

# Namaiki: Let The Plants Design!

Written by [Uleshka](#) for PingMag

Garden Photos by Alice Taylor



Pretty in pink! Scene from Namaiki's current 'Kinky Muff Land' exhibition in Osaka.

Those familiar with Namaiki's insanely colourful objects and installations, mad graphics and psychedelic videos might be surprised to hear that they are now mainly working in the garden watching their plants grow.

Oh, really?

Indeed, the Tokyo-based foreign design duo, consisting of graphic designer [David Duval Smith \(NZ\)](#) and architect [Michael Frank \(UK\)](#), are not only celebrating their 10th Namaiki (naughty) anniversary this year: Still fulfilling the connoisseur's high expectations in terms of silliness, madness and genius, they added another level to their recent fun and light-hearted installations by switching literally to more natural grounds. PingMag transcribed the essence of an afternoon in David's garden introducing some of Namaiki's inspiring thoughts as to why ending up working with living things is just the most interesting thing to do...



The interview setting in David's garden: Michael, David and Uleshka.

The first time I actually came across Namaiki's work was at the Strange Kinoko performance at the Hara Museum in 2002 where they exhibited weird animal creations and taped beautiful imagery all across the museum windows.



Strange Kinoko Dance Company poster



Installation bits at the Hara Museum.



"Strange Kinoko" dancers performing in between Namaiki's works.

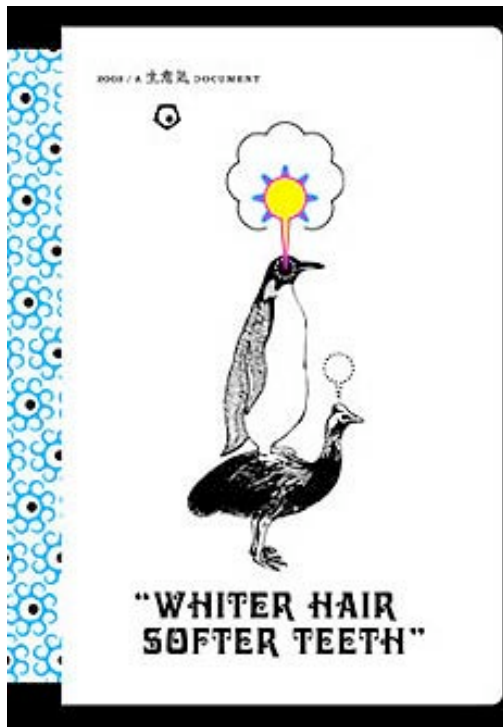
Since then I experienced a great variety of Namaiki's work: countless VJ performances at your shared event space SuperDeluxe, set designs for fashion shootings, your own beer called Tokyo Ale, your funny videos, your Whiter Hair, Softer Teeth train design for JR's Tokyo Art Jungle, your sculpture at the Snoopy exhibition and various other Namaiki objects drowned in neon pink paint...



Snoopy exhibition



Toothpaste Hot Dog visual



DVD cover. "Whiter Hair Softer Teeth"



Train design for JR's Tokyo Art Jungle.

**Michael:** (laughs) The thing with the pink paint was... don't know! Just something nice about splashing paint, but working with lettuces is as satisfying somehow! It's actually even more indulgently sloppily voluptuous!



Working with lettuces resulting in a 'sloppily voluptuous' experience.

As you say you have found a way to “goof off very professionally” and your playful approach actually seems to work as a lure for clients to get interested. But I never quite understood how you make it – business wise? You seem to have way too much fun! (all laugh)

**Michael:** Seeing work as play is an important message! As there was definitely a stage when we overworked things. It is actually better if things are open ended. Our exhibitions were always better when they were not totally finished – then people come and get involved and they basically finish it. It’s like feeling more comfortable at somebody’s home when it’s slightly messy. That definitely works for design.



Little visitors giving Namaiki’s work the final touch.

So, how did you now end up here, in David’s garden, planting pumpkins?

**Michael:** We were into design for so long and it is interesting to see where you end up. After a while it seems that you’ve done all you can with your materials and then – what else do you do? What becomes interesting? It does seem most logical and meaningful that you end up working with living material.



Michael (left) and David (right) in their natural environment.



Working with plants – even a 'Namaiki Seeds Lab' turns out to be another colourful installation.

When you talk about plants making things, would you actually say that they also do design work for you?

**Michael:** I actually find it interesting to design systems which then take care of the whole work for you.

Many people give themselves too much over excess of work. There is an interesting book called [The power of duck](#) by Japanese farmer Takao Furuno who discovered permaculture for himself. He was planting rice the traditional way and was wondering why it was so much hard work. He then realised, that if he held a duck family in the fields, their pedaling legs would take away a lot of the work he had to do. Then he discovered, that certain little fish in the fields would feed and keep the ducks and he slowly kept stepping up the productivity ladder of the animals and had very little to do in the end.

That kind of design thinking is really interesting I believe: he was creating a system which is really efficient. But he couldn't find anyone in Japan who was interested in testing or trying his idea because growing rice here is this really traditional social thing. It just seems mad that you prefer to do twice the amount of work that ducks are just happy to do for you.



Hyotan (pumpkins) growing wild.



Neighbour checking the pumpkins.

