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War games

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

War Games

By

Trevor Fruchey

2012

Submitted By Trevor Eugene Fruchey

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Outline

I. Introduction.

1. Abstract-

My goal is to create a playful body of work that will investigate thoughts and memories of the past. Purity, childhood, and innocence will be some of the concepts that I will be exploring and investigating. I will be analyzing these thoughts, feelings, and memories.

2. Statement of Basic Premise of thesis-

I plan to have a dichotomy of youthful playfulness, innocence, reawakening of youth, versus maturity, loss of innocence, corruption, and the desire to return to this innocence but not being able to.

3. Statement of goals and objectives of the thesis-

Through exploration and demonstration of technical mastery of material, I plan to create a body of work through the process of kiln casting. Through selectively choosing different objects (mostly childhood toys) that either I have had a connection with or that I have an affinity for, I plan to construct a grouping of objects that will stimulate thoughts and ideas that will go along with the concepts and topics I am concentrating

on. Through reinvestigation of these toys of childhood I will closer examine their relationship to the previously described topics. I will inspect and scrutinize the initial purity and innocence that these objects have with closer examination of their social and politically charged implications.

II. Main Section.

1. Critical discussion of the work in relation to Introduction
 - A. How the work stayed with and evolved from the original topic
 - B. Toys youthful innocence vs. adult meaning or representation
 - C. Importance of object choice
 - D. Psychology and importance of play
 - E. Artistic influences

III. Conclusion.

1. Critical evaluation of results of thesis investigation in relation to the issues that I have chosen to investigate.
2. Critical discussion of the relative success and failure of the thesis work.

IV. Body of Work.

1. Listing of pieces created for the thesis exhibition:
 - A. Name of work
 - B. Materials used
 - C. Dimensions

2. Color imagery of the work

V. **Bibliography.**

I. Abstract

I plan on creating a playful body of work, which will investigate thoughts and memories of the past. Purity, childhood, and innocence will be some of the things that I consider and explore in this body of work. I will try to reawake or evoke memories of the past, but also explore ideas of lost memories and the loss of innocence that everyone goes through as they grow into adulthood. I plan to have a dichotomy of playfulness, youthful innocence, reawakening of youth, versus maturity, loss of innocence and youth, and the desire to revisit ones youth.

Through exploration and demonstration of technical mastery of material, I plan to create a body of work through the process of kiln casting. Through selectively choosing different objects (mostly childhood toys) that either I have had a connection with or have an affinity for, I plan to construct a grouping of objects that will stimulate thoughts and ideas that will go along with the concepts and topics I am concentrating on. Through reinvestigation of these toys of childhood I will closer examine their relationship to the previously described topics. I will inspect and scrutinize the initial purity and innocence that these objects have with closer examination of their social and politically charged implications.

“Play is the highest form of research.” – Albert Einstein

Childhood memories, innocence, purity, and playfulness are many of the thoughts that sparked this thesis exploration. Taking what interested me in these ideas and how that affects my life now as an adult is really what this body of work is all about. The evolutions from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to culpability are truly where I started with this work. Somewhere along the way the work expanded to deal with not only these initial thoughts, but to also encompass more. By choosing objects such as toy soldiers and toy weapons, this body of work became a commentary not only on play but on what play can represent: loss of childhood innocence, and the act or idea of war itself.

The original intentions of this thesis exploration entitled "War Games", the evolution, explanation of these ideas and their evaluation are what will be assessed in the following. This body of work is about memories, fragility, life, death, about our perceptions of the pieces presented, and what ideas the above-mentioned objects symbolize. I intentionally chose objects that I had an affinity, or affection for, but also had a memory or deeper emotional tie. These objects are not only toys, but also toys with hints or obvious relations to larger ideas or more mature subject matter.

"War Games" is a grouping, or installation of objects that have playful outer appearance and connotation. Yet upon closer examination and inspection, there is a much more serious and possibly sinister undertone to what these objects represent. To illustrate the thoughts and ideas of this body of work I have used many childhood toys and games that either already have or have been subtly changed to have, or represent a more serious idea or notion.

To establish the ideas behind this grouping of works and my investigation, I have started with many toys and games that depict or represent strategy, competition, and possible representations of conflict. I started the process by selecting childhood toys that either I played with or had an affinity for, when I was young. After selecting a large group of objects I then narrowed them down to the strongest pieces that best fit this duality of childhood playfulness and innocence, yet also had or possessed a bit of ominousness (either in form or being representations of things that have a more devious nature.) This duality became a very important concept for the evolution of this body of work.

