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## *Birdie Is a Dummy, But the Girl Is Onto A Real Hip Thing*

Mr. Pucci's Mannequins Have  
A Foot in the Art World,  
And Plenty of Attitude

By REBECCA QUICK

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
NEW YORK — Swirly is a purple Cyclops with a twisty conehead.

She's the kind of dummy that has made her maker, Ralph Pucci, look smart.

If you think the staid old mannequin business is all about drab ivory forms upon which department stores hang the new spring line, think again. When stores need mannequins that are more than mere molded human shapes, they turn to the 45-year-old Mr. Pucci, a man who takes the mannequin over the moon.

Rich's, a Southern department-store chain, wanted a tasteful, attractive mannequin to model clothing styles for bigger women, so it sought out Mr. Pucci. His solution was Birdie — a voluptuous flirt with her eyes closed, her lips pursed and an attitude as big as her 44-inch hips. And Saks Fifth Avenue drew crowds to its windows in 1998 when it draped John Bartlett fashions from a line of Mr. Pucci's pastel-colored, cartoonish mannequins, Swirly being the star. Others in the group included Eyvis, a one-eyed orange dummy with a purple pompadour and sideburns; and Jet, a yellow lad with blue hair and a goofy smile.



Swirly

Not all of Mr. Pucci's creations are weird or outsize, but there is always an artsy edge, and custom jobs are his specialty. For the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Mr. Pucci developed extra-thin mannequins to fit clothes once worn by superskinny rockers such as Jimi Hendrix and Sid Vicious.

"Ralph is fabulous," says Ignaz Gorischek, a vice president at Neiman Marcus Group Inc., on a recent trip to the Pucci studio in Manhattan, where he tried Gucci and Prada suits on a mannequin being designed exclusively for the retailer. "He's unique because he's always looking for a new twist, a new interpretation for mannequins. Nobody else in the United States does that."

A sense of the bizarre is as strong as the smell of paint in the Pucci workshop. As a few dozen employees busily pour and polish mannequins in progress, freshly painted body parts dangle on a line. Torsoes await limbs. And boxes of hands fill the shelves along one wall.

There is also a whiff of money. Mr. Pucci won't reveal sales for his privately held business, Pucci International Ltd. But demand is so strong that Mr. Pucci hopes to crank out 250 mannequins a week this year, up from 200 a week in 1999. His dummies sell for about \$1,000 each (compared with about \$500 for run-of-the-mill department-store mannequins), thus his sales could top \$13 million.

The mannequin mogul's secret is his stable of artists and fashionistas who work on his designs. Fashion designer Anna Sui, supermodel Verushka, architect Rubin Toledo and pop artist Kenny Scharf, among others, all have collaborated with Mr. Pucci to transform mannequins into objects that sometimes attract more attention than the clothes they model.

A handful of other shops in the U.S. also make upscale mannequins; chief among

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# Pucci Is the Gucci of Dummy Designers

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them are Adel Rootstein Inc. and Goldsmith Inc., both of New York. But in terms of the weird and the wild, Mr. Pucci's designs stand alone, a distinction that has helped his shop withstand consolidation in the industry over the past decade.

"Pucci does things that are much more stylish and sophisticated than anyone else," says Ken Smart, a vice president at the Saks Fifth Avenue unit of Saks Inc.

Adds Simon Doonan, the window designer for Barneys New York: "Ralph has created his own little Bauhaus."

Mr. Pucci rose from modest beginnings. His father, Nicholas Pucci, operated a mannequin-repair shop in New York. Instead of joining the family business, Ralph Pucci went to college to study journalism. But jobs were hard to come by when he graduated in 1976, so he decided to help out around the repair shop while floating his resume about that summer.

Soon, he realized there was more opportunity in producing mannequins than in patching them. Inspired by the Olympics, he came up with mannequins in athletic poses—diving or doing handstands—for retailers such as Macy's, which decked out the entire first floor of its San Francisco store with the figures. He started experimenting with abstract forms and color—one of his first successful creations was a sleek, glossy-black mannequin with ambiguous, flowing features that graced a Barneys window in the 1970s.

Business grew steadily until the late 1980s, when an economic downturn forced many department stores into bankruptcy and left others hurrying to cut costs. "When the economy got strange, people weren't buying zillions of mannequins any

more," Mr. Pucci says. To survive, he was forced to start knocking off the cheaper dressmaker forms—the headless, limbless dummies that populate many store windows. Shopping as a national pastime lost some its pizzazz back then, he recalls. "It was just so predictable and boring," Mr. Pucci says.

By the mid-1990s, department stores had rebounded and were looking for ways to create a buzz and bring shoppers back. In 1994, he worked with Maira Kalman, a children's author and illustrator, to develop an unusual line of mannequins called Tango, based on characters from her stories. The whimsical dummies, with features such as ponytails and upturned noses that are more commonly found on children's dolls, were a hit with retailers. With the Tango line, Mr. Pucci's artistic mannequins came back into high demand.

About that time, Mr. Pucci moved his operations to a sprawling loft in Manhattan's Chelsea district. From his brick-walled penthouse, with views of the World Trade Center and the Empire State Building, he kicks off each new collection with a party catering to the downtown art scene. At a recent soiree, guests included Chris Makos, a photographer who worked with Andy Warhol, and Bettina Werner, a sculptor known as the Queen of Salt. (One of her creations is "Salt Woman," which she crafted by adorning a Pucci mannequin in salt.)

But the real action takes place in the Pucci workshop a floor below. Michael Evert, a sculptor who has collaborated with Mr. Pucci for a dozen years, works several days a week here, carving out creations drawn by the many artists under contract with Mr. Pucci. A wall next to Mr. Evert is

covered in sketches by Robert Clyde Anderson, whose angular, sophisticated drawings have appeared in magazines such as Wallpaper, Time Warner Inc.'s trendy British publication.

Mr. Evert is molding a clay head, the basis for a new female model in a line designed by Mr. Anderson that will come out in May. The artists often sit with Mr. Evert to offer tips on how he can stay true to their creative image. The head of this female form, for instance, started out with long, wispy hair; but now the hair is pulled back into a bun.

To mass produce the mannequins, a few dozen workers pour a gooey black fiberglass concoction into molds built from the sculpture. They sand any seams off the finished body parts and clean the pieces for painting. Others work in the spray-painting booths.

The final touches are added by painters in a side room. Scott Sjobakken, a 24-year-old artist who lives in Jersey City, N.J., answered a help-wanted ad in the Village Voice a year ago. Mr. Sjobakken is an abstract artist with high aspirations, but his day job here pays the bills.

His favorite mannequin line is Dolly, a cross between a 1920s flapper and Twiggy designed by Anna Sui. Dollies don't have carved facial features, so they aren't a simple paint-by-number job. "They're the best looking ones, and I'm actually using some talent to do them," says Mr. Sjobakken.

He often gets surprised looks when he tells people what he does. "Most of them say they didn't know that job existed," he says. "I didn't either, until a year ago."