



# LIFE, UPSCALED

On the eve of the launch of his latest sculptures – a series of giant LEGO ice creams – Andy Morris spoke to *Bricks Culture* about the unexpected effect that LEGO has had on his career

Words: Tim Johnson Photography: Andrew Tipping





The word 'play' is usually pretty loaded when applied to adults. Play is seen as an essential part of childhood, but an adult who is said to be playing is often considered to be wasteful or even sinister – like playing poker, or mind games. But it's not a word that Andy Morris shies away from, although when he first uses it in our interview he says it slowly, with deliberate measure. "Once I finished my foundation course and had my first free summer break for over a decade, that's when I decided to play with LEGO," are his words. It was a life-changing moment which would lead to art, pop culture and LEGO colliding on both a micro and macro scale.

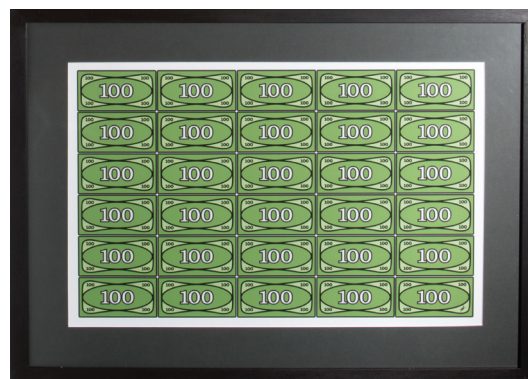
Andy's return to university came after nine long years working in finance. "I knew I needed a life change from around year five. It took me a while to decide because it was such a big decision – I had to leave my job and sell my very nice flat on Cardiff Bay, as I couldn't afford that as a student. Plus there was a recession at the time and so I knew I needed a stable job, which meant it had to be something I really wanted to do. I've always been fascinated by art, design and architecture so it had to be something on that spectrum. I settled on interior design in the end, because it ticked the most boxes."

It couldn't have been more different to his previous career. "Before the three-year degree started I did a foundation year – it was a chance to experiment. We got loose topics as briefs and there were no creative restraints. I got quite fixated on pixels – all of my subjects had some degree of pixilation within them, such as mosaics... and of course that's when LEGO first came into it. But at that point I never used LEGO past the concept stage, only because of the cost of acquiring the bricks. I did a self-portrait that was 1.2 metres square, so these projects were a bit too large... instead, I decided to use 4,500 stickers for that one. But LEGO obviously stuck with me."

With that initial year complete and three months of holiday stretching ahead of him, he chose to buy some LEGO and see what happened – but he was aware of the potential stigma. "My parents probably thought I was going into an early mid-life crisis, giving up my career in finance and playing with LEGO. As a man in his late 20s, before I knew of the adult fan community, I had to justify to myself why I was playing with LEGO. Now, people's attitudes have relaxed – they have seen that it's developing into something and that there's a market for it; it's not just me trying to relive my childhood!" So was the potential market a part of his justification? "No! Just a creative thing – it was only ever going to be an extra item on top of my university portfolio when I graduated. It's definitely snowballed since then, to the point where now, with one year left to go, it's more LEGO than degree!"

Andy began his experiments – his play – by shrinking modern artworks down to the scale of the LEGO minifigure and placing them in small vignettes. "It had to be artworks where you could still see what the original was, for example Damien Hirst's spots. I used white minifigures as viewers because I wanted it to be about the artwork, not the figure; they're just there for scale. I made them just for myself and for getting used to the process – things like having to source parts. That was something I'd never had to do in the past – you just buy a set and build it and from that set you then have the parts – whereas starting from zero, I had to work out what I needed and how to get them. That was challenging sometimes, like with my Damien Hirst shark tank. Those LEGO sharks I used are from the 1990s because the modern-day sharks almost look a bit too friendly, which is no good for art – it's not supposed to be a happy shark! So I had to figure out where to find these in new condition; you couldn't have a child having had a chew on it. The answer was BrickLink, which is a very user-unfriendly website... until the moment when the penny drops and you understand how to use it!"