The process of glass casting used, for making these pieces was the lost wax method. To create these pieces the process is fairly labor intensive and time consuming. After the objects are selected they are then rubber molded, translated into wax, and manipulated; an investment mold of plaster silica is made around the wax, essentially suspending the wax in a solid block of investment. After this the wax is melted out, the volume is calculated, and they are put into a kiln and taken to a temperature between 1600 and 1650 degrees Fahrenheit. The void left by the wax is now filled with molten glass, and is then slowly cooled. Finally the

pieces are de-molded, ground, and polished into their final presentation. In all, there are six pieces in this show that comprised of multiple cast glass objects. Of the pieces for this show there is a recurring use of the game board to bring in the ideas of playfulness, strategy, and tactics.

Glass casting has a very technical learning curve. This technical side while important was not the focus of this work. I wanted to prove technical mastery of material, yet the technical side or the logistics of how to make the work is more for me and not that important to the viewer. One of my favorite quotes about the technical aspects of making artwork was said by from Swedish glass caster Bertil Vallien (during museum lecture) “Skill can get in the way of art.” The important aspects of the show are the objects and forms presented, as well as the material choices. The ability for light to become part of a piece of glass sculpture is something that I have always found to be fascinating. This ability to use light as a sculpting material is very unique. The use of light is important to this work because it brings up ghostly qualities in the glass and enhances the memory like aspect of the glass.

This show is comprised of about five different objects made with primarily two atypical materials. These objects consist of the plastic little green army men, toy guns, hand grenades, toy army tanks, and an oversized game of jacks. Although there are six displays in this showing, each piece is comprised of 4 to 90 components. I have carefully limited my material choices to just glass and steel. Glass is by far the most important and crucial material that is used for these pieces. By using some of the natural and inherent properties of glass I am able to

further push the cast glass objects past their physical presence. By doing so, the glass is made into a metaphor and pushes the concepts of this show. By exploiting and using some inherent characteristics of glass, such as transparency, translucency, color, and most importantly fragility I am able to push what these “toys” are. This allows the viewer to examine what toys represent (both in a child’s imagination and in the world) and any implications this could have.

I intentionally chose to create objects that could take completely different meanings from their original form to their translation of medium and alteration of shape. Glass casted toys still retain much of their innocent, playful, youthful and nostalgic qualities of the original toys and games. They are also able to take on a deeper connotation and representation of meaning. This begs the viewer to take a closer look and think about the connotations and deeper or hidden meanings in their current state. The first items of focus for several pieces are toy soldiers, or the little green army men. These toy army men are something that many can relate to and remember from childhood. Even though the objects are familiar they are taken out of their original context on many levels. First they are much larger than the normal green plastic molded toys. Just by transferring them into glass I have given them a higher sense of worth, or value. Originally they are made of green plastic that is considered to be a cheap material. The simple act of changing the material from plastic to glass bestowed upon them a preciousness, and higher sense of value, just by nature of material. I have three pieces that are comprised of these glorified “little green army men.” The toy army man is a perfect dichotomy between playfulness and the more serious thoughts of war that they are

representations of. The viewer is not only forced to consider the material choices but also the value of societal implications. The three pieces that use the army men are all variations of a similar theme.

By selecting a familiar toy from my childhood like the plastic little green army man I am invoking memories. I am trying to evoke a sense of nostalgia in the first piece entitled “Playing Field” measuring 24” X 24” X 7” tall. I have twenty-four army men in six different poses all cast in a translucent clear glass, giving them a ghostly presence. These translucent soldiers are depicted in six of the stock poses from a pack of plastic army men; bazooka, mortar, radio, binoculars, bayonet, and minesweeper. These oversized glass soldiers are placed on an enlarged section of a chessboard, depicted on a sandblasted grey piece of glass. The figures are lined up on the grid of the playing board hinting to an on-coming battle. The game of chess is all about strategy, sizing up your opponent, and deciding upon the best course of action. The goal is to eliminate your opponent, very similar to the objectives of real warfare. There is a tug with this piece between the child-like qualities of the army men and the adult connotations of war.

