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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School for American Crafts

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts,

Glass

Hopeless Optimism

By Shane Caryl

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Signature Page

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Proposal

Being influenced by the toy art scene that exploded in Japan, my work is an insight to the American adult through the playful and satirical antics of my creations. Through making a series of sculptures I am interested in the visual language that is needed to create an implied narrative, which is required for the metaphor to come across. These satirical situations I have created are influenced by Anime, Comic Books, Merry Melodies Cartoons and Japanese Manga and the way they are made is inspired by the works found in the Little Boy exhibition as well as the Beautiful Losers exhibition. The figures are made of glass to elevate the object as well as establish a pathos for the figures, with the intent of raising the work from a lowbrow standing to a highbrow one. The scenarios are made in such a way that resembles prop making with a “Backyard Builder” or a “Do It Yourself” approach with the intention of making the work relatable to the viewer and to fulfill a sense of resolution to the scenario.

Abstract

After creating this work, I found that my proposal was still too broad and it wasn't until completion that I had realized that my work had become more focused. The work is still about creating a narrative while using visual language, and it is still being influenced by the sources stated above. Just that now it focuses on the scenario created as being about how one deals with their hardships that have occurred, or are occurring, in their life. All the figures have placed themselves in dangerous or precarious situations and these situations seem to be reminiscent of scenes found in Merry Melodies cartoons, scenes I like to think of as classic cartoon tropes. And because of these classic cartoon tropes it allows the viewer to draw upon memories associated with their childhood and allow them to re-examine them in a new context of time and space,

which in turn allows the viewer to feel empathy for the figure. It is upon this understanding that I started to realize that these sculptures are about me comparing highly fictitious adaptations of conflict with very real and personal issues I have encountered in my life. They are about anxiety and fear of failure, a desire to run and try and escape from the potentially scary reality of having to grow up and take on more responsibilities. In the same way, these sculptures are the way in which I tend to cope with my anxieties. Through the construction and consideration of how these sculptures come together allows my mind to sort out and start to understand my problems so I can come to terms with them and deal with each worry and fear appropriately.

Discussion of Sources and Research

As I am growing as an artist I have been finding that I am attracted to the underground movements of art and pop culture which are weaved into the fabric of society. An appropriate term for this underground interest would be subculture. This is a term that has been appearing in the art world for a while now and many people accept its existence and use, but when asked to define it I found that is not as easy as I thought it would be. Subculture is a strange phenomenon where rebellious attitudes and chaos and disorder reign. As stated by Dick Hebdige in his book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, “The word ‘subculture’ is loaded down with mystery. It suggests secrecy, masonic oaths, an Underworld “(4). It is these unknowing and alluring traits of the underground scene that attracts the rebellious youth, turned adult, which gravitates me to its existence. I have always had my attention pulled towards the strange and uncommon things because I felt that I could gain a level of status amongst my peers. And if no one understood and/or approved then the more I would immerse myself. Hence why much of my work today is influenced by the Japanese Pop Culture, because growing up in America it was, and to some degree still is, a subcultural presence which has led me to my interests in the



Powel, Tom. "Eco Eco Rangers Earth Force." *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, Takashi Murakami/ Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd., Tom Powel Imaging, 2005, www.asianart.com/exhibitions/littleboy/12.html

contemporary art world upon the discovery of the Little Boy show which was curated by Takashi Murakami. This exhibition contained many things that I have treasured from my childhood, but it wasn't until finding his exhibition book and reading the essays that I started to truly gain a deeper understanding of who I am and what my work is about. Growing up watching Voltron, Dragon Ball Z, Akira and Godzilla I had been always attracted to the science fiction and fantasy aspects that these television shows and movies provided. At an early age, I loved to let my imagination wander into worlds of improbabilities and false realities of youthful thinking, and then as I grew older and watched the same things again I started to understand that some of these shows and movies were perhaps talking about real and relatable events. But I still hadn't



Voltron Defenders of the Universe, *Into Another World*, Susan Leigh Noble, April 25, 2015,

susanleighnoble.wordpress.com/2015/04/25/v-is-for-voltron-defender-of-the-universe-atozchallenge/



Toriyama, Akira. Dragon Ball Z,

Shonen Jump Manga, Vol. 8, 2003

fully understood what these things were, and perhaps I still don't, until I came across the Little Boy exhibition book. It was in here that I finally realized that many of the things that I was being influenced by since grade school were in fact an echo of the bombs "Little Boy" and "Fat Man" hitting Japan in 1945. In Takashi Murakami's essay *Earth in My Window*, he thoroughly explains the relationship between the trauma resulting from those two bombs and the Japanese Pop Culture that has engulfed their nation. Alongside this information, he discusses the political and social temperatures that have been plaguing Japan since it became a nation-state as result of World War II (Murakami



