

Knee High Media, A History.

By Lee Basford

Lucas Badtke-Berkow has been exploring the world of the printed page in Japan for the past fifteen years with his company Knee High Media. Producing inspirational, independent and open minded publications, consistently looking at things with new eyes and an infectious inquisitiveness of the world around him.

The first time I'd seen anything published by Knee High was issue two of Tokion back in 1997, a magazine I'd picked up by chance. It was expensive and oversized, but I'd never seen anything like it, you have to remember that this was a time when the internet was in its early days so most of the information we take for granted wasn't around, especially this kind of glimpse into a special and unknown world. It's quite possible that this copy of Tokion, now beginning to fade with sunlight, was the catalyst in a string of events that led me to Japan in 1999. And that, in essence, is how Lucas describes the power magazines can have when made well, trying to make the world a better place by presenting ideas, emotions, people and places that will hopefully become seeds for a new way of thinking, *widescreen thinking* as he describes it. A way of seeing the world from multiple viewpoints and through this expanding the reader and putting them in the mindset to enjoy all of the unique experiences that life can offer. Some magazines have that rare quality that transports you into somebody else's world and another way of being, it was skateboarding and BMX magazines from the West Coast that did it when I was a growing up. Lucas left the West Coast 17 years ago, the day after graduating college and headed directly for Japan.

For him magazines have always been a great love, not just the content of a magazine, but all of the minutia; the details of the paper, the design, illustration and photography, right down to the root of where each story is coming from, describing them as "art, culture and history sandwiched between two covers." He made his first magazine in 6th grade and has continued producing various forms of print from that day on. It was only when a friend reminded him that he hadn't produced anything of his own since arriving in Japan that Knee High began to slowly grow as an idea. After working as a freelance writer for two years on a variety of publications the first issue of Tokion magazine entered the world in the Autumn of 1996. An oversized and brightly coloured orange magazine with a naked woman on the cover, she was painted with the Japanese character for power, the title of the first issue.

The name Tokion itself was created by combining the Japanese kanji TOKI (time) and ON (sound) translated to mean *the sound of now*. The idea being a magazine that was focused on representing what they were feeling at the moment, trying to capture the mood of the time and put it within the pages without separating themselves from the reader. This was the thing I loved about Tokion, every issue exposed me to so many new and interesting people and all they were doing, it wasn't about what was cool, it was about what was actually happening and feeling part of it. Lucas explains that it's about getting across the feeling, the smell and sounds of the place, transporting the reader there and making the pages come alive. It was also important that the title of the magazine said something about the place in which it was being created, something else that was important to them, identifying your roots in the bigger communal space in which the magazine existed. This single publication opened up a world of underground culture and creativity in Japan that had, until now, been relatively unknown. It was this unknown element of Japanese culture on the street level that Lucas wanted to share with Japan and the rest of the world. At the time much of the celebrated cultural media came from outside, which was strange considering there was so much creativity already happening, just waiting to be discovered and taken seriously within Japan. Everybody involved and featured throughout the issues reads like a who's who of people influencing culture at the time, one of the first to take part was Paul Smith who immediately got what they were trying to do and wanted to get involved even before the first issue had been printed. This was from an initial meeting with Lucas who was interviewing him for a fashion magazine while freelancing, a friendship which continues to this day. Looking back, the development and refinement of the magazine is clear, although it wasn't obvious at the time. What began as a spewing of art and culture in a chaotic two colour publication of ideas soon became a full colour magazine available across the globe, thirty issues spanning six years, featuring hundreds of amazing people with something interesting to say, shot by some of the most important photographers in the last sixty years. Among the many things they pioneered was product collaborations between companies, a phenomenon that is still growing; A Bathing Ape, Hiroshi Fujiwara, Head Porter, Benetton, Shepherd Fairey, Stussy, Reebok, Crocs, Ships, Casio, Timex, Lee Jeans. With goods ranging from t-shirts, bags, pillows, clocks, paper trees, it goes on and on.

