

AMAZING

FIGUREMODELER

Gothic Frights and Sinister Delights

Artist Profile:
Jean-Louis Grinon

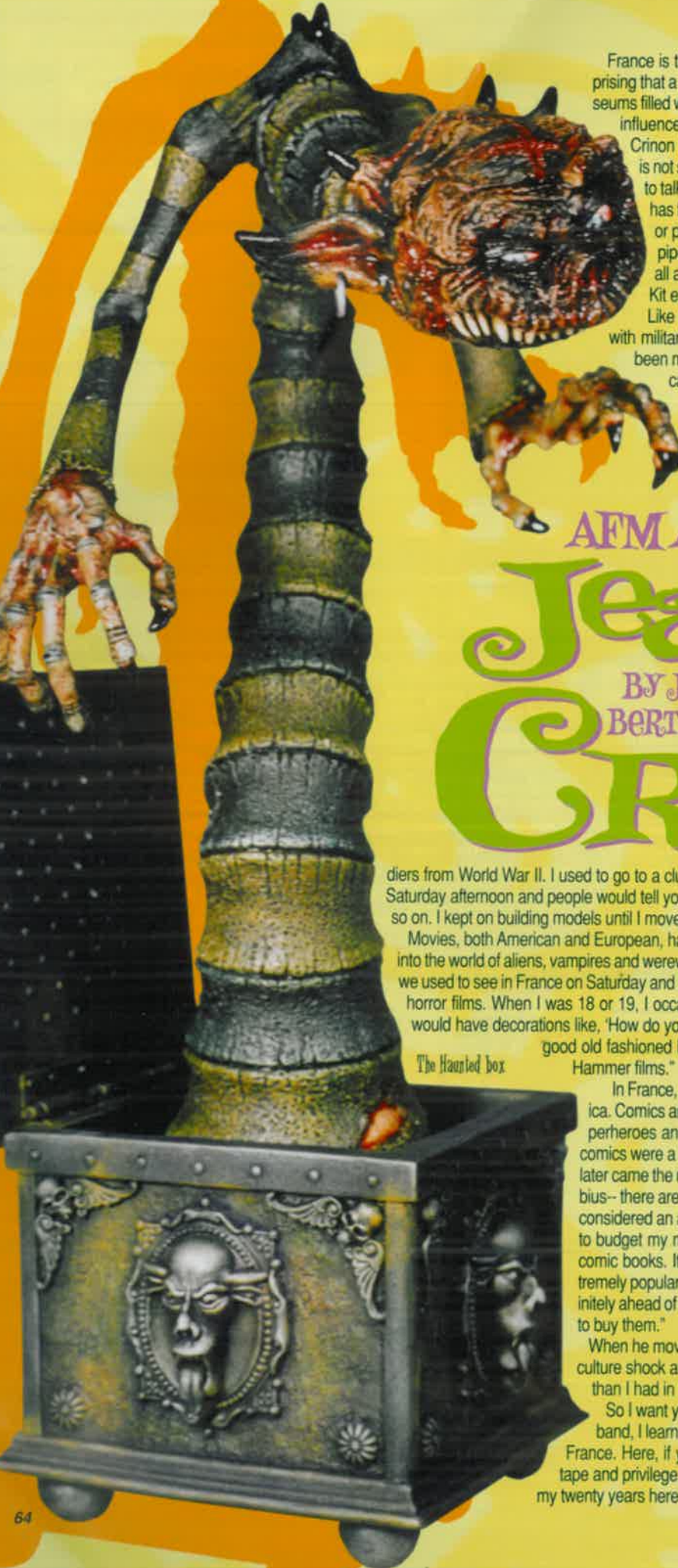
The Phantom's
stage of Horrors

Nosferatu's
Midnight Ride

Barnabas Collins

and More Bloody Goodness from the Grave!





France is the country that gave us Gothic Art and Architecture, so it's not surprising that a creative person who grew up surrounded by fantastic buildings, museums filled with artistic wonders and streets alive with history would absorb those influences and channel them through his own creative output. Jean Louis Crinon is such a person and he is also a man of contradictions. He says he is not so much a socializer, but he is gregarious, warm, charming and funny to talk to. He is a Frenchman who loves America and the opportunities he has found here. He's also a musician, but where you'd think he's a rocker or plays classical music with an orchestra, you'd find that he plays bagpipes with a traditional Scottish band. There are contradictions, but they all add up to make a unique individual who has been providing Garage Kit enthusiasts with his fantastical visions for many years.

