in recent years (Morrissey,

2013). A portion of the Lisa Frank headquarters, covered in rainbow-colored hearts, and home to colossal statues of anthropomorphic wildlife, is currently listed for rent (Loopnet.com, 2022).

The price for the 181,080 square foot space is just under one million dollars a year. The abandonment of the headquarters marked what was essentially the end of the corporation. All that's left is a name, a skeleton crew, a vault full of art, and a vast collection of memories.



The Lisa Frank Inc. Headquarters at 6760 S. Lisa Frank Ave, Tucson, AZ, as seen in the rental listing on loopnet.com. Everything from the violet glass curtain wall entrance to the rainbow of dancing icons fall in line with the Lisa Frank approach to design. The standard office setting is

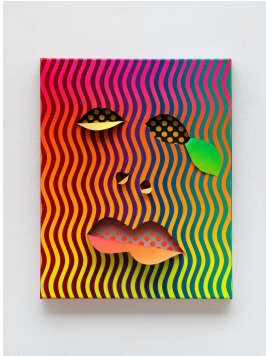
infused with colors where they are least expected. Swaths of blue and red are woven among the rafters. A statue of a polar bear cub lives on the corner of a bank of desks. The playful exterior stands in contrast to invasive weeds that slowly reclaim the property.

The company does maintain an online shop that sells mugs and apparel for adults and kids. They still have a social media presence including a Facebook page that has nearly 1,046,000 followers. The activity from the company has been on the decline in recent years, posting less than once a month in some cases. While they are close to neglecting their Twitter account, in 2019 *Elle.com* wrote an article called “Lisa Frank Is the Best Thing on Instagram Right Now” in which they interviewed Frank’s son, Forrest, who was managing their account (Yaptangco, 2019).

In recent years LFI has collaborated with a number of other companies. They produced a pair of Crocs sandals covered in rainbow hearts, butterflies and plastic gemstones along with Frank styled Jibbitz charms to go in the holes. They made a makeup kit for the Morphe makeup company, and some outfits that combined Frank imagery with NBC’s *Friends* TV show.

Lisa Frank’s Legacy

It’s difficult to separate Lisa Frank the artist from Lisa Frank the businesswoman, but like so many other artists who often get lumped into the category of kitsch, her work has impacted the masses, and permeated popular culture around the world. Her influence has manifested in an untold number of contemporary artists. It appears evident in the work of Rob Pruitt, Rebecca Mills, and Anthony Ausgang.



Rob Pruitt, Lovelorn, Acrylic on canvas, 2020. One in a series of painted masks that utilizes vivid colors and patterns like Frank does.



Rebecca Mills, Untitled, digital 2019. Mills' body of work is full of colorful animals that often display human characteristics just as Franks do.



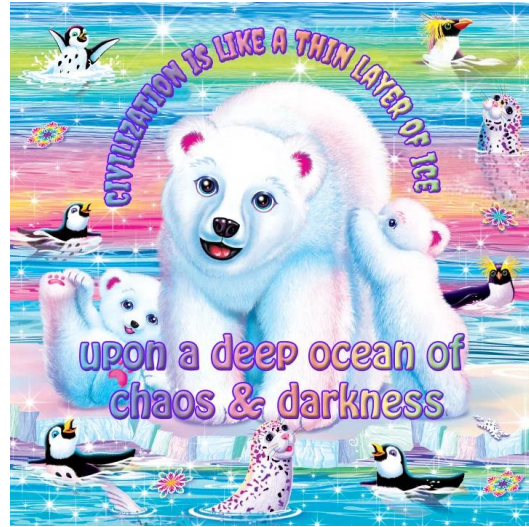
Anthony Ausgang, Three Characters in Search of a Punchline, Acrylic paint, 2017. Ausgang's bright cartoon characters and surreal worlds are reminiscent of Frank's work.

Frank has created and embraced a style so identifiable that it invites instantly recognizable parodies like the Nihilisa Frank tumblr account (2018) and work by Laura Freeman (2022).



Laura Freeman, Neon 90's Freddy with Unicorn, glossy art print, 2022

Freddy Kruegar is the main character in the popular Nightmare on Elm Street horror movie franchise. Freddy, who enters his victims' dreams to kill them, is pictured riding a unicorn though a Lisa Frank style dream world.



Lisa Frank style parody from the Nihilisa Frank Tumblr Account, 2018. This account features dozens of memes that juxtapose quotes related to bleak aspects of life with optimistic looking Lisa Frank artwork.

As is the case with many enduring intellectual properties, parents want to share a piece of their childhood with their own children. Frank said, “[We get] calls from grandmothers who say they have been purchasing the brand since the beginning, first for their daughters and now for their granddaughters” (Raphael, 2017). She’s reached a multitude of people during their formative years, an act that practically guarantees her a place in their psyches for a lifetime. The fan mail on her walls was a testament to her product’s grasp on their buyer’s imagination. “Oh

my gosh, the fan mail is so overwhelming! I mean they're all so incredible you can hardly, you know, really believe them" (Williams,2012).



A collage of mail hung up for display at the Lisa Frank headquarters in 2012. The mail was often created using Lisa Frank products, and much of it features original fan art inspired by Frank's distinct aesthetic. Many fans included snapshots of themselves showing off their favorite LFI wares.

Though the company is far less active these days, Lisa Frank and her products are still the subjects of many online videos, essays, and retrospectives that often generate lively discussions. Her wares can fetch hefty prices on ebay, and her headquarters remains a mecca for fans and online content creators.

Conclusion

Lisa Frank's story is one of ironies and contradictions. Her saccharine fantasies exist in stark conflict with the workshop that produced them. Frank's goal to render an imagined garden of eden was accomplished in a workplace environment where little kindness was generated, and where business-minded behavior often bulldozed the people who kept it running. In a way, the Lisa Frank parodies and mashups present a more honest picture of the Frank empire. Both the dream and the cruel reality are equally visible.

Frank embodies the dilemma that most artists face, finding the balance between artistic integrity and producing what pays the bills. (Or in this case, what pays for the private jet and lavish lifestyle.) However, Lisa Frank was forthright about her commercial motivation from the beginning. Her desire to capitalize seems interwoven into her creative life. Eventually she even placed her artistic vision at the mercy of actual children and their childish whims. Is such a move an act of total submission to the market? Or is tapping directly into the unfettered minds of her customers a bold stroke of brilliance? It may explain why her style became progressively gaudy and moved away from sound design principles. She gave kids the keys to the candy shop. The transformation may even echo Frank's growing detachment from reality as she was engulfed in her own world.

Frank's blend of dreamer and entrepreneur is a rare combination. Her business magnified her abilities as an artist, and at the same time revealed her interpersonal shortcomings and questionable values. Her company is a uniquely personal extension of Lisa Frank and her strengths and weaknesses. It stands to reason that a major crisis in her personal life could

practically topple everything else. Of all her roles, it is Lisa Frank the artist who connected with generations of young people, and in the end, it will be Lisa Frank the artist who will be celebrated.

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