That may well have proved to be the end of Andy's LEGO ventures, but things progressed further because of the encouragement Andy got from friends and fellow students to make more. "I started expanding beyond the white figures and making the actual artists themselves as minifigures, using actual LEGO parts – back then I didn't know about the fans who customised minifigures. On and off it took me about three months to make my first five artists: Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko and Andy Warhol. I'd find bits that looked right







but when they came I'd think, 'No, it's not quite there, it's missing something.' So back to the internet I'd go."

Andy began to sell these as limited edition kits, but was still cautious about his venture into LEGO as a medium. "I called the company Little Big Art – I didn't want it to be my name at the time because I still wasn't 100 per cent sold on it at that point. I was still valuing it as a side project; I didn't want myself to be associated with it directly in case I went on to a design career and had people referring to me as 'the LEGO guy'. But nowadays the two are intertwined and I've worked my name back into it."

He also sold the works as Giclée prints – photography was the obvious progression once the models had been completed – but selling commercially wasn't on the agenda at first. "The original concept was that I wanted to create an art exhibition, where the photographed minifigures were the same scale as a human. So I took the photographs and blew them up so it looked as though you're in a LEGO art gallery. But it never came to fruition simply because I couldn't get the quality with the type of camera I used – I got the prints up to A1 size but beyond that point you could tell the image quality was going, and I wasn't going to sacrifice quality. But I was really happy with the

project because for the first time in my life I had total creative freedom. I could express myself and if that meant playing with LEGO as an artist, I was happy to explore that. I didn't know anything about the world of toy photography or even LEGO art at that stage, not until I gained some traction and started being compared to others. That's how I discovered the adult LEGO community which, big and friendly as it is, how do you know about its existence – let alone find it?"

Although his original concept wasn't realised, many of the important themes and media that recur in Andy's work were established by this project. Inspired by the lively work of Andrew Whyte (Legography), Andy's photography experiments continued online with his *Travels of Roo* project: a minifigure of himself travelling the world and photographing landmarks. His desire to stage an exhibition was realised in August 2014 at a local Cardiff gallery: despite zero promotion the show broke the gallery's attendance and sales records, and Andy was invited to bring it to Brick 2014, the massive LEGO fan convention in London that November. The works he created for that exhibition continued to examine the themes of the Pop Art movement and play with the relative scales of humans and minifigures.

Perhaps the most concise example of this was his reworking of Andy Warhol's famous screenprint *200 One Dollar Bills* using the LEGO money tile instead. "I put the piece in a minifigure's hand and held my hand out at the same angle, and worked out what proportion I would need something sitting in my hand to be the same as the minifigure's. Because of course when that piece is in the minifigure's hand, it is grossly out of proportion with the rest of his body; it's about half his height! I knew it wasn't going to be half of my height so I compared the piece to his hand."

Andy wanted his work to be made of moulded plastic, just like the LEGO part is, but costs proved prohibitive. "I discovered that the tooling costs of creating the moulds were going to be in the £10,000-20,000 bracket! So I spoke to local model makers in Cardiff to see what they would suggest and found one company who was really enthusiastic about the project."

After trying various prototypes and balancing aesthetic and practical needs, they settled on using high-quality model board. The simplest route to achieve the grid-like effect of the multiple bills was to carve the whole work from a single piece of model board. "In the end it was all about the effect I wanted to create – casting an illusion."

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**“Each piece is a work of art and I want every person who unwraps one to have an experience”**

Andy continued these explorations by recreating Warhol's Marilyn Monroe screenprints using the 'Hollywood Starlet' minifigure, which the LEGO Group had just released. "I only used ten colours in different combinations; it was all about exploring the LEGO colour palette. I wanted to make sure the colours I used were the same as the ones the LEGO Group use because I wanted everything in the exhibition to have visual continuity as people moved through."

