

# Todd Goldman: THE PROFESSIONAL DOODLER

TODD GOLDMAN, self-professed 'professional doodler', is a household name within several different industries. His art career began with the forming of 'David and Goliath' in 1999, a T-shirt company that licenses and merchandizes characters like "Trendy Wendy" and "Goodbye Kitty". Turning D&G into a multi-million dollar merchandizing machine, Todd transitioned into the fine art world, exploding onto the artistic circuit with his incredibly successful first exhibition, *The Stupid Factory* in 2004. His simplistic but incredibly witty style soon gathered a vast popular following, bringing his colorful images, irreverent humor, and often provocative subject matters from the t-shirts where they were born onto canvases hung in the top U.S. galleries, and into the private collections of many celebrities and major companies (including Paramount Pictures, Paul McCartney, Jessica Simpson, to name just a few). As if this weren't enough, Todd has also had several books published and is currently working on multiple animated series, notably a forthcoming cartoon *The Uglies* for Fox. And alongside the success has come a certain degree of infamy. The so-called 'bad boy' of the art world has already generated a fair amount of controversy in his career, including accusations of plagiarism and a notable inclusion at no. 97 on Bernard Goldberg's list of *100 People Who are Screwing Up America* in 2005. Todd, with characteristic flippancy, responded by saying that he "hoped to be ranked higher next year."



SENSE: You've been described as numerous things in your career...

TODD: You mean like 'an asshole'?

SENSE: Well, yes, that too. But one particular self-description stood out - "Professional doodler." What exactly were you suggesting by this?

TODD: Well I grew up in high school and middle school, not paying any attention in class and doodling on the desks. I'm doing so much different stuff now, and so rather than saying I'm an artist, I prefer to make fun of myself and call myself a professional doodler. It's cuter I guess.

SENSE: You almost seem to have a resistance to being labeled an "artist"?

TODD: I don't think it's a resistance. But the word "artist" is so vague. Everyone's an artist in his or her own way. I'm very happy where my career sits in this world of art. I don't take myself too seriously. I never went to art school and I don't have one hour of art training. I'm glad I didn't because with classical training you can become just another robot drawing something. I think that's what makes myself different and marketable, and I do get a lot of criticism for this because I'm out there and successful. I don't want to call them jealous but a lot of the criticism is along the lines of "my 4-year old can draw that". Yes, they can. But they didn't. My style is simplistic, even child-like, but I have very adult humor and sayings. And I think it's the combination that works. Take *Boys Are Stupid, Throw Rocks At Them!* If I had drawn a realistic boy, I don't think it would have been the same.



SENSE: So what influences these doodles?

TODD: You mean, inspiration-wise? Well, I'm inspired by everything, from walking down the Grove to watching a movie to reading a book. Anything! Going to the park and watching my dogs take a shit, I get inspired. I've always had a million ping-pong balls going off in my head and they won't stop bouncing around. If you saw my office, I have literally two hundred projects of which only 8% are done and I can't finish them.

SENSE: I've seen you described as a Post-Pop Artist and placed in the same category as Keith Haring, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol. Is that a fair comparison? I'm not even sure I know what's meant by 'Post-Pop'.

TODD: Well, I guess it's because all the Pop-artists are dying. Maybe it's because I'm not gay and I don't have AIDS. Actually it was my publisher who labeled me that. People always ask me what that means. It's Pop-art but it kind of has more of a message. I'm not saying I'm the first person to do it but there aren't a lot of paintings with 'verbage' on them. It's either the simplistic visuals or the message that attracts people.

SENSE: But you don't feel any particular affinity with the earlier Pop artists?

TODD: Well, it's not like I'm starting a movement here, like Scientology. No, I do my own thing. I don't even think about it, I'm not that smart. I don't think big picture. I didn't start making stuff because I thought people would buy it. I started doing stuff that I liked to do and it just happened that a lot of people also liked it. And suddenly all these markets opened up for me.

SENSE: And you did it the opposite way round. You started in business and then moved into the art world?

TODD: Correct. I did it ass-backwards. I was going to go to art-school but my Dad said he refused to let me be a starving artist and told me to make a living. And he was right. So I went to the University of Florida and got my degree in accounting, became a CPA, and I hated it. Then someone introduced me to the apparel industry. So I tested the market. I took some of my little doodle designs from High school, *Boys Are Stupid*, *Boys Are Smelly*, *Boys Eat Boogers*, and put them on t-shirts. And it just took off.

