A Pawn’s Toil: Advocating for a Return to the Toybox

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Abstract

This paper serves as a contextual and conceptual aid to the three, oil on canvas still life’s that make up my senior thesis exhibition, *A Pawn’s Toil*. The first section of this document addresses the paintings directly as political artworks. It spells out each’s narrative, identifies their references to other artworks and inspirations, and discusses their intent. Next is a discussion and cultural analysis of the toy objects used as subjects in the paintings. These toys serve metaphorically as representatives of various economic and social backgrounds in the artwork. This paper suggests that they give rise to the candid, childlike senses of curiosity and investigation which have the potential to inspire subversive political action. Afterwards is a brief analysis of the still life genre’s rich, historical lineage, and discussion of how this contemporary artwork operates within it. Attached as an appendix is an evaluation of the current political and economic climate in the United States of America, and declaration of my position on the topic.
The title of my BFA thesis show is *A Pawn’s Toil*, a series of three oil painted still lifes (*POP! (The Little Red House)*: 3’x5’, *The Gun of America*: 3’x3’, and *Chutes*: 45”x45”). Each depicts antiquated and cheap, personified toys enacting cartoonish scenes of the working class’ struggles and inequalities under the political economy of capitalism. In this series, I demonize American government’s profit driven agenda and how politics are used as an avenue for the benefit of economic relationships. I also aim to dispel the neoliberal idea that competition (financially, in the workplace, and educationally) is the definitive driving and moralizing force behind people’s success and virtue. I do this by illustrating the injustices dealt by abusive corporate juggernauts and political figures, for which antagonist toy characters serve as stand-ins, and by revealing just a few consequences of the United States being a nation subscribing to late capitalism: inflamed social tensions, a violent and toxic gun culture, and environmental oppression. With this series, it is my intent to talk about the poor culture of living in survival mode by using outdated and salvaged children's toys as an avenue to persuade varied audiences of their resistant power in the face of systemic injustice.

