



## Interview: Sean Kenney

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Images by Sean Kenney



Sean Kenney is a renowned, award-winning artist and “professional kid” who has used LEGO® pieces to design and create contemporary sculptures for high-profile clients, major corporations, and venues around the globe for over 10 years.

**HispaBrick Magazine:** How did you get started with LEGO bricks? What led you to start building with LEGO bricks professionally?

**Sean Kenney:** I’ve been building and playing with LEGO toys my whole life. I was a total “LEGO maniac” when I was a kid, and LEGO toys were usually the only toys I ever asked for when my birthday would come around each year. I kept building LEGO models all through childhood and even into my teenage and adult years. My models slowly became more involved and elaborate as I got older, and eventually I started building LEGO models professionally. Now it’s my full-time career.

**HBM:** Do you use other media, aside from LEGO, to express your art?

**SK:** I’m self-taught. I was always drawing as a kid and was a published cartoonist by the time I was a teenager. I took a few fine art classes in college but just for fun, and became a graphic designer during the dot-com era but again, just always figuring it out as I went. :)

**HBM:** How do you solve structural issues to allow your work to support so much weight?

**SK:** All of the sculptures are steel-reinforced, fully glued, and then coated with a special UV-protectant lacquer to protect the plastic from the rays of the sun. They’re also bolted down to the ground to protect against weather and vandalism.

**HBM:** What is more complicated: representing facial features or creating complex geometrical shapes?

**SK:** The most challenging thing is to create curved shapes with those hard little plastic rectangles. Making something round and curvy like a shoe or a ball can be tricky, but the most complex thing is to create people's faces. I was commissioned to build sculptural portraits of two brothers and it took an entire summer... We all read so much into facial expressions that you can move one piece and suddenly a face changes from looking depressed to looking bored. I often need to build and re-build a face many times to get the subtlety of the subject's character and their expression just right. Unlike traditional sculpture, you can't just carve out a shape or add to a surface. You have to think ahead as you're building upwards linearly. It's very tricky at first, but once you get the hang of it, it's very rewarding to build something organic.



**HBM:** How much time goes into preparation before you start building?

**SK:** Each sculpture can have a different process... For example, the design of the Hummingbird sculpture in my Nature Connects show just "popped" in my head the minute someone said "hummingbird". I immediately had this vision of something that you could actually walk under, suspended as if by magic. Creating a spindly little nose and paper thin wings built out of chunky LEGO® pieces seemed like a wonderful challenge and, if done right, something that would look amazing. I spent about 4 weeks designing and planning this specific piece; researching images of hummingbirds in nature, choosing the perfect colors and designing the internal steel reinforcements, then about 5+ weeks building it.

My sculptures are not computer-generated. When I'm designing a model, I gather as many photographs or drawings of the subject as I can, and then use graph paper or a computer model to plan out the basic shape and size. After that, I start building a prototype with LEGO pieces, using my plans as a guide. There's a lot of visualization required, and I often have to step back and examine the model from all sides as it's coming together... often taking sections apart and re-building them! Once I have a prototype that I like, I'll rebuild it,

glued, using the prototype as a template.

Depending on the size of the sculpture, it can take anywhere from a few weeks to several months! And if the model is something that needs to be uniquely recognized, I spend a lot more time making sure it's perfect.



Hummingbird by Sean Kenney





Monarch on milkweed by Sean Kenney



Pansy and bee by Sean Kenney



Jeweled Chameleon by Sean Kenney



**HBM:** What is the largest model or sculpture you've done?

**SK:** The largest sculpture I ever created was a mother polar bear together with her cubs. The sculpture weighs 625 pounds, contains over 133,000 pieces, and measures 8 feet long and 5 feet tall. It took about 4 months for a team of 4 people to design and create the sculpture. I was touched to learn about the relationship that a mother Polar Bear has with her cubs; she raises them, teaches them to hunt, and together they have a very visible and strong love. Watching videos of polar bears with their cubs, I was taken by how almost-human they seemed. I wanted to try to capture this aspect of their lives.