The issues themselves were all led by singular themes, from; Dreams, Sex, Sound, Roots, Water, Horror, even a McDonalds issue in 1999 which devoted an entire magazine to the golden arches, bringing you everything you ever needed to know about McDonalds in Japan. There were

obsessive badge collectors, bootleg McDonalds vinyl enthusiasts, 24 hours in a Shinjuku restaurant and a 38 page photo essay by Takashi Homma and Tetsuya Yamamoto, a beautiful insight into the lives of others through photographs and stories all relating to the home of the Terriaki McBurger. In 2000 Kaori Sakurai, Lucas's wife who'd been working alongside him since issue two of Tokion, took over as editor of the magazine so he was able to spend more time developing new ideas at Knee High, and while Tokion was in full flow he was developing something new, something very different. Many of the people working on and featuring in the magazine at the time were starting to become parents, and with this in mind they decided to get their creative minds together to develop something that would benefit the next generation with a positive influence on their lives. The name of the magazine, *Mammoth*, initially came from a random ramen restaurant encounter, a name everybody decided was perfect because it was cute, soft and scary, not to mention big, all of the things that kids love.

Mammoth initially started as a bi-annual magazine with the intention of getting kids excited about life and creativity. But this wasn't just a bunch of adults deciding what was good for kids, the central idea of the magazine was *For Kids, By Kids*, from the fashion shoots right through to the articles. They would have meetings with kids once a month to discuss what they were into what they were thinking and what they were feeling. The first incarnation came as a brightly designed box with the magazine and a collection of original collaboration items like CD's, stickers, fridge magnets and pencil sets. The price was set at 500¥, a single coin in Japan making it easy for kids to buy. What they found though after three years was that making a magazine with kids is amazingly rewarding but actually selling it to them is something else entirely, so a strategic re-think was in order. The new format of the magazine was aimed more at the parents, almost a reinvention of a school text book where interesting articles, great design and fun were all key factors. It was all about getting parents and kids excited about learning as a life skill you shouldn't let go of, learning in a fun and playful way. In 2008 while they were working on the *Music* issue they decided there should be an event, because as great as books and magazines are, they don't make any sound. So the idea of the Mammoth POW-WOW came about and is now in its fourth year. It's a camping and music event where kids get together to take part in all kinds of activities like; cooking, learning to play instruments, creating their own t-shirts and exploring on bikes.

For the past eight years Mammoth have collaborated with one of Japan's largest clothing brands, *Ships*, to produce a range of clothes that fit the theme of the magazine and can be found at the Ships Kids stores. Knee High also designed a shop for kids themselves called *3 Feet High* because of a kids only front door which was exactly *three feet high* (there was an adults door too). The place had a book section stocked by Hiroshi Eguchi of cult Tokyo book store and gallery *Utrecht*, and a selection of well thought out and designed toys and clothes for babies and children (but only children up to the height of three feet).

In 2010 Mammoth entered its third stage of development, and after 10 years in print its going to be in a larger format and will now become a free paper, but a free-paper designed so you want to keep and collect it in the custom binders they're creating. The magazine is now part of a larger project called *Mammoth School*, the philosophy behind it, hands on, fun learning with environmental and green studies being an important part of the curriculum. Lucas thinks its important to shape kids for the future, "creating children that can be leaders in the complex world they are going to inherit." They've devised five areas of study which they'll gradually begin to create workshops for; Green Study, Outdoor & Sports, Creative Art, World Culture and Nippon Learning.

Around the same time Tokion and Mammoth were growing, the Knee High office remained a tiny space at the bottom of a modern office building. They'd been looking for a new place with more room for six months without any luck. By chance Lucas spotted an old house one day out walking, just a minute from their old office, the place looked empty so he enquired at the real estate office and found that it was just about to come on to the market. It was perfect; two floors, a garden, and made largely from traditional wooden beams, the added bonus was that the Japanese tend not to like old places so the rent was cheap too. They spent the next three months replacing the tatami mats with hardwood floors, removing cupboards, repairing doors, generally brightening up the place and transforming it into a beautiful space which feels very modern even though its over sixty years old. They didn't interfere with the character of the building which is one of the few remaining old houses in Tokyo, built just after the second world war and now occasionally rented out for photo-shoots under the name *Green Studio Tokyo*. To commemorate the 15th anniversary of Knee High this year, Hitozuki artists Kami and Sasu were commissioned to paint a mural leading from the garden wall up onto the side of the house, juxtaposing clean flowing lines with the weathered exterior of the ageing concrete which feels like a natural extension of the house, as if it's always been there.