SENSE: So how did you transition into the so-called 'High Art' world?

TODD: I'd been painting since I was in high school but the merchandising was increasing the exposure of my art. So I went to my agent and said: "do you know anyone in the art world?" But I didn't want to do the typical artist thing though, knocking on gallery doors, doing little shows and so on. For me, it was all or nothing. So I met up with these people, showed them some postcards of my work and said: "hey do you think you can sell this on a canvass?" And they looked at me like I was crazy because of the subject matter and she said: "We don't schlep potty art". That's what she called it. Potty art.

SENSE: You should have asked if she'd never seen Duchamp? [Surrealist artist who tested the definition of art with his work *Fountain*, a urinal]

TODD: (laughs) Well she said it wasn't for her. Ok, so 6 months go by and then they called me up and gave me the opportunity. This is 3 years ago. They said they'd have a small show in Vegas. It was at the same time as MAGIC. So I was going to be there anyway for my apparel line. They agreed to do a small show of, say, 25 to 40 canvasses. Anyway, I thought: shit, this is my one opportunity. So I showed up with 110 canvasses. And I sold 89 out of 110 canvasses at my first show. This guy, Jack Solomon, who's represented Picasso and Haring and Warhol at some time or other, was amazed. He told me it was the fastest selling of any young artist he'd ever seen in his fifty years in the art world. So we were in business. And it's so funny - his wife comes along and says, "I guess I'm schlepping potty art now." I think it was a testing ground for them as well as myself. I didn't expect it to have such a reaction and nor did they. Now I have a pretty good following. A lot of people know my work, it's opened up a lot of doors to me.



SENSE: Including the world of High Art?

TODD: Yes. I'm being sold within the contemporary art market. And the people who are collecting my pieces are the ones who have Lichtensteins and Warhols and stuff like that.

SENSE: Isn't this a paradox? Most art critics see that the aim of the disparate Pop artist movements of the 60's was to demonstrate that capitalism has desecrated art by turning it into just another object of consumption. But here the art world is embracing someone whose whole thing started with selling a product. Does this create any kind of conflict in you, between the artist and the entrepreneur?

TODD: Absolutely. Ultimately it's a business but I deal with that balancing act everyday. My Dad runs my business but he couldn't draw a stick figure to save his life whereas my mom is an amazing artist, way better than me, but she couldn't balance her checkbook. I got lucky. I'm the fusion of them both. I know so many amazing artists who can't take the next step because they don't know how to market themselves and that's my advantage. But I don't really think that far in advance. I just do what I do with blinders on.

SENSE: But you're always aware that you've got to make a living?

TODD: Yeah, and I make a good living out of it. As you see in my work, I make fun of everything, myself included. I touch on every subject and I offend. I think that half of the art world has embraced me as an artist and the other half are probably embarrassed of me. Fortunately there are enough people out there who like my stuff. The art world is such a tight-knit, snotty community that I don't really want to be involved in it anyway. I am what I am and I do what I do.

SENSE: So in a way you're putting your work out there as a challenge?

TODD: Yes, yes. It is a challenge. They call me the bad boy of art. What? I'm not a bad boy. I'm just a very sarcastic guy... this is how I am. I don't have to try to be bad.

SENSE: No drive-by shootings of art galleries?

TODD: (laughs) Right. I've been kind of black-balled from the art societies but you come to my art shows and we're having twinkies and milk and playing sesame street music and it's fun. And then you go to these other galleries and they're in tuxedos, sipping champagne. So I make fun of it. It is what it is and I am who I am. I'm not saying I'm Rembrandt. I don't want to be Rembrandt. You know what, I have more fans than I have enemies... I think.

SENSE: Is that the David and Goliath theme? The little guy who takes on the establishment?

TODD: No, no, you're reading too much into it. This is just how I started - who I am, how I draw, my sense of humor, and how I look at the world.



of people screwing up America?

TODD: Well, not everyone has a sense of humor. Not everyone agrees with what I'm doing. Like *Boys are Stupid, Throw Rocks at Them!* I did that to be funny and to sell t-shirts. I was selling to teenage girls so I made fun of boys. Then you get all these accusations of "boy-bashing", all these fathers saying you're degrading boys. How do you answer that? It's so petty. It seems like anything that gets put out and has success will generate an adverse opinion. There's always going to be someone who doesn't like what I'm doing. But like I said it is what it is. If you don't like it, don't buy it; don't look at it. It's like Howard Stern – if you don't like Howard Stern, change the channel. But a lot of people do like him. And I'm not even saying I'm that out there – I don't intentionally try to offend people. I really don't. I don't wake up saying who can I piss off today? I'm going to piss off the blacks today. I don't do that.