This paper is a written document which outlines the conceptual justification for each of the paintings in *A Pawn’s Toil*, followed by an account of the art historical context and contemporary political context that they exist in. By reflecting on the modern American political atmosphere through a theoretical lens, I mean to aid the reception of the artwork and detail the anti-hierarchical stance of the paintings. These realist paintings have saturated palettes reminiscent of pop culture objects and media, and build on an art historical lineage of the still life genre which is often concerned with consumption and morality. While this narrative work fits into the still life genre, the
paintings are not rendered from life; they are instead staged, adapted from photographs, and act as documentation of an unraveling event. Toys are used as the main subject matter for the paintings; they provoke nostalgia for the spontaneity of and leisure provided by childhood, they arouse empathy (especially in the case of personified toy objects), and they elicit joy. Their attractive design and nostalgic ties to childhood appeal to the viewer and flank their political predisposition so that the critiques of U.S. socioeconomics made by the artwork, which some might call radical or polarizing, are most agreeably expressed. Toys are symbolic of childhood; they reference the beginning of one’s life - the pivotal point from which the rest of an individual’s life is largely formed - and are the tools through which children discover their agency, their creativity, and their collaborative power. Specifically, the “thrift toys” used in this work are intergenerational, inexpensive (no longer heavily marketed or profitable as a result of their obsolescence and substitution for toys representative of the newest fads and franchises), and stand-alone (not requiring other toy components for their use in play). Such toys include simple wooden pegs, commonly painted to look like people, a set of wind-up chattering teeth (a 1949 lowbrow, novelty toy), a modified *Chutes and Ladders* board game (the U.S. 1943 version of an ancient Indian game used for moral instruction), and early troll doll and G.I. Joe models (also known as “Good Luck Trolls”, and a hypermasculine, propagandic “action hero”, both reaching popularity in the 60s). These toys emerged as a result of a golden era boom for toy production in which the industry took advantage of the post-World War II, emerging plastics industry. Subsequently, these popularized toys were replaced by the tech toy fad of the last few decades. In this series, thrift toys are personified to serve as stand-ins for people of various castes, and
speak on one hand, to the lack of value regarded for people who've fallen through the trenches dug by hierarchical greed, and on the other, to the outdatedness of mainstream politics in the United States. Outdated “thrift toys” lack the monetary value that contemporary, collectable, “in” toys have, and the toy’s (the people’s) labor is equally disregarded and undercompensated, this phenomenon made sustainable by a desperate workforce.
The toys in these paintings are staged around graphic, pop cultural scenes and imagery to reference stylized, narrative media, which is complimented by the inclusion of high art historical references, used to elevate the status of the toy. *POP! (The Little Red House)* features the birdhouse being studiously decorated in Norman Rockwell’s Americana artwork *Painting the Little House* (1921). It is adapted to resemble a well loved and self-made country home, situated inside of a comic speech bubble and adorned with the colors and stripes of the American flag to symbolize the traditional American value of hard work as a means to success. The “big mouth” token preaches and advocates via the word bubble for self-sufficiency and “traditional values”, synonymous with rural living and the American dream. The wooden peg characters are stand-ins for the many vulnerable groups of people subjected to hierarchy's tyranny. The ribbon woven between each of them represents rhetoric used to stoke cultural tensions, a web of misinformation spun by the mindlessly chattering influencer through oblivious suggestions like “success is earned through discipline and hard work.” This type of statement makes no room for underlying inequalities experienced among varied ethnic and class cultures; the language is used to advocate for and separate the theoretical white, employed, natural-born citizen from all others, who according to ethnicized stereotype, lack American virtues. The ribbon snakes around the pegs, promising to lift them up out of economic hardship as they draw nearer to the antagonistic teeth. The fate of the balloon, and by extension the fate of those swayed by Big Mouth’s rhetoric, is foretold by the POP! decal, exposing the fallacy of the chattering teeth’s deceptive speech. This painting illustrates a conservative tridactic, where political leaders attempt to appeal to the lower classes, from whom they are far removed, by making a scapegoat out of those
who are most disadvantaged (i.e. immigrant people, urban welfare recipients, and/or “hillbillies”). United States president, Donald Trump, has reached infamy in part because of this rhetoric, referring to immigrant people as “animals” (Valverde, 2018), and insisting that this group as a whole “[competes] directly against vulnerable American workers” (Gonzales, Horsley, Kurtzleben, Mccammon, & Montanaro, 2016), an entirely misinformed statement. The cityscape background of this painting references another painting, Edward Hopper’s From Williamsburg Bridge (1928). The scene shows a single figure sitting in a window overlooking the (at the time, newly built) bridge, emphasizing the isolation one might feel in a fast-paced and rapidly evolving city environment. The buildings featured in this painting no longer stand in the city today as the neighborhood they occupied has been transformed to accommodate new, wealthier residents and their high-end businesses. The buildings have been stylistically reinterpreted to mimic a more graphic, contemporary aesthetic in order to match the visual energy of the toys’ overall narrative, as well as to suggest their transformation via gentrification, which displaces the old in favor of the profitable or moneyed. The woman sat in a window in the original painting has been exchanged in favor of two new, also faceless residents peering out over the scene from a lower window and sidewalk, witnessing the manipulation of the other pawns.
POP! speaks to the political and cultural divide between and among urban and rural populations, stoked and perpetuated by many U.S. politicians who use patriotic clichés like “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” to justify the governmental and
social treatment of people who struggle to be economically self-sufficient. It does so by contrasting the renewed look of the urban landscape (filled with multicultural residents of varying class statuses who either witness or fall prey to divisive tactics), with the preserved style of Rockwell’s little red-roofed house (and the teeth’s romanticization of individualistic, patriotic values and The American Dream). It shares the sentiment of Josh Kline’s resin cast sculptures of broken toys, tools, and other items, part of a series titled *Civil War*. The sculptures are larger than life, weighty, and entirely grey in color. The lackluster piles of trashed objects speak to this stoking of tensions by predicting a second, calamitous American civil war. Party agendas instigate this inter-community conflict by using scare tactics to stir rural hostility towards urban folks and vice versa.