Like many of us, Jean Louis' love affair with modeling began in childhood with military figures and vehicles supplied by his beloved Grandmother, "I've been making models since I was a child, as young as I can remember, because my Grandmother used to get me models. That was my activity, you know, toy soldiers in the back yard, digging trenches, making barricades, little forts and whatever. After that I switched to tanks and ships and boats and trains. But most of the time I liked tanks and soldiers like Verlinden did in those years. There was a big fashion going on about Allied and German tanks and German sol-

AFM ARTIST PROFILE:

Jean-Louis BY JIM BERTGES CRINON

diers from World War II. I used to go to a club in Paris and paint figurines. I would take the bus from home on Saturday afternoon and people would tell you all their secrets on painting and how to change the figurines and so on. I kept on building models until I moved to America and that's where everything started."

Movies, both American and European, had their influence on a young Jean Louis as well, giving him a look into the world of aliens, vampires and werewolves. "About the hobby, I have always been fascinated by movies we used to see in France on Saturday and Sunday afternoons; Science Fiction mini-series and once in a while horror films. When I was 18 or 19, I occasionally went to a specialized movie theatre in Paris where they would have decorations like, 'How do you fit in a coffin?' and skeletons hanging all over the place and see

The Haunted box

good old fashioned horror movies like *Night of the Living Dead*, Vampire movies and Hammer films."

In France, comic art was, and is, viewed quite differently than it is here in America. Comics are considered an art form and not relegated just to the realms of superheroes and read by geeks and fan-boys—they are taken seriously. "French comics were a big part of it for me. There was Tin Tin, Asterix, the funny ones, but later came the more intricate and more sophisticated comics like Drüillet and Moebius—there are so many of them I couldn't tell you all the names. It's very rich. It is considered an art; people religiously take their money and buy the albums. I used to budget my money every month to buy some music, some models and some comic books. It's the same with American comic books; over there they are extremely popular; people buy them and collect them, but the French comics are definitely ahead of everything. They're so beautiful and colorful. It's always a pleasure to buy them."

When he moved to the United States, Jean Louis experienced not so much of a culture shock as a cultural revelation. "Actually I had a better possibility for things than I had in my own country. Sorry for you guys in France, but that's the truth."

So I want you guys to know that because it is true. I learned music, I play in a band, I learned to sculpt, and I learned to paint through classes I couldn't get in France. Here, if you want to do something you can, but there it's much more red tape and privilege of the rank. I blossomed much more here than I did in France. In my twenty years here, on and off, I learned so many things that would each take me fif-

teen years in France. For me it's been a big revelation."

More than just the educational opportunities, Jean Louis was exposed to American culture and all its influences. "As far as influences it's been models, movies, comic books and of course music. I've been listening to American music since I was fourteen or fifteen. I have always wanted to keep up with the American culture without ever once suspecting I would be able to move here. Then I got married and moved to America. My wife was American and I moved here, so I was exposed to the real thing. I went to Los Angeles, Disneyland, Hollywood and I had more access to books about art and movies, etc. At the time I was building a collection of VHS movies: horror, Science Fiction and things like that. I was still making my models; at that time I was making chess sets out of lead figurines. There were many Orcs, Ghouls and Elves in pewter in 25mm. I used to do pieces for people who were ordering dragons and other things. At one point I passed the Commission of Arts in San Francisco and they gave me permission to be a Street Artist. So what I would do was to transform existing figures into something else like a Cro Magnon Man using melted plastic and paper to create fur. I won some competitions and some prizes and had my figures displayed in some stores. I sold my figures through the Street Artist program. I'm not saying I was extremely popular, but I remember people always coming to my stand and they would buy a piece or two. I was extremely happy to provide people with a smile and the feeling they wanted to pick up one of my pieces. Eventually people would order private work from me and I would do scenes and special orders for them. That was the last step before I started the big jump into sculpting. I wouldn't consider what I was doing then as sculpting; it was more modification, altering figures, adding clothes, making small scenes, but changing something I had originally bought. It was accepted as that. It was my first try at doing something like that, but I never thought it would become something more."