Akira Japanese Movie Poster, TMS

Entertainment, Toho. 1988



A scene from Godzilla (1954), Directed
by Honda Ishirô, Copyright Toho Pictures

100-101, 144-108). In this essay, Murakami does a fairly good job at remaining unbiased, but I came away from it feeling guilty for what my nation had done to theirs. And this led to a feeling of uncertainty over my reference materials and how that I as an American artist can sit here and make work using a body of popular culture that has been derived from a tragic event, caused by the U.S., that crippled a nation? The baggage became heavy after I read this and it took me awhile to realize that this was perhaps a good thing and it forced me to see things as they are and not as what I want them to be. Tragedy of the United States dropping two atomic bombs on Japan crippled their nation and the making of all the things I have been attracted to from their culture is a form of coping for them. The production of movies, manga, anime and art was a way to help Japan heal and move forward from the tragedy.

With the understanding of why I am attracted to the Japanese popular culture I now must move towards understanding my interests in the current subcultural scene happening over the last decade and a half here in the United States. Upon entering my second attempt at

an undergraduate career back in 2004, I had accidentally stumbled upon a magazine that had changed the way about how I make. This magazine was Juxtapoz, a art and culture magazine as it titles itself, but to me it was an answer to a desire that I had had for the better part of my youth. It was a magazine that takes everything that wasn't mainstream and brought it to the masses. A place where graffiti street writers turned into contemporary gallery artists. It was here that I was



introduced to the Japanese toy art world as well as the works of many east coast.

Juxtapoz Art & Culture Magazine. July/August, High Speed Productions Inc., 2004.

and west coast painters and sculptors

dealing with making “lowbrow” art and getting it out to the masses. This is what I wanted to see, to read and everything that I aspired to be as an artist. It was within this magazine that I found a whole new world of artists that were young and creating an influence on the contemporary art scene. Artists like Jeff Soto, Camille Rose Garcia, Robert Williams, Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami. The discovery of this work had started to penetrate the way I approached and thought about making and once I had discovered it I started to see the things I was finding within those pages start to seep into my everyday world. Seeing images of Geoff McFetridge in advertisements and the imagery of one of my favorite street



McFetridge, Geoff. Dream with Oreo. Bēhance. Jorge Callega. Published November 14, 2016.

<http://www.behance.net/gallery/45243713/Dream-with-Oreo-by-Geoff-McFetridge>

artists, Shepard Fairey, appearing in various sources, including his own clothing line, told me that this was something real and I stuck with it.

Eventually I discovered the kind of origin story for this new movement. Much like Murakami's Little Boy exhibition that covered a wide range of collected visual media that explained a generation there was a similar show here in America called Beautiful Losers. This show was a group exhibition of many artists who have influenced this subcultural movement in the contemporary art scene. Many of these young artists at the time were just teenage skaters and graffiti artists who were creating visual work in response to the thing that they were seeing in



Fairey, Shepard. Obey Advertisement,

Propaganda Clothing. December 30

2013. [thyunveiling.wordpress.com/2013/12/](http://thyunveiling.wordpress.com/2013/12/30/obey-propaganda-clothing/)

30/obey-propaganda-clothing/

their everyday lives. In the essay *The Painters of Contemporary Life* by Thom Collins, currently the executive director and president of the Barnes Foundation, compares the artists found within this show to the works of Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, a poet, often wrote of the work being done within the French impressionism movement as a sort of critic. Baudelaire had written about what it means to be a modernist painter during this time, stating that to be successful in this field one had to be a Flâneur, which

loosely translates to mean a wanderer. What he

means by this is that to have ones' work make a

connection to their time and place the artist must be

out and experiencing the world they are living. They

need to go out onto the streets and see the people and

places to make relevant and relatable work for their place in time. And that is the connection that

Thom Collins is making by comparing the artist found in the *Beautiful Losers* show and

Baudelaire (Collins 66-67). These young artists were making work that was derived purely in

response to what they were seeing on the streets and experiencing in there day to day lives, and

therefore it was inevitable that they would break into the contemporary art scene the way that

they did. Looking at both shows, *Little Boy* and *Beautiful Losers*, I have gained a better

understanding of my influences and can now start to look a little deeper into this body of work.



Haley, Dylan. Beautiful Losers Billboard. Type Goes Here ©. agnès b. Los Angeles. typegoeshere.com/bl.html

Critical Analysis

Starting with *Icarus Seeks Alternate Modes of Transportation*, we see a large headed glass figure with a helmet and goggles sitting in a beat-up mining cart. This cart is perched upon a narrow and



Icarus Seeks Alternate Modes of Transportation. Blown Glass and Mixed Media. 2017.

cobbled together wooden ramp, made with a daringly steep decline and a small incline at the end of it, which leads your eye an equally beat up looking hoop set a few feet away, set as an obvious challenge for him. Looking upon this scene we can see immediately how ridiculous the whole set up is. In this situation, Icarus finds himself literally jumping through hoops to get towards whatever end goal he has deal with. By taking this highly relatable phrase and placing it within a visual context adds a layer with which the viewer can relate with what Icarus is facing, and by adding in the cute, pop culture influenced, glass figure atop this rickety ramp helps to make a connection between the viewer and their experiences as well as creating a sense of empathy for the figure.