According to nationalist discourse preached by these leaders, traditional American values and lifestyle are indicated by a self-sacrificial work ethic and a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality: American citizens who are invested in the betterment of their nation are also invested in the individual, economic success of themselves. Land and home ownership are indicators of one’s success in these endeavors. Pride in one’s financial autonomy is a staple of American patriotism while seeking due government aid is demonized. Furthermore, cultural differences in dense cities combined with the dense population of people of color in many cities is advertised as inherently “foreign” and dangerous to “traditional values” (especially when national hostility toward immigrant people is high). All politicians mean to sway the US population in their favor, as they target varied demographics with promises of socioeconomic betterment for all people (just as the teeth target the pegs), while simultaneously focusing on the individual rather than the community. Promises of national betterment via individual self-sufficiency fall
flat, and in continuing to advocate for the theoretical, model American citizen, leaders in
government will continue to fail all people within the U.S., regardless of geographic
location.
The Gun of America’s composition lends itself to a cyclical and recurring string of events: GI Joe is tasked with the defense of the advertisement (and by extension, both the defense of an individual's right to gun ownership, and the defense of capitalism’s freedom to globalize), with a dollar bill in one hand and a loaded rifle in the other. GI Joe, “A Real American Hero” as his tagline proclaims, is tasked with defending human freedom against terrorist organization, Cobra, according to the franchise’s lore. Though the action figure was thrifted for use in this painting, he is perhaps, of all the toys used in the series, most loosely defined as a “thrift toy” according to this paper’s criteria. The franchise has captivated children for decades starting in 1964, and experienced a resurgence of popularity in 1984 with the conception of GI Joe comics and his animated series. It was at this time that the action figure became less stand-alone with the addition of accessories, vehicles, and a huge variety of characters to be recruited in bringing down Cobra. In the painting, he is the second most menacing entity next to the advertisement itself, linking heroism with militant nationalism. Positioned above and in the path of his rifle is an enthusiastic gun advocate, blindly presenting the provocative troll [doll] and his assault on a group of peg characters whose blood seeps around the foreground, back towards the defendant of freedom, Joe. Experiencing its first surge in popularity around the time of GI Joe’s initial conception, the troll doll’s original design can be attributed to a Danish woodworker, Thomas Dam, who carved the first in 1959. His design was subsequently ripped off and mass produced in the U.S.: generic versions of the doll became an American fad. The doll in this painting was also salvaged for the still life, yet its charm is overridden by its integration into American commodity culture. The character in the painting is similarly corrupted by American culture which fosters the
toxic masculinity and government/corporate agenda that is pushed most aggressively by the AR-15 lower receiver advertisement and Joe. The mock advertisement in the painting markets an essential component for building an ArmaLite AR-15 rifle, the popularity of which rose in the U.S. after the expiration of the assault weapons ban in 2004. The text, which brags that the piece is “unregistered” and “requires almost no prerequisites to purchase” speaks to the current accessibility of assault weapons; even the flawed and few purchasing regulations in place, including age restrictions and background checks, can be easily bypassed. The fetishization of the gun in combination with the growth of “gun nut” internet communities and the advent of 3D printing technology has led to an especially aggressive “do it yourself” culture around gun ownership and collection. The tone of the painting is dark, and the characters expressions and actions feel maniacal. The advertisement is the most illuminated aspect of the painting, and one of the most vibrant. The stylized gun at the top which points towards the pile of pegs, and “The Gun of America” header are included partly as a reference to Roy Lichtenstein’s 1968 Time magazine cover. An article within the issue entitled “The Gun Under Fire” provided an overview of American gun culture at the time along with a liberal critique of the country’s lack of gun legislation, tackling conservative clichés popularized by the National Rifle Association. The author covers efforts by private gun owners and businesses to relinquish their stock to police stations, and addresses concerns by leftist organizations like the Black Panther Party over reform being used to police their rightful resistance, sentiments shared by varied political groups now. The article expresses concern over a budding “internal arms race”, identifies absurd gun marketing claims (i.e. “ideal for long-range shots at deer [...] even a tank if you happen to see one”), and
casually identifies racist political figures, one of which suggests the population “take up arms, learn to shoot and be a dead shot” (“The gun under fire”, 1968). In these ways, the political atmosphere of the late 60s resembles today’s political attitudes and debates around gun culture. Just as reports on the issue then failed to pinpoint the symptoms of a depraved national gun culture (toxic masculinity and staunch nationalism, among other social ailments), the modern mainstream news media has also fallen short of identifying the problem at its core. In *The Gun of America*, I intend to critique gun culture indirectly, by concentrating the focus on the heavy marketing of guns, as tools tasked with the preservation of “freedom”, to an immature (patriarchal and increasingly nationalist) and insatiable consumer society. I argue that widespread gun violence is not necessarily a product of widespread ownership, or even more vaguely “human nature”, but a combined result between capitalism’s need to establish a dedicated consumer base, and government’s manipulative use of scare tactics regarding national security. Guns are often a subject of critique among artists, but perhaps no single artwork is as relevant as the *Throne of Weapons* (2001), sculpted by Mozambican artist Cristóvão Canhavato (known as Kester): it comments on the dangers of and destruction wrought by militarism, by anthropomorphizing the gun as ruler in the context of the Mozambique civil war. At the same time, he critiques the global arms trade that the U.S. is largely responsible for by building his artwork with strictly imported weapons. British artist, Darren Cullen, also commented on the effects of wartime violence by revamping and repackaging the GI Joe action figure as *Action Man*, a series of figures suffering from “battlefield casualties.” Their accessories include a noose, a wheelchair, and a body bag, objects that reflect the figures circumstances after having returned from their glorified military service.
The firearm and ammunition industry and the NRA (as well as the U.S. government, by extension) use patriotism and fear mongering as a marketing strategy to put guns in the hands of many American people. The argument for this threatening means of defense is rooted in the false but convincing suggestion that a vaguely defined and densely populated category of people (non-white people, people of non-christian/catholic faith, lgbtq+ people, and/or “liberals”) is out to do the hardworking, American citizen physical and monetary harm, as well as do harm to the “moral integrity of the nation.” They advocate for widespread gun ownership using conservative ideology and suggest that there is an inherent conflict between progressive politics and one’s individual wellbeing. Rather than argue whether guns are fundamentally good or bad, I am using toys to imply that guns are heavily and irresponsibly marketed to an immature
society based on the premise that without guns, our inalienable freedoms are at risk, freedoms that many people in the United States have not had historically and do not currently have. In order to tackle the problems of gun fetishization in this country, rather than restrict individual gun ownership, we must address the societal problems of toxic masculinity as well as acknowledge and learn from the nation’s racist history, the consequences of which are still permeating vulnerable communities.