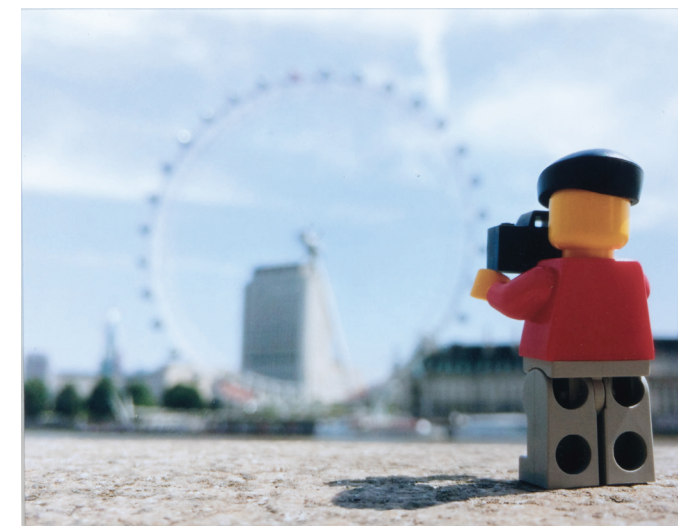
This journey through the exhibition was another important aspect for Andy, no doubt as a result of his study of interior design. One deciding factor in choosing the Cardiff gallery was its ability to control the flow of visitors, thus orchestrating their experience of the works, and at Brick 2014 he had to create the display space from scratch. "That was great, but also a bit scary because in a gallery you've got the walls and you can plan from within the confines of the building. At Brick 2014 you were told, 'Just build it!'"

So build it he did, and he had to take a month off university to do so. "They were very understanding because they could see it was relevant to my study." With nearly 50,000 people visiting the convention, the massive sales spike that kicked off afterwards resulted in Andy needing another fortnight off just to process the sales! "It can take me up to an hour to wrap some items for delivery. Each piece is a work of art and

I want each person who buys one to unwrap it and to have an experience. That's important to me and it's important to the business."

Andy's final year of university is about to start but his LEGO play shows no signs of letting up: an exhibition of new works is currently travelling around Wales. "I was approached by Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service. They conserve Wales's heritage, including castles, and asked me to create artworks based around seven of their sites. LEGO plus castles – well, I wasn't going to say no to that! I've used a variety of different art styles to create the exhibition, but mainly ones that will inspire people to create their own. I'm particularly fond of the pixel art mosaic pieces due to the way they encourage people to interact with them. Up close they make little sense, just a seemingly random selection of tiles, but from afar – or viewed through a smartphone – the image is clear. There's also some framed minifigures who are a character line-up from the Welsh fairytale *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*."

Also keeping Andy busy is his latest concept: the giant dropped ice creams. He's been working on them since finishing the Cardiff exhibition back in August last year. "It's taken this long to get them to a quality that I am happy to put my name to. Ice cream has always been very pop-art for





me, and there's something about dropped ice creams... something very sad. Once an ice cream is dropped, it's gone. There is no five-second rule with ice cream. And then, there's something very happy about LEGO. So it's the balance between the two!"

This time, his desire to use plastic as the medium became a reality, and he found a company in the UK able to produce them.

"It hasn't just been sent off overseas with in order to make 10,000 of them. Each one has had a real human take time to make it." And despite being moulded, they are all unique: each ice cream consists of four different components from silicon-injected moulds which are then assembled by hand, thus allowing Andy to vary the position of where the balls of ice cream get attached to the melting pool. "No two are the same, there are also production variations in them – slight colour variations, even how the plastic sets affects things." Such variations are the antithesis of the production goals at the LEGO Group's factories, but then Andy's art isn't LEGO. Although Andy began his play using LEGO pieces, his works have moved beyond it.

"It's quite ironic in a way, but my fascination lies in the iconography found within LEGO, and that even when it is taken out of context people still instantly know what it is. This is the basis for a lot of pop art: finding something from popular culture and taking it out of context. My popular culture just happens to be within the world of LEGO. But nothing can replace the satisfying feeling of building an actual LEGO model. I just reserve that more for my relaxation time now."

Andy's works are available at [littlebigart.eu](http://littlebigart.eu)  
Details of the exhibition can be found online at [cadw.gov.wales](http://cadw.gov.wales)  
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