That something more started on a sleepless night by the flickering light of a TV set in a darkened room at a time when Jean Louis was creating bases for gaming figures. "I started in Garage Kits by making some bases in Durham's which is like plaster. I made some Science Fiction bases for 25mm or 54mm figures and I sold a couple to stores in Berkeley and some stores in the East that specialized in War Games. One night I wasn't sleeping very well and I went down and turned on the TV. At that time it was when HBO and Cinemax were just getting started and they were playing the movie *Killer Clowns from Outer Space*. For some reason I found the movie very

surrealistic and it had an identity of its own. I mean, how else would you think of clowns except as something to laugh at, but the way it was brought out in the movie that they were aliens, there was something extremely amazing about the idea, the concept and of course the creatures themselves were amazing. I just fell in love with this thing and I decided to do the famous baby clown coming out of the toilet seat. I was cautious about my abilities at the time so I decided to do something more on my level, just the toilet seat, a little worm-like body and the head. It came out pretty OK. I also did a small version of the Alien egg too; it was a long time ago."

As most of us

well know, dabbling in Garage Kits and resin can lead to a serious addiction. Jean Louis found this out quickly.

"Then I was exposed to the magazine of Terry Webb and then the work of Thomas Kuntz; it was like some kind of new horizon, it changed my life completely. I communicated with Tom Kuntz and traded some of the things I had done. But, since I really didn't know how to sculpt figures, I started out making bases. For the bases, I used my background with everything I used to see and hang around at home—every monument, museum, old churches, and old buildings. I believe that these things have an identity by themselves: old stones, old ruins. They are like entities, if you look at them in a certain way, they talk, and they have a meaning. I decided to transfer that into my bases. So, I got some 1/6th scale figures by Horizon and Billiken and I wanted to do something to match them. The figures by themselves were great, but it is kind of silly just to leave them alone. They need the kind of scenery they had in the movie. The Monster needs a castle or a lab or a door; the Vampire needs a Cemetery, so I decided to go on and on. I wanted to do bases for all the monsters, but I wanted to do bases that covered all peoples' needs. One base would work for the Wolf Man just as well as Dracula so I was extremely happy to be able to come out with something like this."

Through observation, study and guidance from a very good friend, Jean Louis learned the intricate craft of molding and casting his own pieces. "I learned that a lot on my own. I'd seen some people do it a couple of times, but I had to experiment on my own. You can imagine all the trials and miserable failures. Other people like Tom Kuntz were my savior many times because of his advice, his confidence and the way he approaches these problems himself. He was definitely a big, big help and I'll thank him for the rest of my life for everything he helped me to discover. It wasn't exactly like going to school, but it was the big, main, key information he shared and guided me on it. He showed me how to do vacuum form. He had his own system at the time; it was kind of like the mad lab thing—it was really tricky stuff. All this happened by phone and by books and whatever I could get my hands on. Then I had a great moment in my life attending a show in Los Angeles where I finally met Tom Kuntz and his friends. The show was called The Mad Model Party which I went to several times and had an intense experience there because of what the people did. I was exposed to all these people doing the same thing as I was. The first time I went to the show, I had two bags of bases I had done to show around or trade one or sell one. I believed in trading at that time because I didn't

The Carrer

Little Pumpkin Head

Moon O War

Count Von Krolock



think people would buy my kits. By the time I reached the table where Tom was, they were all gone. You could see there were kits in there, parts were sticking out and walls were sticking out. People knew me because Terry Webb had notice of my kits in the magazine and I never made it to the table; all my kits were sold before I met Tom. That was a growth period where I used to meet people like Sean Nagle, Terry Webb, Mad Labs (Mike Parks), Tom and all of these kinds of people. Randy Bowen was around too at that time-- it was a great pleasure to meet all these people. I met Randy Bowen at his home a couple of times too when he lived in Pleasanton with his charming wife. It is amazing to see what he has accomplished with his own business, creating such wonders."