Like *POP!* and *The Gun*, the painting *Chutes* also utilizes simplified graphics reminiscent of contemporary media aesthetics, and a playful palette and composition. The *Chutes and Ladders* board game is a classic: originally called *Snakes and Ladders*, its origin is traced back to 2nd century B.C. India, where the game was used as a metaphor for life’s journey and one’s destiny. It was adapted by the Victorian era British to reflect the rewards and consequences of performing good and bad deeds before the Milton Bradley game company revitalized it in 1943 as *Chutes and Ladders*. The game board in the painting is missing its ladders and the slides have been shifted around to imply the intense struggle required of working class people to overcome the numerous pitfalls of being poor. Each character is connected to either a slide or ladder on the original board, but here the characters occupying spaces 13 and 31 are stagnant: 13’s labor does not result in her achieving upward mobility, and 31’s inability to catch a break means that he simply breaks even in his efforts. The toy truck in the foreground seems to deliberately, and without regard to the characters it faces, relieve its bed of sludge, which seeps towards the bottom of the game board. Environmental disasters, the effects of which are escalated by polluted and transient water, air, and soil, are represented by the paintings black puddles. The disadvantaged “residents” of the board - their low rank indicated by the numbers on the squares they inhabit - meet similar ends: a slide back towards square one, and back towards the contamination, regardless of whether they are engaged in precious, rare acts of leisure (like the characters in squares 16 and 49) or labor. The character’s subjugation to the persistent effects of the spill (impacted health, decreased ability to work for the resources to tend to one's health, and a correlated decline in other areas of life) reads as a punishment for being of a vulnerable socioeconomic
status, “a drain on the economy”, and subsequently makes recovery under the circumstances increasingly difficult. The characters on the board game (which are also depicted on the player tokens in the original game), and the board game itself, both qualify as “thrift toys.” They have been not only discarded, but also degraded in the painting, becoming saturated by the oil spill and buried by the environmental burden placed on them as a consequence of industry’s convenience. Chutes shares the sentiment of Mierle Ukeles’s inspirational artwork called the Touch Sanitation: Talking with Sanitation Workers (1982). In it, she documented her handshakes and meetings with working class people employed by New York’s Department of Sanitation. She addresses in her work that the laborers who occupy these necessary but lowly regarded positions fill them out of necessity, as a means to support themselves, though the job is thankless: underpaid, physically demanding, and risky. While individual contributions to environmental degradation are significant, the greatest environmental threat can be attributed to industrial scale pollution.

Industries and corporations that dominate the U.S. economy sour the environments in which communities of working class people work and reside, in the interests of business and capitol. As those with the means to move from affected areas leave behind pockets of poor communities, many resources and businesses move with them, leaving those that remain without work, with increased risk for health issues, and without the resources to tend to them. This is the case in Flint, Michigan where the water crisis of 2014 continues to harm residents, and with the C-8 contamination of the Ohio River (covered up to avoid scandal and loss of consumer loyalty), as well as with each new threat of pipeline installation. Corporations’ blatant disregard for people and the
environments they live in are, judicially, all but forgiven on the bases of corporate
personhood, which considers the corporate entity to be deserving of all the leniency
afforded to individual, natural people, and ignores their influential reach. Upward
mobility and The American Dream are impossible under an economic system that bases
the merit and worth of its people on their productivity, and simultaneously feeds the
societal notion that the poor are an inherent economic and moral burden on the nation.

Contextual Analysis

Primary schools, as social institutions, play an integral role in grooming people for participation in and obedience (discipline) under capitalism. Because “consumption has become a necessary and indispensable context”, Cook argues that to think of children as corrupted by capital is a moot point; people are not “corrupted” by capital, but rather late capitalism creates dependency so that people must obey and participate in the economy, at least to some extent, in order to survive it (a nationally taught principle) (Langer, 2005, p.262). Accordingly, children in America are a product of circumstance, both objectified as a consumer group and idealized as sacred. Langer (2002, p.69) claims that “sacralization does not in itself protect children, nor exempt them from what Weber called the ‘irresistible force’ of the modern economic order”; in other words, the paradoxical objectification of children renders them unprotected by their status of innocence from targeted marketing. Applied to adults under hierarchy, innate innocence is substituted for “sacralization” under the conditions of advancing the economy, and therefore, the nation (similarly, patriotism/nationalism does not exempt them from being objects of capital). Their attention is grabbed by advertisements, their consumption influenced in part by their entertainment and its related merchandise.