Using these somewhat stock poses of the army figures, I am trying to represent a larger group of people by using this familiar grouping of figurative men. Although touching on different topics, there are some similarities to this display and that of the work of Korean artist Do-Ho Soh. In several of his pieces, such as “Floor 1997-2000”, he uses multiple toy-sized figures that have the

purpose of holding weight.¹ Soh uses space to speak of the fine line between strength in homogeneous numbers and the idea of conformity. This idea of individuality and homogeneity can be parallel in the “Playing Field” pieces just because many people can connect to the army men figurines. We each bring our own memories and experiences both from our childhood and adulthood to the pieces. So each viewer is seeing the pieces from their own individual perspective, similar to Soh’s but very individual in nature.

The use of multiple figures was important to me in the displays using the toy soldiers; the ability to form a collective or a group of people alludes to strength in numbers and solidarity. These are comforting thoughts to me, to know that I have others to support and to lean on. British artist Anthony Gormley’s piece “Fields 1991” is a prime example of this use of multiples to exude this idea of strength in numbers.² In this piece Gormley uses around 35,000 terracotta figures and completely fills the room that they are exhibited in. The sculptures are all facing the viewer and feel ominous just in their massive numbers. These figures are all hand-made and are fairly small 8-26 cm. They are small enough to be the size of dolls yet the forms, in their great numbers, lead the viewer to be awe inspired and intimidated.²

“Playing Field II” consists of the six army men poses, however, is fairly large in size, measuring 48” X 48” X 11”. For this piece, all of the soldiers are cast in a black glass and all look as if melted to one degree or another by a magnifying glass. All of the soldiers in this installation are more opaque and less

¹ Doh-Ho So, www.pbs.org/art21/artist/do-ho-soh

² Anthony Gormley, www.anthonygormley.com

translucent so have a more substantial presence. For the base of this piece an entire three-dimensional chessboard has been constructed out of 5” rectangles of differing heights. For the two opposing teams the metal boxes are both polished shiny and rusted and deteriorated steel. These polished and rusted boxes serve the function of the base of the piece but also reinforce this idea of playing a game. Strategy and tactics are ever present on this oversized chessboard. Having the army men on this immense game of chess has an interesting balance of child and adult themes. The partially dissolved figures are very much a child’s toy yet chess is more of an adult’s game of tactics and calculations for victory. The black melted soldiers in this piece are all in different states of melting and disfiguration.

They look as if a malicious child has held a magnifying glass to them, causing their current state of dissolving or distress. Something that many can relate too having played to rough or intentionally destroyed some of their own toys as children. Unlike discarded toys, the disfigured army men hint to a much more serious topic of fallen soldiers, and life and death. The color black was an important for this piece. With black usually representing the bad guy, evil, or death it is a perfect allegory for this piece, that represents destruction or passing of the toy soldier. The fragility of the glass works in tandem with the ideas of life, death, as well as innocence and loss of innocence.

The third in this series of pieces involving the soldiers is “Playing Field III”. It measures 48” X 48” X 11”. This piece again uses the six soldier poses yet they are all highly modified. This modification includes whimsical loop de loops in the weaponry as well as grossly oversized guns in the hands of some of the

soldier poses. Similar to “Playing Field II” the game board of this piece is made of differing sized black and white metal boxes; with the altering box height the board is reminiscent of the differing heights of a topographical map. All of the soldiers in this piece are primary and secondary colors adding to the juvenile playfulness of the pieces. This artwork hints to the futility of these characters’ intended roles. Where they once had a purpose, due to modifications to their weaponry, they are no longer fit to fulfill the intended purpose.

Objects can have the capacity to represent innocent childlike entities and³also have a darker more sinister side. This same message was something that I associated with a Japanese artist named Koichi Matsufuji. In the piece “Kabuki Baby 2004” Matsufuji⁴ has a cast glass infant in clear glass with a Kabuki mask covering the baby’s face. Like the work that I have created for this show Koichi Matsufuji has merged this innocent child with a mask of the Japanese theater of kabuki, which traditionally depicts plays about historical Japanese wars of the 1100’s and 1300’s. He perhaps is using even more drastic and severe examples than I am. The toys like the baby form in a lot of his work are a representation of innocence that everyone has as a child As one gets older, the more loss, or corruption of innocence one experiences. Trying to capture this dichotomy or balance between the innocent and the more serious is the commonality between the work of this show and that of Koichi Matsufuji.