Not only did the demand for Jean Louis' bases validate his ideas about giving figure kits more elaborate scenery, but the growing trend to include bases with figure kits shows he was thinking in the right direction. "I always consider the base to the figure to be the icing on the cake; they are complementary. And now I can see that I was not wrong; I can see now the figures that are coming out from different companies they all have bases. I'm not saying that I started the trend, I'm just saying that people's notions of it have become more intense because of all the kits coming out with bases. I have always been interested in seeing other people's work whether I see kits on-line or in a magazine; I love to see what they do and how they do it."

Taking the next step, Jean Louis ventured from making only bases to creating his own figures to adorn them. "Doing bases was great, but I wondered, 'Why can't I associate my bases with a figure myself?' That's my next step-- I could take a base and I can take a figure and make a scene of it. But before that I had to try a few things. I did a series of busts, like Tank Girl and creatures from *Star Wars*. I remember trying to do the Tank Girl... I must have restarted that at least three times. I tried to be methodical and study other people's sculptures; read books on sculpting and thought if they can do it, I can try to do it too. I'm not saying that I was trying to create a great masterpiece-- that was

not my intention anyway, but at least I can try to do something myself. That's when I did Necron 99 from *Wizards* and Sil from *Species*. I thought those came out well, but I never give myself any excuse or any quarter. I am extremely rough on my own work. I'm my own worst critic. I can say that there were a few sculptures that flew through my workshop by themselves because of miserable results or flaws or irregularities. But I've reached an age where I'm a bit more reasonable now."

Tiring of recreating creatures from movies, Jean Louis decided it was time to strike out on his own and develop fantasies and creations from his own imagination. "The thing that was a revelation for me was when I did The Haunted Box; it's a demon coming out of the box. At that time, I was starting to do more of my own things because I was getting tired of doing monsters from movies. I ended up doing my own piece and a few other pieces, like Moon of War, and I decided to submit them to the art book *Spectrum* (*Spectrum* is a publication that showcases the work of various artists and is used by the Advertising and Entertainment industries to help select artists for various projects). I thought to myself that this would show my work to some very professional people and all I risk is them saying 'It sucks,' 'It's crap' and 'Blah, blah, blah.' I was just hoping they'd put a picture of my work in their book. So I sent out my pictures and what I never, ever expected was that I won the Gold Award in issue number 8. It was extremely encouraging."

That encouragement led to a series of original pieces that embrace both the whimsical and very dark, disturbing sides of life. It is much like the work of Tim Burton where everything cute harbors a sinister side. "Like everyone else, *Nightmare Before Christmas* made a big impact on me. First of all, I loved the style and architecture on the figures which is a lot like what Thomas Kuntz did drawing on the German expressionist film makers. It's all about how things can be twisted and still be seen as a house or a door. That got me excited. And the figures don't have to be too cute or too evil or too realistic, it can be in between. That's when I began to twist a little bit the usual things to show the darker side of the cute things. It's like meeting people and realizing that they are not what they look like. For example, the kids I have in the scene I did, Hide And Seek, they are supposed to be playing hide and seek, but they're doing it in a creepy way with an Iron Maiden. Or my piece, Cleaver Boy, where he's wearing a Mickey Mouse hat and attracting children with candy in one hand and holds a cleaver behind his back. I think that some people believe that the doll nailed to the board in that piece is a child, but



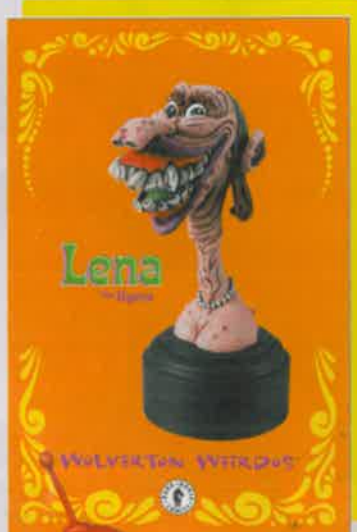
it is a doll...I'm not that crazy. Some of these pieces weren't all that successful because people misinterpreted the message. I don't like to get into the meanings of things, I like more the visual, but there are meanings in some of my pieces. Yes, I am a fan of Mr. Burton; he's opened a whole new universe and it's one I'm sticking to because it allows me to do different things on the level of sculptures. I don't have to sculpt like people out there who can sculpt wonders; they can do Batman like the Shiflett Brothers; my gosh, their work should be in a museum. On my little level of sculpting I can do a figure, I can do a theme and I can tell a story. If I don't tell a story I do a visual explanation of what I'm trying to express. My approach to it is that I don't think of myself as a super talented person, but I'll do what I can do and things that I can't do I won't pretend to do it, because I will only limit myself. I'm more the child's side of it."