Moving onto *David Struggles with Goliath*, I have created a similar situation. David finds himself in a sort of slingshot built out of wood and has equipped himself with a propeller hat, and he has readied himself to either be thrown over or into a brick wall that sits before him in a daunting manner. Again, the figure is made of glass and must deal with an obstacle that has crossed his path. In David's case, he has come to hit a wall and is currently trying to create a situation in which he can overcome or surpass the obstacle. His solution was to hobble together some wood



David Struggles with Goliath. Blown Glass and Mixed Media

2017

and rubber to create a comical, yet functional, slingshot. This scenario is based off a phrase that almost everyone has heard and can relate to, "I have hit a wall...". We all know what this phrase means and how it feels when we encounter it, we also know that it usually means that we need to come up with some sort of solution to get past this obstacle. For David, his solution of constructing this slingshot gives him an opportunity to solve his problem, but even with this tool it still looks like a hopeless task. The idea here was to show that just because you have created a solution that solution may not always be the best one, or in some

cases, one that will even work. When looking at this scene the easiest solution would be to go around the wall, for it is substantial in height but it is relatively narrow and could be easily traversed around rather than over. Unfortunately for David, he has become more focused on trying to get over or through the wall that he has perhaps overlooked the easiest option. This is a concept that I think we have all encountered at one time or another, and despite the cartoonish nature in which this scenario is displayed there is a level of relatability here which I feel allows the viewer to engage the piece.

The last piece is *Prometheus Ponders Higher Education*. In this scenario, Prometheus stands on a wooden “X” made of planking with a heaping pile of diplomas at his feet. He is staring at this pile of diplomas that have a sign reading “Take One” accompanying them in what seems to be a contemplative state. Prometheus himself is wearing a graduation cap and seems to be missing his gown so he stands alone on this platform only wearing his underwear, shoes and cap. While he stands there alone in contemplation, high above him hangs a rather large and ominous anvil suspended precariously above the fragile figure by a ragged piece of rope. Once again, we see



Prometheus Ponders Higher Education. Blown
Glass and Mixed Media. 2017



Prometheus Ponders Higher Education Detail

the figure being made of glass and the scene in which he is placed in is one that most will recognize from some sort cartoon trope. With this scenario the figure, Prometheus, is faced with the choice of either pursuing

higher education or not. In his case, much like our own, there are harsh realities that come along with whatever choice he makes. It seems like no matter what choice Prometheus makes there is the chance that the anvil will fall on him. It is here where this piece varies slightly from the others. Prometheus's situation is not one referencing a phrase but rather a choice that every human must make. The choice we make here is one that will always come with consequences. If we choose to pursue a higher education then he must deal with the over inflated prices of tuition and the inevitable debt and interest that accompanies today's student loans. Or, if we choose not to pursue a higher education then he is left to face a life full of hard work and low pay alongside a difficult struggle up to a position where life can reach a more comfortable norm. With all this careful contemplation going on and the looming weight hanging over Prometheus, he is also being taunted by the sign and pile of diplomas. This seemingly harmless pile of paper implies the careless, and in some cases, effortless, ways in which one can obtain a degree of higher education from any college these days. It seems that if you have a pulse and can obtain a loan then you are

pretty much guaranteed a degree. This perhaps is not one hundred percent true, but this piece is about my frustration with the higher education system.

Looking at this body of work I see that the pieces are cohesive and work well together within the parameters that I have set. All the figures are made of glass and share a certain pop culture cuteness that I relate to kawaii, a type of style in Japan that means to be cute and/or tiny. The scenarios have all been constructed using found wood and various forms of prop making that help tie all the pieces together cohesively and helps support the almost hopeless nature of their predicaments as well as adding to the “back-yard builder” approach which allows for the viewer to feel as though they might have created something similar if they faced the same situation. The fact that the figures are made of glass and are perhaps the smallest of all the objects being used in each scene does several things for me here. One, it helps lend a sense of fragility to the viewer which adds to the empathy and tenuous nature of the situation. We all understand how fragile glass is and having the figures made from this precious material so it is easy to establish an understanding that the figures, much like us as people, are fragile and must use caution when placing ourselves into potentially dangerous situations. Two, the limited use of glass in these works is meant to break away from the current standards that seem to be set in the contemporary glass world. In this established world, it is my opinion that the work is starting to become a little stale for the artist. When going to a contemporary glass gallery I find that much of the work seems to be derived from someone, or something else, from our narrow field. What I mean by this is that glass world is still a very “glassy” world. People want to see big and shiny things, and there is nothing wrong with that, and not to say that there aren’t people out there starting to do things to glass that hasn’t been done before, what I am concerned about is how incestuous the glass world is. It seems glass people are only really concerned about what other glass people are

doing, and it is very rare for to find an individual who is making work trying to bridge the gap between the contemporary glass art world and the broader contemporary art world. This is what I am attempting to do here with this work. I am trying to take glass as a medium and use it to its strengths and make work that can identify with both the contemporary glass art world and the contemporary art world.