**HBM:** What is your favourite sculpture?

**SK:** Perhaps my favorite model is a 50,000 piece city inspired by New York's historic Greenwich Village. [http://www.seankenney.com/portfolio/greenwich\\_village/](http://www.seankenney.com/portfolio/greenwich_village/) It was a true labor of love, assembled part-time over the course of 6 months.



Greenwich Village, New York by Sean Kenney

The model has intricate details everywhere you look, from street vendors and parking meters to historic buildings, high rises, taxicabs, and graffiti. Even the LEGO® people in the city are behaving like the combination of locals and tourists you'll find on any New York City street corner.

The model gained a lot of popularity in 2003. It was placed on display at an international design gallery in Chelsea in 2003, it was displayed at an event honoring Freedom Tower architect Daniel Libeskind, and it has been broadcast in TV and news around the world.

I'm also very partial to a small sculpture I made called "success" <http://www.seankenney.com/portfolio/success/> . It's an editorial statement on our society's overall opinion on what it means to be "successful".... and a literal depiction of myself before I left my former career to pursue creating art with LEGO bricks full-time.



Success by Sean Kenney



Careerbuilder mural by Sean Kenney

**HBM:** How do you see the evolution of the AFOL (Adult Fan of LEGO®) phenomenon over the last couple of years?

**SK:** I am always amazed to see what everyone is making, and every great creation seems to grow from the last. I think that every AFOL creation inspires another AFOL to create something great, and our inspirations all build upon those that have come before us. It would logically follow that AFOL creations will only continue to become more amazing, more inventive, more involved, and more creative! Certainly it seems to be the case if you look at what the AFOL community is creating today compared to what we were creating 20 years ago.

**HBM:** What do you think of the increase in new parts and colours in the LEGO palette over the last couple of years?

**SK:** I think another big boon to all the new creative and inventive MOCs has been an increase in really great new elements. I am a big fan of The New Elementary blog! In my opinion LEGO has been doing a really great job of expanding the set of elements in a way that makes a lot of sense as a platform and a system of shapes. We all lament the era of BURPs and POOPs, and I think LEGO designers have taken to heart the idea that expanding the pallet of elements needs to be done in a way that is flexible and formulaic. I describe this to parents and non-AFOLs as “lots more basic shapes”, and explain that “everyone knows that LEGO makes rectangles; now they also make all kinds of circles and triangles and cylinders and things.”

If you think about it, that's really what's going on: Lots of new ways to connect old things, lots of new variations on existing shapes, etc. It's perfect.

**HBM:** Which part would you like LEGO to produce?

**SK:** I am happy with what they make! I like the “forced limitations” of working with what exists... That's the whole point of trying to build something with LEGO pieces; to try to render something with what you have available. If I had a magic wand that could make new imaginary parts or to recolor parts to whatever I wanted, I don't think building with LEGO would be nearly as much fun.

**HBM:** So far, you are the author of 8 children's books, do you intend to make a book for an adult audience?

**SK:** Yes! My ninth book, “Sean Kenney's Amazing Creations” (working title) is currently in production and scheduled to reach stores in late 2017. It will be a large (375 page) collection of the many varied works I've created over the years, from skyscrapers to bumblebees and everything in between. In the book I talk about how I make my creations and show my process behind-the-scenes. I talk about “why” I make my creations and share decisions I make along the way. (Or funny anecdotes :). It's written on a level that both kids and AFOLs can get something out of it.



Times Square by Sean Kenney



**HBM:** Tell us about your latest exhibition. Will we be able to see it in Europe?

**SK:** My traveling exhibit Nature Connects is all about connecting you with nature by giving you a good excuse to wander a botanical garden, zoo, or arboretum while discovering my sculptures that speak to the interconnected aspect of the natural world. Nature Connects is foremost an educational platform and secondarily a means of artistic expression. I aim to showcase the connections found in nature and the beauty of nature, because just as LEGO® pieces interconnect, everything in nature is interconnected in a delicate balance.

And yes -- Nature Connects is coming to Europe in June 2017! We will be announcing the schedule on [facebook.com/seankenneyart](https://www.facebook.com/seankenneyart) and on [seankenney.com](http://seankenney.com) in the coming months, so I can't spoil the surprise just yet. :)

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