Jean Louis has a special affection for his characters and their stories. That affection comes out when he explains the back story of a certain disheveled, discarded toy called Zombird. "Zombird has a story too; it has been rejected as a toy, he has been thrown around the way children do with their toys which is how his legs were broken and replaced with metal. He feeds on the energy of the teddy bear on the ground that is left over from children who have just abandoned him too. He needs love too, but since he doesn't get it from the children directly he gets what's left over from the toys on the ground. That's why Zombird is a zombie bird; it's a toy discarded by children so it goes out at night and sucks on the energy of toys that children threw away. Have you ever been stuck in a traffic jam and by the side of the road you see a toy that looks like it's fallen out of a car? It makes me sad because as a child I loved my teddy bears."

Although it may seem that Jean Louis has been away from the Garage Kit scene for some time and is recently making a comeback, he's actually been active all along. His website has been open and selling kits and people who wanted to find his work could seek him out. He did have to return to France for a few years due to family matters, but he is now in the United States and building his life in Idaho where he works as a Certified Nurses Assistant. "I moved to Idaho about six years ago and I was working toward buying a house here and I've finally reached the point to where I can get

back to what I was doing. Actually I never really stopped; I have a web site where I can be found. People thought I was out because I didn't appear in magazines and I haven't been to many shows. I've been doing my kits and my fans who contact me around Halloween or Christmas to get a kit or two. I was never really off—I still did my stuff. The thing is that now I'm more settled so I can really go back to it and do new things and finally make molds of things I sculpted five or six years ago that never came out because they were on the bench."

Also, some of his older kits are being refurbished and reissued. "My things have always been available, but as I moved I improved some of them and retooled the molds. I just re-did the Killer Clown to straighten him up a bit. I've reissued some of the bases, too. I just released Cemetery II and I want to reissue Cemetery III, but I'm working on a new base right now that will be ready in a few months. So, I'm still doing bases and I will continue with my little creatures as well. The Navigator is out as a bust. I used to have an entire body of it with the back of the body and the rear legs, but I just didn't see any interest in redoing the



Lena
for Dark
Horse Comics



Diabolo

Lucie

The Chicken
Rider



Green Mutant

entire creature because the face was the most interesting part. I did a special base where he can hold on. Most of my kits are fully reissued and a few bases are not, but I'll get to them." To achieve a higher level of realism, Jean Louis bases are carved in plaster. Large pieces of plaster are cast and details are carved out. "I can carve wood as well as plaster, but I have more issues in working with Sculpey. The indirect sculpting with Sculpey causes me more problems, but I would not carve a figure out of plaster. Plaster is magic because it has the qualities of real stone; it can be carved, crumbled and textured. You can do a construction set from it. You can make it talk with texturing. That's very important to me, when I go to the museum and look at paintings I look for the texture. For some things, like roots, I might use Sculpey on a base, but mostly it's plaster."

Much of Jean Louis' figure work is done in a smaller scale for both practical and nostalgic reasons. "I like working in a smaller scale because when I was younger I built a lot of 54mm kits and there was so much detail happening in a small space. If I was making figures in a larger scale, the whole kit would end up being three feet by four feet. I keep the figures smaller because I want to create a scene with them. To do a big face would be fun if it was my own design, but to do a creature from a movie would require a lot of skill that I don't really have. I'd rather admire someone else's work rather than try to do something that has already been done. People are doing amazing work, particularly the Chiodo Brothers and their off the hook creations; they make movies and they have an amazing level of creativity. Mr. Yagher too, makes kits that we have all dreamed about, Dr. Jekyll and Curse of the Werewolf with Oliver Reed. I have to tell you that when I went back to France for family reasons, I had those kits with me in my bag on the airplane, I was so eager to get to them. There are people out there doing incredible work and I would rather stay with my own ideas I'm more happy that way."