SENSE: So it's not like you're the *South Park* of the art world?

TODD: No. This is my sense of humor. I'm more successful now but I haven't changed since day one. I've always been a smartass. I was constantly in detention growing up. I'm always taking it to the next level. There's a very fine line between what's appropriate and what's not and I always seem to cross that line. Always have. At least now I can soften the blow by making a cute cartoon character out of it. I've created this world, which I call the 'Stupid Factory'. It's the world that I work in and I run it.

SENSE: I hope you don't mind if we touch on the other area of controversy - the accusations in May of this year that you had plagiarized a cartoon from David Kelly's *Purple Pussy* comic for your *Dear God Make Everyone Die* canvasses.

TODD: I guess what happened was this: I have a whole design team that works back in Florida creating t-shirts for me. And then I take some of these images and make paintings out of them. If we do 50 t-shirts a month we probably create over 300 images to narrow down to those 50. Listen, I couldn't paint in my lifetime the amount of stuff that we've done. I thought that image was created internally within 'David and Goliath'. I guess the original idea came from that Kelly guy which one of my artists had seen. We changed it to *Please God Make All my Friends Fat*, because the *Die* wouldn't sell on t-shirts. But I thought it'd make a great painting. So I painted two images from it. 5 months later it was hanging in this gallery and someone saw it and started this whole Internet thing. When I found out it wasn't our image, I apologized to the guy and gave him the full proceeds for the sale of the paintings. They sold for \$10,000. So I didn't profit from him. There was no lawsuit from it. But then a whole can of worms opens up and suddenly I'm knocking off everyone apparently.

SENSE: So it turned into a massive Todd Goldman witch-hunt?

TODD: Well you have to understand, I'm coming from the t-shirt world and we use a lot of clip-art. Most of it came from jealousy I think. These other artists might be better than me but they aren't as successful. It doesn't really matter. The point is that I admitted I made a mistake. I didn't check my resources. I apologized for that mistake and paid for it. It was the 16-year old bloggers on the Internet that blew it out of proportion. Actually I got the copyright to that image [*Dear God...*] which Kelly never got so in fact I now own the copyright. So if I wanted to... but I'm not going to go there. It would be pretty funny though.

SENSE: Jack Solomon's comment on the whole debacle was that "the real story is that with the web, anybody can go out and ruin someone." Did it have an adverse affect on you?

TODD: I look at it like this: I made a mistake but a million more people now know my name. I don't look at it as a bad thing. I guess those people were looking to railroad me and thought they could take my career down. I guess they thought I was some kid in my garage making t-shirts. What scared me is what you can do or say on the Internet. You could go to my Wikipedia entry right now and say I'm a pedophile. It's scary how fast the news spreads. But you know what, it hasn't hurt me one bit. A friend of mine always said, if someone's not talking about you then you're not successful.

SENSE: And how do you account for your overwhelming popularity?

TODD: I don't know. I just think that people like to laugh and not to take themselves too seriously. My t-shirts really started taking off after 9/11. I had only just started my company back in 2000 and I guess people were so caught up in their problems at the time. And with a \$20 t-shirt they could just laugh and forget about their problems for a while. I'm not trying to save the world here. I just think that I hit a chord with people, whether it's the 12-year old girl that thinks cooties are funny or the respected lawyer who is still a kid under that suit.

SENSE: So you think your work appeals to that child-like quality in people?

TODD: Yes. I pull out the child in people. And not in a pedophile way. I suppose I think like a child myself.

SENSE: You're quoted as saying: "If I can make someone laugh and allow them for just one second not to take life so seriously, then I have done my job as an artist."

TODD: It's not like I wake up in the morning and say: "I'm going to make a hundred people smile today". This is who I am. I don't take life too seriously. I've found a way to spread my message through my art. And I'm very fortunate that I can get my art on many different mediums from notebooks to art to t-shirts. Everything plays off each other. But I really don't have a hidden agenda. I do art shows and people often read way too much into my work. Like *This Sucks* and it's a fish in a fishbowl. People ask me "what did you mean by this?" Are you retarded? It's a fish in a fishbowl! It would suck.