**David:** We grew tons of hyotan, pumpkins, in this garden last year and it is just amazing to literally watch them grow and see what shapes they make. When we were doing stuff with [gangoo](#), it was those kind of shapes we were looking for, so now we realise that you are actually much better off taking real hyotan from the start.

As a designer, you would be a fool trying to make a shape like that out of wood when it actually makes itself!



Early years Namaiki style: the 'Gangoo' project, sculptures made out of plastic.



Hyotan (pumpkin) inspired designs for [Hoya Crystal](#). Namaiki explain: "Hoya is this traditional, respectable Japanese crystal company – great clients! When we did an installation for them they came along and said, Yes, we really enjoyed that, but can't you do anything more insane?"



Your recent exhibition “Kinky Muff Land” in Osaka was the first time that you did a proper long-term installation with living things. What did you do there exactly and how did people react?

**Michael:** It was a 4 to 5 months installation – which is still ongoing – where we cut 3 pieces out of moss and grass and made very thin green tables as a base to present our objects. One of the problems with gardening is, that you always need to bend down to look at things on the ground, so we created those tables to look at things in a comfortable height.



Moss tables at the ‘Kinky Muff Land’ exhibition in Osaka allowing you to get close to grass without having to bend down all the way.



**Michael:** "One of our visitors asked me, what 'Kinky Muff Land' actually means. I was a bit shocked and didn't know what to say..."



**David:** "On the first day the grass was really short. On the second day there were already some dandelions which must have been in the soil and then on the third day we had mushrooms popping up... It's totally that kind of Namaiki work that we like to make, but it's just doing it all by itself."

You've been making sculptures and objects out of different materials for a very long time now. How exactly did you switch from plastics to plants?

**Michael:** After a while of working with things from [the 100 yen shop](#) you get really fed up with the feeling that the plastic has on your hands. And after every exhibition you have to deal with all that plastic stuff collecting dust. Then we started to work with woods and papers and things that basically have been alive at some point.



Giant paper cow



Smaller cow and tape drawing at the ['Technique and Picnic'](#)

**Michael:** And then it was just the next step to work with things that simply are alive. Maybe it is the kind of thinking that objects have a spirit or life force to them and with plants there is more of an interesting communication. They are living things and you really have to slow down and watch them rather than assuming what to do next all the time.

I heard about some of your guerilla gardening projects. What is that all about?

**David:** There is an incredible amount of space left in the city that can be used and turned green. We used to carry seeds around sprinkling them everywhere. We also planted a bunch of broccoli in the holes in the concrete outside the [Yokohama Bank Art Gallery](#). Funny sight! Or planting radish in those little plots of dirt on the side of the road beneath the trees. Excellent!



David explaining the magic of maths using a cactus!

Yes! I noticed that there is quite an awareness of these tiny spots of green around Tokyo. Old ladies just go ahead and plant flowers they like in green spots close to their home...

Great that you draw some design attention to those by planting broccoli! Not sure I would like to eat vegetables growing next to a highway – but the act itself certainly gets you thinking! How would you call this guerilla gardening action then? Is it design...?

**Michael:** We see this as graffiti more than anything else but it has a huge potential. Look at what happened in Cuba after the oil shock: suddenly they had no food 'cause there was no oil for the fertilizer. Then they just discovered **permaculture** 'cause they had to eat something – and now they supply a lot of the food they consume in the city from within the city.

It is great to have things in the garden, but how do you actually use that for your work? And how do you get hold of the plants you need?

**David:** For the **UA album cover or video**, we used real plants and now they asked us to design the stage for the next UA live in Omotesando. We now hire this great 5th generation plant hunter from Osaka to get us some amazing huge plants...

Afterwards, we will give some of those plants to you – stick some in the garden and use some for new projects. One thing feeding the other...



Setting at SuperDeluxe for the UA video.

Visuals of the UA video 'Ougon no Midori', meaning 'Golden Green'.



Did you have any negative experiences when working with plants so far?

**Michael:** As we started looking for seeds we were shocked by the evil of companies such as **Monsanto**, the world's largest seed company. Changing the DNA inside a living thing so that it won't survive the next year, thus forcing you to buy new seeds every time! Introducing death into a living system like that and to assume that it won't spread!!

It has already polluted Mexican corn, a country where for hundreds of thousands of years people have been protecting and using corn. Now with terminated technology the seeds only last for one season!

Therefore teaching people to understand, collect and share seeds is quite a political act, really. Just to keep other options open so that large companies don't end up controlling all seed production.



A garden designed for [Graf](#) in Osaka on the 5th floor of their building. The sun comes down, the wind blows through and by summer, all of the flowers and herbs will blow fresh, delicious air through the building, like a large organic air conditioner plus scent installation!



Garden setting for Graf with their designers relaxing in their lunch break.

**Michael:** Working with plants is just the most rewarding thing to do.

When we did the garden for **Graf**, it was interesting to see all the creative guys from the shops and offices in that building coming up to the roof watching what we were doing and being so stunned. Watching their amazed faces, the difference plants make and how much it surprises people is the most simple and most relevant thing.



**Thanks a lot  
Michael, David, Uleshka, Alice, and PingMag**

This interview was published in PingMag June 2007. I would love to provide you with a link for this truly great blog but sadly enough they decided to call it a day at the beginning of 2009. The word is that White Rabbit Press is searching for ways to continue PingMag, if so I let you know.