

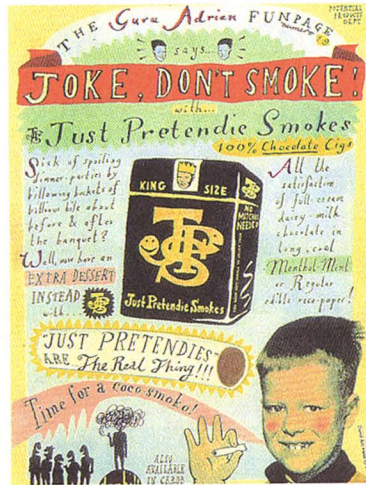
a bathtub with a board resting on the top of it which doubles as a table.

His recent output includes a series of small works featuring a recurring motif. It resembles a butterfly, but also a set of knuckledusters, which is what he used to make them. The series is called *The Bellicose Lepidopterist*. Asked to describe his work, he responds: "Unfashionable, I guess. Everything now seems to be about meaning and theory. My art is devoid of theory."

He isn't happy with this answer. In a phone message several days after the lunch (he leaves phone messages the way other people slip notes



How great David Art: (right) words of wisdom from his 300-year-old child guru Adrian; (above right) *The Flower Collection*. His work, he says, is about "beautiful little jokes".



under doors), he says he likes to think of his art as "beautiful little jokes". In a subsequent message, he says the brass knuckles series reflects part of his philosophy, which is "to see negatives as positives".

The same instinct led him, a little while back, to see what he could do with the contents of his fridge when he ran out of money to buy new art materials. He has some striking monochromatic works in his apartment made with masking tape and soy sauce. He has also dabbled with a type of horseradish, but found that it changed colour.

He gets occasional commissions for stylised portraits (for which he uses more conventional materials) and pocket cartoons for the letters page

shown \$US3.5 million apartments. The trick, he says, was not to seem *too* impressed with the fabulous fittings or views of Central Park.

DAVID ART WALES DREAMS GRAND DREAMS. Over his second dessert at Nobu (he sends the first one back, insisting that the Chef's Selection was insufficiently Japanese), he says, "My ambition is to watch my child dive into the pool at the Beverly Hills Hilton." Excuse me, does he have a child? "Actually, no. But maybe, 10 years from now ..."

And maybe, in 10 years' time, Guru Adrian – his most enduring and imaginative creation apart from himself – will finally have hit the big time. "Guru

model for Adrian. When asked if it is a childhood picture of himself, he replies: "It is you!"

Four years ago, Guru Adrian seemed about to hit the big time in the United States. Wales's proposal for a Guru Adrian animated series attracted some serious interest. He had discussions in Los Angeles with the animation studio Hanna-Barbera, producer of both *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*. The Fox Network courted him. Wales was riding in limos. But, in the end, Fox passed. Then – as he puts it – "MTV decided it was too Nick [Nickelodeon]; Nick decided it was too MTV."

"He's done the rounds," Wales says of Guru Adrian. "I take solace in the fact that *Forrest Gump* was around for 11 years before anything much happened. And I actually thought that *Forrest Gump* was a load of crap."

Wales has taken to posting stickers – *Guru Adrian Absurdiveness Training*; *Guru Adrian Always Puts The Seat Down* – around Manhattan. Who knows, all it might take for the Guru to enjoy a second spring is for somebody (at, say, *The New Yorker*) to ask, "Who or what is Guru Adrian?"

Meanwhile, Wales is pushing other ideas such as another animated series – this one featuring a character called Kevin Kelly and Collin the Rabbit. The rabbit impersonated by the hamster that came to lunch at Nobu. And then nearly escaped.

AH, YES, THE HAMSTER. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE hamster? The full story emerges slowly, in instalments, through phone messages and one last meeting at his apartment, during which Wales has Dave Brubeck playing on his mini stereo system.

After almost gnawing its way out of the cardboard container, the hamster finds temporary accommodation in a clear plastic snap-top box, the kind New York delis provide for takeaway food. Wales gets this from the receptionist at a Tribeca advertising agency where some of his artworks are on display.

The hamster, its nose twitching, has to be coaxed into the deli box. Perhaps it doesn't like the smell of mayonnaise. It only just fits, and then seems in imminent danger of being impaled as Wales stabs some air-holes in the plastic lid with a borrowed penknife.

They then head uptown, first on foot, Wales striding through traffic with the hamster held aloft like a unique deli special, then riding in the back of a big yellow taxi, going north on the Avenue of the Americas. Wales later reports that "the stand-in rabbit" was a big hit with the people at Nick. But, he adds, sounding somewhat surprised, "They wouldn't let me leave it with them."

So what happened? "I gave it away ... It wasn't easy. I went down Broadway offering it to people and nobody wanted it. They all thought there was some kind of a catch. Finally, a couple took it. I think it now has a nice home."

As Guru Adrian says: *From Now On Life Is Good*. For hamsters and, sometimes, also for humans.

Some striking monochromatic works in his apartment are made with masking tape and soy sauce. He has also dabbled with horseradish.

of *The New York Times*. But, as cash flow from these can be irregular, he subsidises the art with jobs such as the pin-setting and burlesque.

He says his lifestyle ranges from feast to famine. "I have been to all the best restaurants, but I can also happily live very frugally. I've had weeks getting by mostly on chicken noodle soup." Wales has ladles full of that quality best described by the wonderful Yiddish word *chutzpah*: supreme self-confidence and front. This partly explains why he came to New York in the first place. He simply decided it would be "a lark, an adventure, to spend the '90s in New York". That he is still there says a lot about his survival skills. And his *chutzpah*.

Once, when his resources were low, he decided to give his girlfriend, Kisa, a taste of the high life. They dressed up, convinced a Manhattan real estate agent that Wales was the beneficiary of a handsome inheritance, and had a lovely day being

Adrian could be as big as *The Simpsons*," Wales says. "Every day is like a lottery ticket. Something will take off and go boom!" He has a way of speaking in aphorisms, much like the Guru himself.

Guru Adrian is a seven-year-old boy who has lived for more than 300 years without ageing a day, thus gaining the wisdom of a sage while preserving his cherubic appearance. Wales created him in the early '80s. Around this time, Wales also had a brief period as a presenter on an ABC-TV show for teenagers called *Edge of the Wedge*.

Between 1986 and 1989, the Guru made regular appearances in *Countdown* magazine, dispensing his philosophies. *Having fun is half the fun. Celebrate your birthday every day*. There were Guru Adrian T-shirts and stickers; Adrian-ist parties; rumours that the image of Guru Adrian was modelled on ABC newscaster James Dibble. (Both Dibble, who was flattered, and Wales denied the connection. But Wales still refuses to reveal the