Especially mass produced, contemporary toy objects are the products of capitalism’s reliance on renewed consumer interest, yet in the hands of children, toys subvert the norms under which they were created. By using toys as objects of nostalgia, I do not wish to advocate for a return to “simpler times”; certainly, all the roads of history led to the United States’ condition as a capitalist and otherwise corrupt nation. Instead, I wish to create nostalgia for the lawlessness and freedom of child’s play. Next, I will
define two types of toys and their significance, detailing the first in order to set the stage for the paintings main subjects, addressed second. Today, the toy industry follows trends in popular culture and further saturates the market with these trends in order to maintain cultural relevance and grow monetarily. The consumption of these toys undeniably supports and contributes to cultural permeation by brands (such as Mattel or The Walt Disney Company), and some of these toys specifically aim to further an agenda of power and influence socialization, like in the case of an assigned-female-at-birth child’s gendered role play with baby dolls. Similarly, G.I. Joe, the first line of action figures which made its second and more successful debut in 1982, pushed nationalist propaganda in their battles against terrorism which played out in comic books, television shows, and expansive military toy sets which are now some of the most coveted collector’s toys. The variety and quick turnover of figures in the franchise, a tactic which has been noted and regurgitated by many other toy companies since, both create desire among consumers based on their limited availability as well as their advertising which instructs consumers to “collect them all”, or else the toys and the play experience for which they are purchased is incomplete. This type of toy which relies on deregulated, insatiable desire has been coined a “commoditoy” by Beryl Langer (2005, p.70):

[They] are characterized by their capacity to stimulate rather than satisfy longing, their short but intense ‘shelf life’ as objects of desire, and their promotion through television cartoons and films which double as ‘children’s entertainment’. The essential feature of ‘commoditoy’ is that satiation is endlessly postponed. [...] Children’s sense of sufficiency is thus continuously undermined; the moment of possession is the beginning of desire.

She elaborates that children’s media (cartoons and film) serve as advertisements for the commoditoy, while the commoditoy advertises for itself (through catalog-like packaging) as well as the entertainment that inspired it. G.I. Joe and his counterpart “for girls”, the
fashion icon Barbie, both still resonate with adolescent fans and have paved the way as collectables for contemporary toys that are especially conforming to commoditoy criteria. Most notably among these are the “blind bags” that require consumers to gamble for the chance at one of a series of miniature figures pictured on the packaging in hopes that they unwrap a rare, limited production character figure. In part, these toys create desire by creating scarcity among the variety of supposedly “essential” components of each franchise. The desire for these types of toys is as widely insatiable as the universes that these toy characters operate in are infinitely expandable. After the initial purchase and during play however, children seldom restrict themselves to just one toy or one type of toy. Benjamin Walter suggests that the above mentioned, character driven toys “tend to show what adults understand by toys rather than what children expect from them”, and that the more imitative the toy is of real life, the less it lends itself to the actual freedom and nature of child’s play, which is organic, inquisitive, and anarchic (Leslie, 2016, p. 520).

The antiquated toys that were once the objects of cultural affection now contrast commoditoys and their contemporaries, and are the main subject matter within my thesis paintings. These toys, which from this point on I will refer to as “thrift toys”, are especially subversive because of their accessibility as relatively inexpensive objects (often thrifted or salvaged); they are intergenerational (sometimes handed down through families), often simple in design and function, and stand-alone (as a result of their discarded status). These are the toys of the past, no longer heavily marketed or sought after, and as a consequence they are generally less profitable (with exceptions in the case of collectors’ items). Within this series of still lifes, the thrift toy acts as a stand-in primarily for the poor and working class in the United States, whose labor is indispensable, though the individual among them is considered expendable under capitalism. Similarly, thrift toys, since their deployment onto market shelves, have been purchased, used, and then discarded, donated, or otherwise gotten rid of. Their roles and identities are no longer fixed to the advertising campaigns that spawned them because the discarded toy becomes just one in a mass of aged and discarded toys seemingly forgotten by children and by the culture at large, just as the individual worker, used and paid for, is lumped into a mass “labor force” to be used in furthering capitalism’s global expanse. Capitalism premises itself on the new, and the quick innovation of and turnaround on toys that is required of the global capital market to maintain consumer interest leaves some of these thrift toys, such as an old model toy car, particularly outdated, losing some of its cultural resonance for the child whose birth it predates. These forgotten toys take on an underdog role, a role commonly attributed to the masses both in real life and in many children’s stories (i.e. the Toy Story franchise). Because this mass identity seems
to lack nuance and individuality from the aerial perspective held by the hierarchal tip (as well as looming adults), it is possible for individuals (and children) to subvert this assumption and create resistance communally and through grass roots action. Likewise, children redefine each toys’ identity and function latitudinally, on the ground, and in their spaces of play. The lack of distinction among these toys allows for them to fill any role and function in play, and the commoditoys of today are similarly fated to become unmade, once no longer profitable, and remade by nondiscriminating children.

