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# Profile Zoren Gold & Minori

Text by Pamela Buxton



04



The Japanese design scene is an unpredictable and energetic beast, epitomised by Tokyo-based photography and art-direction duo Mi-Zo. Fashion and music are the staple of Mi-Zo's output but there's nothing straightforward about their fusion of sex and Surrealism, photography and illustration. Here Pamela Buxton talks to the pair and discovers a yen for the theatrical and live-for-the-moment spirit.

Back in 1999, an aspiring German photographer met a Japanese graphics student in Los Angeles. Fast forward to today and they have become well established as Mi-Zo, a Tokyo-based, avant-garde photography and art-direction duo whose interest in the surreal and the erotic has resulted in a curious but memorable hybrid of photography and illustration.

Although Mi-Zo admit they are a little bit unconventional compared with the more staid elements of Japanese photography, that hasn't stopped them attracting a client list full of big names (Sony, MTV Japan, Warner Bros) combined with more experimental editorial work for lifestyle and fashion publications and themselves. They are soon to gain more exposure still, with a contribution to the forthcoming erotic compilation *All Allure* and the first solo book of their own work published by *Die Gestalten* ([www.die-gestalten.de/out](http://www.die-gestalten.de/out)). Busy compiling a portfolio for their new agent in Paris, they hope to explore work prospects in Europe as well.

Mi-Zo is short for Minori Murakami and Zoren Gold. Born in Hiroshima, Murakami moved to LA in 1991 and studied communication art before working as a freelance illustrator, graphic designer and art director. Gold moved from Berlin to LA in 1995, where he travelled and worked in bars—anything, he says, to avoid a proper job or career. Envyng friends who could pursue their creative hobbies with autonomy wherever they were, he taught himself photography. "I had no portfolio and no equipment, but I bought a computer with Photoshop and was interested in the possibility of using it to work twenty-four hours a day on photography rather than just at the shoot." He spent four months developing a portfolio and by 1998 was working as a freelance photographer. With fantastic beginner's luck, one of his first commissions was photographing Radiohead for Sony.

01 Image for Neo2  
02 Image for  
Boonkat/Dreamworks  
03 Image for Neo2  
04 Image for  
Boonkat/Dreamworks

His portfolio was no conventional photographer's portfolio of carefully cropped work. Instead, he says, it was very graphic, mixing media and incorporating scanned elements and overlaid images—all techniques that have recurred and persisted in his later work with Mi-Zo, but with the addition of Murakami's graphic and illustration skills. But it wasn't until he met her that his work was firmly sent off in a different, and more avant-garde, direction. "We liked each other's work and started talking about what would happen if we mixed our skills using photography as the main medium," say the duo, who work very closely together from concept through to realisation. Initially with Murakami as the model, they developed a joint portfolio as Mi-Zo.

"We are two individuals sharing each other's vision. The outcome does not belong to either of us, it stands on its own. This unknownness and surprise keep us going," says Murakami, who had been feeling unfulfilled in her work as a graphic designer, but had always appreciated the effectiveness of good photography. "I met Zoren and he took amazing photographs. We decided to take these and then manipulate them. It's a mix of two different media and we liked the outcome very much but didn't know what to call it," says Murakami. "It's a really great opportunity for me to use photography as my material—the outcome is inspiring for me." "If you work with someone you really know it's much better and really fun," adds Gold. "The downside is you spend so much time together that you end up fighting—but I guess that's normal."

Sometimes the result is photography, sometimes illustration, but more often it's a startling mix of the two, with post-production blurring the boundaries between what is real and what is not. This helps create their rather unsettling Surrealist style, with subjects often appearing uneasy in their surroundings. "We just wanted to see what happened when we work together—it looked very experimental and very sexual," says Gold.

"Sometimes we start with an illustration but most of the time we want to shoot—taking photographs and working on them. But we're trying to get away from too much retouching and have been creating lifestyle props to make it [the process] more organic rather than just using computers... The fun part is that we plan it together. It's like playing a game back and forward."