One problem with creating something that's *now* is that *now* is always changing, and approaching 2002, the final issue of Tokion, Lucas already had a sense of where they were heading "When you get older, it's not right to make a youth culture magazine - that's not where you're at. Whenever you're doing something creative - you've always got to be real and honest with yourself, if you're not your work will have no soul which means your fans will cease to be inspired." One of the last issues of the magazine, The *Florida* issue, was an early experiment in how the magazine and Knee High could progress, "We went to Florida and interviewed pro wrestlers, went to Key West, ate a ton of Key Lime Pie, hung out with art dealers, talked about Hemingway, explored the insects living in the swamps. It was a very stimulating process and I could feel with my heart that this was the right direction."

At the same time one thing was coming to an end another was just beginning. Knee High were approached by a big publishing company to create what would become Japan's first major free paper, the result was *Metro Min*, another direction to explore and another title to add to Knee High's expanding list of publications. The team came up with the concept, name and design of the magazine as well as editing the first four issues. The idea behind the name of this subway magazine was that most people will be on a train for around 15 - 20 minutes, so the content was designed to be read in that amount of time. A simple idea still going strong after 8 years.

After producing thirty magazines over a period of six years, in 2002 Tokion ended in Japan. Selling the rights to a New York publisher, Knee High continued to pursue their dreams of producing work that was relevant to where they were at, still rooting for the little guy, the underdogs and the unknown. The first outcome of this progression was *Papersky, The In-Flight Magazine For The Ground*. In a way it was Tokion but more mature, wiser and a little more inclusive of the world as a whole. The name Papersky is part of a concept of bringing the world's culture to everybody in an interesting, friendly and down-to-earth way, with a sense that we are all travelers and that everything is possible for the readers. As Tramnesia put it "Knee High always manages to avoid the cliquish elitism that dooms other magazines, perhaps because it lacks cynicism and self-importance." The magazine aims to be educational and inspirational in a way that is typical of Knee High; beautiful design, intriguing photography and an enthusiasm for things that draws you in to their world, you want to be there exploring these places, transported into another world of rich and colourful sights, sounds, tastes and people. Sustainability was also a key factor in creating the magazine, they wanted to send out the right message from the outset using only soy ink on recycled paper. The whole ethos of the title is trying to be local and global at the same time, partly inspired by Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion map which appears on every cover, a map that doesn't distort the scale of any countries or show the world in any specific orientation through cultural bias, it simply shows the world as an almost single continent surrounded by one great ocean, on a scale more accurate than any other existing map. The idea of this *one island earth* that we are all living on is something that has been at the core of Lucas's vision from the beginning, where the world's local cultures are celebrated and shared with one another. The magazine started as a bilingual publication, a natural progression from Tokion. But after twelve issues and the realisation that a fully bilingual magazine for a 95% Japanese reader base doesn't really make sense, translating everything at such a high level is both costly and time consuming. There is one part of the magazine that has remained consistently bilingual, the section by Motoyuki Shibata, one of Japan's most respected translators of English literature. In each issue he selects an English language story that has never been introduced to a Japanese audience, with a list that includes a lot of high profile authors such as Steven Millhauser, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Paul Auster, together with completely unknown writers whose work is translated in to Japanese for the first time. Each story is accompanied by specially commissioned illustrations, there was also a book of the collected stories published in 2006. Books are another thing they have a great interest in as a company, setting up their own travel book store in Tokyo's Aoyama district in 2004 named *Book 246*, they've also published the children's book *We Are Animals* and Naoki Ishikawa's first photography title *The Void*, which focused on the sacred land of New Zealand's Maori people.

As Papersky was about to be launched, Knee High were approached once again by a large publishing company, this time to create a gardening magazine, something Lucas knew nothing of at the time and didn't really want to embark on competing with a group of well established titles in an already saturated market. His drive has always been for something new, to create magazines with ideas and approaches that didn't previously exist and being a small company, originality is what keeps them going "As soon as you're not able to think of the next idea - you're gone! All we have is our ideas and the inspiration our projects offer people". He went back to the company with a firm *no* to the gardening magazine, but did have a new idea to show them, a lifestyle magazine about plants and how plants relate to our everyday lives - surprisingly they said yes.