The paintings in *A Pawn’s Toil* create a call to action by preemptively engaging the audience with play to brace the intensity of each of their respective political messages, a tactic advocated for by Schiller (1794) in his ninth letter on aesthetic education. “Tactics”, according to Michel de Certeau (1984, p. xix), constitute the infiltrative “act and manner in which [an] opportunity is ‘seized’”, without definite spatial context. In presenting this series of paintings in a gallery setting, I am targeting audiences most commonly of the upper socioeconomic classes, those with the monetary power which is of necessity to grassroots efforts in undermining capitalism’s manipulation of and tyranny over the people (“the workforce”). It is in this traditional setting that I aim to co-opt visibility, and urge and influence a dialog about the moral and the physical ramifications of passivity. The toys used in the artwork are built to withstand rough child’s play, but their resilience is not maintained in the paintings. Toys are consequently mistreated by the other players in the still lifes and the paintings offer no solution or closure for the problems they illustrate. As a result, the tension created between the viewer and the reality of the scene stirs empathy for those most subjected to capitalist/American hostility, as well as guilt for past inaction under the circumstances.
This tension is further exacerbated by the individual, personified toys themselves as Hanneke Grootenboer (2005, p. 9) notes: the objects, with their forward facing and confrontational gazes, “occupy possible points from where we can be viewed, even as we are looking at them. [...] they ‘look back’ at us.” The conclusion of the painting, therefore, is resolvable by placing the future of the narrative in the viewers’ hands.

Still Life

These paintings build on the tradition of 17th century Dutch still lifes, rich and realistic paintings which were overwhelmingly concerned with morality, temporality, and the preservation of the human soul. They expressed ephemerality through a range of painted, luxury objects: pocket watches and hourglasses most obviously stood for the passing of time, as did extravagant foods. Shellfish and imported fruits which were subject to spoiling were most commonly depicted in the breakfast still life subgenre. Tipped or empty vessels such as the glass that can be seen in Pieter Claesz’s Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill (1628) spoke to the meaninglessness of riches, glassware being an expensive commodity. The skull as a common Dutch still life object is perhaps one of the most relevant in the context of this paper. One can be seen in Jacob de Gheyn II’s Vanitas Still Life (1603): it is confrontationally positioned facing the viewer, a symbol condemning egotism in much the same way that the toys in A Pawn’s Toil do. Because it once held life and because of its frontal orientation in the painting, it is personified. It is not a portrait but the remnants of one, a warning from beyond the grave. Still life is, however, descriptive of portraiture in the case of David Bailly’s 1651 still life, titled Portrait of a Young Painter, in which he, near the end of his life, reprises the
portraits of his career in an expression of love and grief. With objects and portraits sat beside the main portrait of the artist, he creates a visual account of his life and work into an accompanying still life. The main self-portrait stands apart from the still life and framed portraits and therefore suggests a more lifelike presence and motion, similar to the motion and action suggested by suspended toys in *A Pawn’s Toil* and the action suggested by a cat and its prey in Isaac Van Duynen’s *Fish still life* (n.d.). The cat represents one side in a moral battle, devilishness and mischief, while the fish symbolizes faith and Christ, a battle similar to that presented in the thesis paintings (one between modern “gods” of capital versus humanitarian struggle).

Vanitas of the period exemplify “dialectical polysemy”, defined by Wayne Martin (2006, p. 566) as having “a multitude of [opposing] meanings”, by creating tension between the “pleasure” and “vanity” of the material wealth depicted. Paradoxically, they also exist in a state of conceptual tension in that they praise the humility (of the moneyed) while demeaning those of modest means. As Dutch society of the time experienced a general surplus of wealth, the still life paintings of the culture tried to overcome the object’s lowly regarded status by elevating it with conceptual significance to match the respected mentality and “civility” of the higher classes (the success of this elevation of objects was validated by the upper class consumption of these commodity paintings).