02



01



03

- 01 Image for Kohmi Kame / Manjūee magazine
- 02 Personal work
- 03 Uta/Senkou promo poster / Victor Entertainment
- 04 Froids magazine / story 1
- 05 Uta/Senkou mass single / Victor Entertainment
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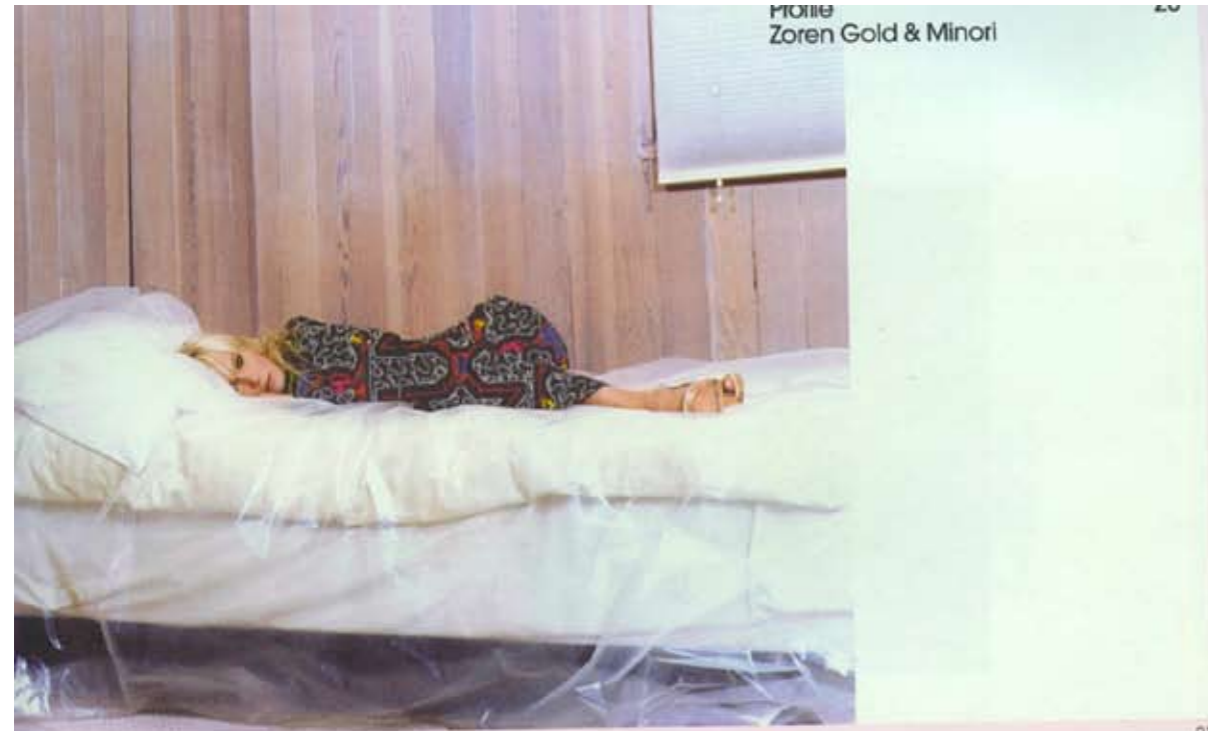
05



06



07



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magazine/story 2  
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Post-9/11, they decided to leave New York and relocate to Tokyo, where friends had suggested their new joint work would be well received. It was good advice—they have since worked as photographers, art directors and video directors for music, magazine and commercial clients such as Honda and Japanese retail group Parco. Current work includes an upcoming photo shoot for Esmode fashion catalogue, a photo/video shoot for a Japanese artist and a cosmetic campaign for Covergirl/China, plus producing some new personal work—in particular they'd like to do more erotic photography. The video work, says Gold, is just a bit of fun—they don't even have a showreel and don't feel as in control of the post-production process.