This leads me to where I feel this body of work fits within these two worlds and I would have to say that straddles the two worlds, or perhaps it is better to say that shares aspects from the two. Either way I think that this body of work does reside in a subcultural scene that has been developing over the last decade or two. This scene is a combination of the work scene in the *Little Boy* show along with the *Beautiful Losers* show, as well as a lesser known group specialized to the glass world, the pipe makers. The contemporary art and artists from the shows have already been discussed, but the pipe makers have not. Until recently, the pipe makers were shunned for their choice of using glass to make illegal paraphernalia much like most of the artists from the *Beautiful Losers* being looked down upon for their methods of making. It is the rebellious nature and subject matter that attracts me to both scenes and has influenced my way of working. I decided not to listen to all the strict rules that seemed to be passed around the modern American glass studio, rather to use any and everything and anything to make my work. Instead of the trial and error of how to get even tones of color on my blown forms, I used spray paint on the inside of the form. Instead of trouble shooting firing enamels onto hollow vessels, I used cold enamel paints found in my local hobby store to paint my figures faces. Both methods have earned me the title of “genius” and “amateur” from people I have told this too. But this doesn’t matter and is the problem that I am seeing in the glass world. Everyone seems to be concerned with the right or wrong way to make something and readily discredits a different way of thinking or making

until someone proves that it works. We should not be focused on the small picture, but rather the larger one. Does this decision to use a different way of making, make the piece better or worse? If the answer is yes it makes the piece better then who cares how it was made. The work being discussed here isn't about perfecting specific glass techniques to make interesting objects, it is about making these objects effectively to get a point across. Some may criticize that my techniques won't last over time and work will start to fade and fall apart. That may be true but I don't care. My job as an artist is to make the work and defend its meaning and relevance. If I can do that well enough, then it will be someone else's job to make sure that the work will stay together. But I digress, the point that I am trying to make here is that my choice to use spray paint and hobby shop enamels on my glass are a nod to what both subcultures are based in. Graffiti artists of the eighties and nineties used the spray can to write and draw on private property. Many people saw this as nothing more than a crime, but these acts of vandalism eventually made its way into the acceptable realm of contemporary art, and now many of the graffiti artists from that time now have lucrative careers that they earned because of their passion for what they were doing. Same sort of situation for the glass pipe makers. A couple of decades ago if you were a pipe maker in the glass world no one would take you seriously as an artist, despite this, many artist stuck with their craft and helped push what they were doing to the point that the contemporary glass art world can no longer ignore their skill. Because of their diligence, colleges are bringing in pipe makers to do demos and teach the techniques to new students entering the field, which in turn is opening a new chapter of opportunities for the next generation of glass artists. It is the rebellious nature of these two groups of individuals as well as the popular culture that I witnessed throughout my childhood and found within the *Little Boy* show that have influenced my way thinking and making in this body of work. And it is because of these things that I will continue to make.

Conclusion

The figures I have made all face a challenge, and each challenge is different and therefore a different solution is needed. Each solution that the figures have made for themselves just screams of failure if one were to go ahead and try to push the cart down the ramp or launch the figure at the wall, but I found that almost every viewer always asks the same question, “will it work?”. This I think is because of how cute the figure is and how these situations reference popular cartoon tropes that were highly evident throughout the 80s and 90s. These daring activities have never failed to amuse us and therefore when seeing it set up we want to believe that it can be done. Because of how familiar this is we tend to associate the situation with memories of our past and this creates a sort of empathy towards the figure. It is with this empathy that I try to draw in the viewer and it is my hope that the scenes I am setting up will allow the viewer to find something from their lives that they can relate to by drawing upon their own personal experiences. After showing this work and seeing the reactions that people have to them I feel that I have been overall successful in this goal, perhaps not everyone liked the work but they all knew the references I was making to the Merry Melodies cartoons. Which then brings me to this conclusion, that this body of work is by no means perfect nor is it finished. It is a start to a better understanding of what my interests are as both a person and as an artist, and an exploration into new and different ways of making while trying to find my place within the contemporary art world. I no longer see myself as a glass artist but rather an artist who uses glass and it is from here where my real work begins.

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