Mundane objects, like those used for the upkeep of personal hygiene, were transformed into objects of value by contrasting their value to that of the laborers and peasants, who “served metaphorically as crude, ill-mannered, unkempt negative examples, as bodies and passions unregulated by mind” (Baldwin, 2011, p.16). In contrast, I am painting this work to claim poor kid culture as a tool and make it the object of rich people’s affections, effectively “elevating” the lower-class coded object, not by increasing its monetary value, but by personifying/humanizing it, and giving it a platform in order to speak about the inherent worth of the demographic it represents. In that Dutch still lifes serve as warnings about the life one leads, and about the spirit’s eligibility for being in good standing with God, they function similarly to the works in *A Pawn’s Toil*, which serve as warnings about one’s behavior, actions, and politics in regards to one’s moral compass. The series does not abide by Dutch society’s respect for civility, and instead creates its tension between idealized and rose-colored nostalgic reflection, and bitter contemporary realities. Wayne (2006, p. 566) suggests that this paradoxical dichotomy makes the still
life genre an especially rich topic for interpretation, “particularly in a cultural setting that is itself caught in a tension between accomplishment and anxiety.” Because these Dutch paintings tackle concerns with material consumption in the culture, but are themselves commodity objects, they contradict themselves. Dutch paintings of the period are a reflection of the imperialist and colonialist tactics of the Dutch government, whose economy flourished under their participation in the thriving business of trafficking slaves, rum, coffee, and other valuables (Martin, 2006, p. 562). Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) is exemplary of this contradicting phenomenon: Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, its subjects, were young diplomats (aged 29 and 25 respectively) looking to document their youthful acquisition of worldly goods and experiences, status, and monetary success, exhibited by de Dinteville’s commission of the double portrait. This painting is at first glance a favorable representation of the two men, decorated in luxurious clothing and positioned in an authoritative and accomplished stance; the gleaming goods of their travels, depicted in a still life behind them, speak to their wealth, their colonial affairs, and their involvement in establishing diplomatic trade relations, among various other tasks. Hans prefaces the foreground of the portrait with a distorted skull, and in doing so, cautions ‘memento mori’. His modest condemnation of commodity, both in the foreground, and more subtly throughout the painting, seems more concerned with romantic notions of civility and general goodness, separate from more pertinent critiques of the corrupt imperialist practices responsible for the initial attainment of many lavish goods.
The use of traditional, realist still life as an attractive entry point to cautionary tales about one’s moral character is as old as the genre itself, but it was revolutionized with Pablo Picasso’s early still lifes. In 1912, with his artwork titled *Bottle of Suze*, he stirred controversy surrounding not only his investigations into collage artwork, but also with his budding anarchist politics. By using ephemeral newspapers, which reported on the impending Great War (fought almost exclusively by the poor), as imagery which reflected the political atmosphere, he made “an important distinction between the beautiful - with an integral relation to moral standards of justice and truth - and the merely pleasurable, which serves at best as simple ‘diversion’” (Leighton, 2009, p. 35).
Pop artists like Andy Warhol most famously repeated supermarket objects on two dimensional surfaces to resemble the consumer goods lining grocery shelves as a comment on the modern consumer-oriented landscape. Later, Audrey Flack used still life objects to talk about the outdated nature of patriarchal values and society, during feminism’s second wave movement in the 1970s; she created her sociopolitical paintings containing stereotypically feminine luxury objects to talk about politics, and question the construction of gender and connotations of femininity. This brief lineage suggests the prolificacy of the still life genre, which has evolved parallel to the most humanitarian ideological developments and political movements.

Pablo Picasso, Bottle of Suze, (1912). Pasted papers, gouache, and charcoal (Kemper Art Museum).

The forgotten toys in *A Pawn’s Toil* exist as byproducts in the maintenance of modern American consumer culture, the ‘parerga’ of the metaphorical consumer landscape. Grootenboer (2005, p. 15) suggests, “[still] life can thus be called the indeterminate residue of representational painting”, a compilation of the “leftovers” and artifacts of a life lived. The parerga in this thesis consists of nearly all “leftovers”, from the toy subjects to the adapted background graphics and text (the television, board game, and cityscape, respectively). They are the essential and cumulative mise en scène of the still life. The still lifes in this series suggest motion and action: a peg flies through the air in *The Gun of America* and oil seeps along the foreground in *Chutes*. The toys share the hardships of navigating the impending demise and displacement that especially personified toys in films like *Toy Story* and *Rudolph [and the] Island of Misfit Toys* must
resist. Judith-Jack Halberstam (2011, p. 30) points out that these contemporary animated films are “deeply interested in social hierarchies”, especially those between parent and child, and between “owner” and “owned”. The characters in the Toy Story franchise, for example, take advantage of their toy bodies in both their fight to remain relevant and entertaining in the eyes of their beloved child owner (Toy Story), and their struggle to resist their value-based imprisonment at the hands of Al the Toy Collector (Toy Story 2), taking on distinct and adaptive characteristics in the process. My still lifes show related scenes of injustice and maltreatment, but there is no main character necessarily within them; the scenes read more like a snapshot of events, a still. The role of main character in the paintings is reserved for the viewer, which holds a similar position in relation to the work as the main, agentive character in a story, encouraged to seek communal support to achieve their liberation. While television and film are potent routes of creation taken to establish characters worthy of consumption, Halberstam (2011, p. 43) suggests that these main characters also “[serve] as a gateway to intricate stories of collective action, anticapitalist critique, group bonding, and alternative imaginings of community, space, embodiment, and responsibility.” Because these paintings are whimsically political and because they make use of the rebellious nature of toy characters, the paintings’ absurdist visual narratives operate parallel to televised, accessible and satirical media for children (as well as adults, in the case of the animated sitcom), which loves to poke subtle fun at modern culture. Animated entertainment uses still life in its settings, and alongside its characters, to further provide contextual detail and definition for them; this is to say that they are further described by their possessions. Because actual human portraits have no place in the paintings, and because the portrait/figure is substituted for unconsidered toys,
the still lifes in this thesis combine the portrait genre (via the subject’s personification) with the parerga of the traditional still life genre that defines and describes. This bridge between genres is significant because it aids the reception of the artwork, helping to rouse empathy, by the objectified, for “objects” of capital. The work attempts to persuade this audience to invest in the longevity of the toy, as well as the person it stands for.