SENSE: But your trademark irreverence has caused a certain amount of controversy, hasn't it? How did you end up on Bernard Goldberg's list



SENSE: So it had no real impact on your business? Jack Solomon is quoted in the *St. Petersburg Times* saying that you had lost your three biggest poster distributors.

TODD: They came back. The apparel industry and the department stores knew it was childish. But when these kids started contacting the galleries, they pulled my stuff. Not off the wall but they took it off the Internet and the poster guys hesitated for a while. But my lawyers spoke to them and they were reassured. Did it hurt my business? No.

SENSE: Did it hurt you as an artist though? Were you concerned that your artistic integrity had been compromised?

TODD: Not really. It did kind of wake me up. It was a cheap lesson to learn but it did make me realize how visible I am and I have to be really careful. So in that respect I learned a lesson. But in any other respect, I don't care. I don't go to these big art conferences and worry about how my colleagues look at me.

SENSE: It doesn't seem to be holding you back?

TODD: No. It hasn't affected me at all. People will ask me about it. It was even brought up in a meeting I had at Fox the other day. But if I was this master criminal, if I was that good of a con artist, I'd be out robbing banks instead.

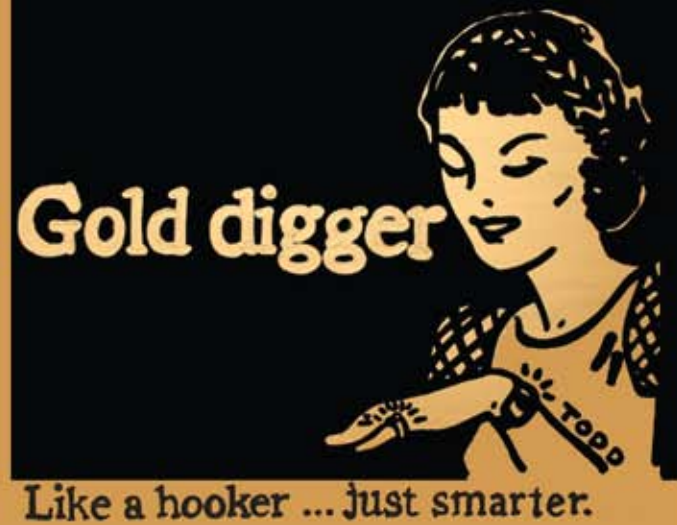
SENSE: This is for the coming series, right? *The Uglies*?

TODD: Yeah. I have a couple of things. I have a deal with Fox now so I'm creating content for them. The first show that'll come out is called *The Uglies*. Then I'm working on another show, which is a variety animated show where I'll be the host. It's about a guy who can't cope in society or keep a girlfriend or job so all he does is doodle. It's kind of cool. Actually I have about 16 cartoons going on right now but they're all at different stages. Some kids shows, some cable shows. But right now I'm working on my cable shows.

SENSE: So when do we hope to see that?

TODD: Fall of next year. *The Uglies* will be the first one. They're the richest family in the world and they've made their money from their pet gerbil's poop. It's pretty funny.

SENSE: Well, you say there's no real message to your work but I'm seeing a strong satirical side to what you do.



TODD: That's just my sense of humor. Ok, I admit I am kind of jabbing at the system a bit just to see how far I can go. But so far, I take a step forward and they take a step back.

SENSE: So you're poking fun at the establishment but at the same time major celebrities and companies are hanging your works on their walls. Paramount's bought your work; Endeavor's got some; Jessica Simpson, the Wayans brothers. It's another paradox, isn't it?

TODD: It's a little weird. But it's also cool to see major people in the Industry buying my work. These are the people that buy Warhols and so on. So even to be in that category with Keith Haring and Warhol when I've only been doing this for 2 and half years... And if this is where I am now, let's see where I am a few more years from now. I keep creating. So hopefully I have a lot more ahead... unless I die of AIDS!

SENSE: So who would be the top choice of person you'd like to see buy your art?

TODD: That's a good question. (thinks for a moment). Well, it'd be cool to see someone I didn't expect buy my paintings, someone like Al Gore. From the exposure side, someone like Angelina and Brad. But you know, more than anyone else it would be my mom. She's always had hundreds of my paintings for free and now she makes me sign them. So she can damn well pay for one. (NC)