Working together with friend Ito Seiko, one time Japanese hip hop pioneer and city gardening author, the concept they came up with was *life with plants on this planet*, looking at all of the ways beyond gardening that plants are part of our lives; from the clothes we wear, the furniture we use, the tea, juice and alcohol we drink, even the air we breathe and the paper books and magazines are printed on. The more they became involved in producing the magazine, the more interested everyone became in the realisation that the majority of city dwellers across the globe had become separated from a connection to plants in their lives and the knowledge that its plants that keep us and our planet alive and well, something that needed to be shared.

Unfortunately in 2009 Planted became another casualty of the global economy as the parent company began to scale things down. The team however, did not want to let the title die and soon began work on another first, the first ever TV station devoted to plants. Reborn as *Plants+*, widening the outlook of plants as an online television station, there's a great team of collaborators involved creating live broadcasts once a month, with a wide catalogue of programmes covering various plant related topics like macrobiotic cooking, how to make your own bonsai and guerilla gardening in Tokyo, programmes that you can watch again and again, anywhere in the world. The project doesn't end with television though, there are real world projects, talks and most recently a collaboration with Argentinian couple Mejune. This was to produce three hand made characters, each based on a natural Japanese material: rice (kome), Japanese cypress (hinoki) and bamboo (take). The figures are each filled with seeds then passed from one person to another, each recipient takes a seed to grow themselves and passes it on. There's a hope that this interaction in growing a plant from a small seed will ignite something in people, that they will find the beauty of interacting with something natural. Lucas explains that "once people get hooked on plants they become better people, paying more attention to the planet as well as to the people around them."

Coming towards the end of 2009 there was a significant redesign of *Papersky*, most notably the introduction of just enough English to enable none Japanese speakers a chance to get a basic insight into the content, design and photography of the magazine. There are also two sections now which are completely bilingual, one of them devoted to a piece of very traditional everyday Japanese life, now sadly beginning to fade. From Public baths to artists who hand paint flags for fishermen, these are beautiful insights into small parts of peoples lives not usually presented to the outside world. The result is that this updated form of the magazine has actually got a lot of new people interested in what *Knee High* are doing recently, more now than when the magazine was fully bilingual, which also helps to reinforce that this is a local magazine with a global perspective. There are many subtle and not so subtle *local* elements to the magazine, something they wanted to increase with the renewal, sending a message out about the people who were creating the magazine and sharing their way of thinking and being - that this is a very special global travel magazine - but one that has its heart in Japan. One of the more subtle local elements is their use of traditional Japanese colours throughout the magazine for all of the graphic elements. They're the kind of colours you will find in old books, originally made from plants native to Japan and therefore unique colours to the island, but more recently they are simply being forgotten, like so many other traditional skills.

Along with the renewal of the title, *Knee High* have recently concentrated on their online presence, which serves as a scaled down version of the magazine with stories in Japanese and English focusing on the people behind the places they visit. They've adopted the idea of linking their activities with the outside world through *Papersky Clubs* which their readers can get involved with; Books, Mountain, Bicycle, Japan and Food. Its through these clubs that readers have a real opportunity to meet and enjoy spending time together, Lucas describes it perfectly, "Magazines shouldn't create fake worlds they should help make the world we live in a better place". There are firm plans to expand beyond Japan with an international edition of the magazine and a clear emphasis on the international section of the blog, with a hope that the website will be used as a navigation system for people making their way around Japan and the World. As a tool for people who aren't interested in tourist spots but all of the unique places and people that make travel rewarding and inspiring.

Knee High have undeniably evolved over the years, with Lucas, Kaori and a love of magazines being the consistent driving force behind it all, together they bring a perfect balance to the company, with male and female, Japanese and foreign perspectives which enable them to see things from a uniquely balanced point of view. They're able to bounce ideas around and between them know when something feels right, in tune with yourself and the rest of the world. They bring a lot to the table collectively, a key factor in the development of the company and its foresight to see ahead and keep moving. Its this constant movement, being small enough to adapt and change, but staying true to your ideas rather than following short lived trends that has kept *Knee High* relevant in a world where magazines are becoming an endangered species.