My experiences, past and present, shaped the direction of the artwork. One of the thoughts in the back of my head while creating this body of work was my

⁴ Koichi Matsufuji, www.koichimatsufuji.com

childhood friend that was serving in the army as a lieutenant in Afghanistan. My friend gave me that firsthand connection to growing up with someone who was serving our country and put in immediate harms way. Having a close personal link with someone on the front line caused me to take a closer introspection of life, and growing up as a typical American boy. It made me contemplate how some of the typical boy games allude to some much more serious things. So from this time of maturing and settling in to adult life, I really have taken a closer and more intent look at past and present situations, and scrutinized what they could be representing.

The duality of my friend on the battlefield and who was stepping up to serve his country and me gravitating to many toys that were army or war-inspired began a quest into looking at old WWII propaganda posters. These feelings of pride in the nation, patriotism, pro-American feelings, and support for the war movement were the reasons for these posters. From Howard Miller's "Rosie the Riveter 1943" to Norman Rockwell's "Buy Victory Bonds" this notion of pride in ones nation and country were some of my immediate thoughts.⁵ Whether for or against the motivations for the war in the Middle East, I feel that everyone should without a doubt support the troops that are deployed at all times. This concept was in the back of my head the whole time I was creating this body of work. It was more to open the eyes of the viewer, to take a second look at what the possible meanings or substance that these objects represent and the objects' implications to childhood play. To think of these figures instead of fun, cute toys but as

⁵ www.popagandaposters.us

representations of people that are doing the real job of a soldier takes the figures to an entirely new context. This piece was not meant to have a right or wrong answer but to just make the ideas present. It then becomes a more open internal or external dialogue for the viewer. Although I had strong opinions about the intent of the artwork, I desired a more open-ended viewer interpretation.

The artwork entitled, “ Finish Line” 58” X 20” X 3” also spoke of society’s ideals and values of what is important and acceptable in times of conflict and war. This piece is composed of three cast glass army tanks. The primary colors of red, yellow and blue are used for the individual tanks. These bright almost candy like colors are used to entice the viewer to want to investigate or join in the race. These tanks are placed on a piece of gray plate glass that has a start and a finish line etched onto each end of the glass. These three tanks are in their lanes racing down from the starting point to the finish. One reaches the finish line first but also the end of the pedestal that it sits upon. The image suggests to its crash off the edge and its fall. The tanks being made out of glass, also demonstrates the concept of fragility and an object easily broken. These three glass tanks are racing to the finish line. The winner has won but is about to plummet off the pedestal to its doom. This begs the question of whether it is really winning. This piece speaks to the idea of an arms race, that even if there is a winner to the race, we as a society or as a globe of people are all on the losing side.

The work of Yoshitomo Nara has been an influence on me for some time. Nara is primarily a 2-D artist who typically uses children as his subject matter.

His characters are cartoonish and stylized showing heavy influence from the cartoons of his youth. His characters are cute and angry at the same time. Nara's use of sweet/sour, happy/sad, and generous/mean in his characters was quite an influence on me while making this work.⁶

A series of handguns and grenades make up the next piece "Untitled" 18" X 36" X 8". The guns and hand grenades are primary and secondary colors respectively. These are more exact replicas of real weapons simply transformed into playful candy like colors. These pieces are displayed on a mid chest high pedestal making the viewer have to just slightly bend over to take a closer inspection of this candy colored weaponry. This creates an up close and personal view, potentially giving the viewer an uncomfortable closeness to these instruments of war and fighting.

Silvia Levenson uses glass as a medium for representing the ambiguity between beauty and strength. Levenson has also cast glass weaponry such as "Something Wrong?"⁷ where she has three pink grenades cast in glass and set into a pink bowl. It is this material transformation into glass that I find fascinating. Just by changing the material that the object is made of can so drastically change the use and meaning of an object. These once metal objects that had a purpose of shooting or exploding are now rendered useless of their original purpose. Now no longer serving the original function these candy colored glass weapons are now a shadow or shell of the tool that they once were. The guns and grenades now look more like a toy but are still the exact size of the original object. They are colorful

⁶ Yoshitomo Nara, www.artnet.com/artist/yoshitomo-nara/biography-links.com

⁷ Silvia Levenson, www.silvialevenson.com

like a toy but still to scale and shape of the real thing leaving the viewer with a sense of possible unease after taking a look down the barrel. Not only the objects but also the material give a hands-off quality to the viewer making them wary while being in close proximity to these fragile objects

“Jacks” 24” X 24” X 6” is the final piece in the show. This piece is an oversized game of jacks. Seven oversized glass jacks and a polished steel ball make up the components of this piece. Although jacks are usually the playful component of a children’s game, these pointed jacks give more of a hint at a menacing end of a ball and chain or morning star weapons. This dangerous game of jacks resides on a piece of black glass. If one were to think of actually playing the game you would just be left with a pile of glass shards and rubble.