Jean Louis has been in the Garage Kit business for many years and has seen it change over that period of time, but what he has seen are mostly positive changes. "When the Garage Kit industry began it was like America with the pioneers, they did the best they could with what was available, but like America now, the industry has evolved. There have been improvements in techniques, tools, materials and an evolution in support. More people know about it and there are more ways for people to share their knowledge and display their work. There has been a big change and many of the wonderful creatures from the great old movies have been done many times, so people are doing more original designs. It is exciting to see people doing all these new things. I'm amazed."

One of the great things about living in America for Jean Louis was the ability to pursue a number of diverse interests including music. "The opportunities in America have been extremely rich for me. I used to scratch on the guitar, I say scratch because you know five notes and you think you are Neil Young. I never really played music or read music, for me it was like witchcraft. I moved to Idaho and met someone who was playing bagpipes in a local band. I was fascinated by that and found people I could talk to about it. I bought a

booklet and took some classes and I actually learned music for it. My attraction to it made me learn the music. Now I've been playing in the band for four years. It's a traditional band with kilts and the entire uniform—we play Scottish. It's funny, I lived in Glasgow, Scotland for two years when I went to hear military bands I loved the sound of bagpipes, but I never imagined I'd be playing them. I went as far as buying some pipes for forty dollars, but they wouldn't play, so I hung them on the wall. But here the opportunity was presented to me and I was able to learn and play. Now I'm amazed at people's reaction to it."

Jean Louis has more recently been kept busy with sculpting for comic book creators whose character creations are very much suited to his style. From the pages of artist Ted Naifeh's Gloom Cookie, Jean Louis created a Lex statuette. For Roman Dirge and Monkey Fun toys, he created Betrayal, a sad little fellow depicting heartbreak and scorn. Carl Cthulhu is a sort of baby Lovecraftian creature who is cuddly and repulsive at the same time. And in a marriage made in cartoon heaven, Dark Horse Comics and Jean Louis created a line of Wolverine Weirdos, based on the outrageously strange art of Basil Wolverton.

For Jean Louis, the sculpting work has never been about money, like his music it's something he loves doing. "It's a hobby; I don't consider it a business. I like to play with mud; I don't consider myself a sculptor. I just like to try something and sometimes it comes out OK and sometimes it doesn't. If people are receptive to it that's great and I can spend money on my hobby, buying tools and supplies and I'm happy like that. I want people to know that when they contact me to buy my kits I always regarded it as a privilege and an intense reward. I want them to know that when I was buying kits it was my pocket money I had saved and it was a very childlike moment for me buying kits of a monster. Everybody who has been buying kits from me all these years had a very dear place in my heart because they responded to something I created with my own hands. They had to work hours to earn that money. I appreciate everyone who has supported me in my hobby and I've never had issues with anyone that weren't quickly resolved. It's good to put a few dollars in your pocket, but that's not what it's all about for me."

In closing Jean Louis would like to take a moment to personally thank: Joannie, for her input, her patience, support and the zillions cups of coffee she's provided! All the modelers who have been encouraging and supportive of my work. Terry Webb, David Fisher and AFM magazine for the impressive coverage of the garage kit industry for more than... 20 years?... already? Thomas Kuntz, because he has always been such an inspiration and such a talented artist, as well as his favorite work of art, Blake. Anthony Quarm, for his tremendous patience, understanding and help with creating my website, as well as his wife and children. Jim Bertges, who had to put up with my struggling English and my accent to conduct this interview! Dan Wado, from Slave Labor comics; Dark Horse comics; Terry Smith, mad model maker, and drummer from Oregon. Pansee, my favorite Finn witch Banshee, and finally, my set of Highlands bagpipes, which always bring joyful tears to my eyes; I transcend my soul, while I play them.

-Jean-Louis Crinon
www.theexo.com/crinon/



Clearer Boy



Kranick



Empathy



The Cemetery Base