"I feel quite lucky to work with artists as clients, people who are special, who understand and get excited about our work," says Gold. Murakami deliberately tries to avoid taking a common approach to all the projects. "Most clients are excited by surprises. People like to see some of our fantasies."

But their perspective is not to everyone's taste. For an editorial job for Big magazine in New York, for example, they were prepared to lose the commission rather than compromise. The brief was to come up with a football fashion story. "It sounded so corny so we came up with more of a Japanese football fetish story and made it more sexual, and more funny," says Gold, who explains that they decided on a more illustrative approach in order to do this. "Minori had made the illustration first, and we sort of filled it with photographs."

The resulting series of images is a world away from conventional sports fashion. Instead of trainers, there are models in black, pointed and high-heeled shoes. In one surreal image, two topless girls flank a slightly suggestive trophy. One girl's breasts appear to be being fondled by a comedy bustier, while the other nonchalantly balances a football on her chest. The magazine didn't like the intense expression on one of the models' faces, so the duo took the images elsewhere. In another picture, a hooded and stilettoed girl wearing a bustier crouches in the goalmouth handcuffed to a goalpost. In another still, two girls leap for the ball but one is more concerned with pulling down the other's shorts than getting the football. None looks like she's about to score. Not in the footballing sense anyhow.



02



03

- 01 Image for Gwest Magazine
- 02 Personal Work
- 03 Personal Work
- 04 Image for Seen Magazine
- 05 Personal Work
- 06 Personal Work



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04

For an editorial shoot for Max magazine, Mi-Zo took a different approach and instead created a collaged and printed highly detailed lifesize backdrop to give a theatrical trompe-l'oeil impression of a grand curving staircase. The model, accompanied by larger-than-life objects such as a giant perfume bottle and book, looks weary, tying in with the photographers' thoughts of insanity, hallucination and rebirth. Another Max project is completely different again in tone—a model, her face made up in reference to traditional Japanese storytales and No drama, leaps up alarmingly in some woods like a crazed wood sprite.

Many pieces have touches of the surreal about them—whether it's the inclusion of unexpected objects such as a look into a fashion shoot or the unconventional poses and uneasy atmosphere. In one fashion shot, the model dressed in all black hangs upside down from a tree like an exotic bat. The fun is in attempting to work out what Mi-Zo are on about as well as just enjoying the unusual images at face value.

Mi-Zo's commercial work is more straightforward but not without attitude and intrigue—a swimwear campaign for Parco has the model nonchalantly riding a giant seahorse. Work for music clients includes a wide range of visuals, from work for the psychedelic-flavoured Doremi TV and Black Crowes covers to the simplicity of the Senkou promo, where the strange perspective gives an overly leggy view of the model that creates a slightly unsettling atmosphere.

Mi-Zo themselves struggle to identify an underlying theme in their diverse portfolio. "Most of our works are just our reflections of time and state of mind. Our curiosity changes from time to time. We like to be open and flexible." Perhaps it's because their inspirations are so diverse. "We get inspired from everyday life and experience," says Murakami. "I have just come back from Morocco and have been very much inspired by Islamic art and culture," Gold credits Murakami with getting him interested in art. The pair's favourite artists currently range from Surrealists Victor Brauner and Hans Bellmer to contemporary South African painter Marlene Dumas, whose work explores sexuality, pornography and death.

The unpredictability of the Japanese creative scene also suits them—they've just had an offer to art-direct a new clothing label which involves finding designers and creating the total look. Mi-Zo hope to incorporate some of their own graphics into the fabric design. "Japan is always good for surprises. There are lots of very unexpected offers," says Gold.

For the time being the duo, now in their thirties, are happy with their mix of work and, for Murakami in particular, their regular travels. They are refreshingly open-minded about the future. All they want, they say, is to have a good time and "experience more".



05

- 01 Image for Soen magazine
  - 02 Image for Pool magazine
  - 03 Max/story 1
  - 04 Image for Soen magazine
  - 05 Image for Qwest magazine
- [www.mi-zo.com](http://www.mi-zo.com)