Glass toys are something that has been around since the 1920’s. Oftentimes these toys would be the leftover vessels that candy would come in at the local dime store.⁸ These containers would be in the shape of cars, trucks, boots, trains, and many animals. These glass “toys” would be just as foolish to play with as the “toys” that I have created for this exhibition. I found it interesting to see that for decades the seductive nature of the material of glass has been used to lure adults and children into the product being made. I feel that this seductive nature of the material is now being used to lure the viewer into the concept behind the work presented in this show.

The natural ability for children to play is the starting point for this body of work. It is this child-like play that oftentimes mimics or even mocks that of the

⁸ Leland C. May, Figural Glass Toys Hobbies 1984

adult world in which it represents. This became a very important factor in the concept behind my work. Children, through the practice of play, are able to learn about themselves and the world around them.⁹ The more chaotic and violent the world and the media are, the more children gravitate towards violent toys, mimicking what they witness. This becomes the new normal.

Everything that encompasses this grouping of work is based on what would traditionally be considered to be boys' toys. One of the main reasons that toys exist is for the social benefits they have for the child's future. Toys and games are generally there to help children better understand their place in society. For the most part, boys' replicas or miniature versions of tools and weapons represent this.¹⁰ By playing with representations of jobs and tools they will use in the future, their place in society and adulthood is a much more natural progression from childhood play to their chosen role in society. This concept of childhood play being an emulation of adult hood profession was a very interesting idea that came from this grouping of work. This idea that a child's innocent portrayal can be mimicry or even a mockery of a more treacherous profession became a very interesting outlook on this dichotomy of innocence and loss of this innocence in adult hood.

I feel very satisfied with the inception, creation, and reaction to this show. I feel that I have been able to better understand and come to terms with many of the topics and starting points of this body of work. The dichotomy of childhood

⁹ Kevin Carrol, *The Red Rubber Ball at Work: Elevate your Game through the Hidden Power of Play*

¹⁰ Stuart L. Brown and Christopher C. Vaughn, *Play: How it shapes the Brain Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*

verses adulthood represents two sides of the same coin. We change and lose some parts of us that were important when we were children, yet it is all of the things that we have experienced and lived through that make us who we are today. It is important to remember where I come from. This is what has shaped me into the person that I am today. Knowing that it is all right to say good-bye to childhood as long as I remember what I have learned. I have discovered that it is from childhood where my current values sprouted and I must always remember this is an important part of my life. Being conscious and aware that, to a certain extent, the sense of wonder, adventure, and amazement of the world will never leave makes leaving childhood behind a tolerable inevitability.

I feel that the ideas and concepts behind this work are things that I will continue to pursue and investigate for years to come. There are so many possibilities, avenues, and potential for this work to expand upon and different directions that I have and will continue to pursue. There is so much possibility with artwork that can have a personal connection with the viewer. When a connection happens it is what happens inside the viewer that has the most value with artwork. It is what the viewer takes away from the piece that has the most value, not the object itself. This idea of taking toys and other common objects and through slight manipulation and material transformation, being able to elevate them to the level of classical or traditional art is something that I really enjoy and plan to do throughout my art-making career.

IV.

1. Playing Field I

Cast Glass and Sandblasted Plate Glass

24" X 24" X 6"

2. Playing Field II

Cast Glass and Polished and Rusted Steel

48" X 48" X 11"

3. Playing Field III

Cast Glass and Painted Steel

48" X 48" X 11"

4. Jacks

Cast Glass, Polished Steel, and Plate Glass

24" X 24" X 6"

5. Untitled

Cast glass and Steel

12" X 36" X 8"

6. Finish Line

Cast Glass and Sandblasted Plate Glass

58" X 20" X 3"

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