*Toy Story 2*, (1999). Film still (Disney).

Under this realm of nostalgia stirred by toys is where I, through the artwork, aim to take advantage of the audience's sense of empathy and power of resistance. In part because the paintings feature a range of humanoid toys (or toys that have human attributes) as substitutes for groups of people and noted cultural figures, and in part because of the affection people place on their possessions, whether animate or inanimate, the personification of the toys in the artwork is important. According to Vittorio Gallese, a neuroscientist of significance, “Empathy [...] is a human capacity that [...] allows us to understand the world of objects as well as the world of others” (Jeffers, 2010, p. 32), and
it is through this perspective that one might be reminded of their moral obligation to humanity over individual and exclusive self-preservation. I would like to now usher Foucault's (1979, p. 184-185) concept of “the examination”: this is the test which makes it “possible to classify, to quantify, and to punish”; it is the observation of “objects” (or people reduced to their capacity for physical labor and monetary value under the social division of labor) and their “subjection” (to hierarchy's whims and profit based agendas), and how the “subjected” are objectified. To apply the exam to methods of play is to observe the parallel manipulation of toys and people, and recognize a relationship in their respective values according to the socioeconomic elite. In Friedrich von Schiller’s (1794) third letter on art and politics, he mentions that nostalgia does not take us back to our childhoods so much as it motivates us to recreate the future as was the past:

[...] when arrived at maturity, [mankind] recovers his childhood by an artificial process, he founds a state of nature in his ideas, not given him by any experience, but established by the necessary laws and conditions of his reason, and he attributes to this ideal condition an object, an aim, of which he was not cognizant in the actual reality of nature. He gives himself a choice of which he was not capable before, and sets to work just as if he were beginning anew, and were exchanging his original state of bondage for one of complete independence, doing this with complete insight and of his free decision.

This past childhood, he claims, carries with it a nostalgia for an ideal state of freedom which must be possible into adulthood, but is only recognizable once the banality and regulation that comes with age grants relative perspective. This desire for the past manifests into action towards the liberation of themselves and it is the intention of the narrative artworks in *A Pawn’s Toil* to “recover” this childlike state of being. In pursuing one’s liberation, they must enlist the resistance of a community.
Conclusion

All of the aforementioned being said, I recognize that the artwork in this emerging series is most relevant when its viewership is not limited to the upper echelon of gallery-goers. Some of the most powerful and moving artwork has employed relational aesthetics or some public art aspect, of which the possibilities are endless. Tatyana Fazlalizadeh and her wheat-pasted series of portraits entitled *Stop Telling Women to Smile* (2012) have confronted passersby with messages that address the street harassment and gendered injustices faced by femme people. Other artists have taken to billboards (i.e. Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled* (1991) empty beds) or have traveled with their work as performance (like in the case of John Sims’s *Recoloration Proclamation* (2002) and public hanging of the confederate flag). As *A Pawn’s Toil* gives rise to new work and applications, and seeks to reach the most varied audiences, it will integrate into a more public art application. By collaborating with other artists and the varied movements that these paintings align themselves with, poster making, sticker tagging, and other activist avenues of mobilizing information are the next natural development for the presentation of the paintings. By transforming the format of the large scale paintings in this thesis into miniature illustrations, stickers which serve as “Easter eggs” hidden publicly and in plain sight, or posters with added text to advertise movements and actions, the work would further subvert the tools of capital by repurposing them to be used against it. “Tactics, the art of constructing, with located bodies, coded activities and trained aptitudes, mechanisms in which the product of the various forces is increased by their calculated combination are no doubt the highest form of disciplinary practice” (Foucault, 1979, p. 166-167), and therefore “tactics” can also be applied to spaces for
play and “tactics” of rebellion. The act of playing is reliant on a formula combining open physical and metaphorical space, open minds, and open-ended materials, and thus the physics of creative play, secured through the trust and affirmation of those within that space, exists in opposition to Foucault’s concept of the “physics of power”, reliant on callous, correctional surveillance (Brett, 2014, p. 21). By applying these open minded and affirmative characteristics of play to our interpersonal relations, the tactic of mobilization becomes most fruitful. A Pawn’s Toil exhibits childhood’s space for play and experimentation, relevant into adulthood, so that we might be encouraged to play in the political arena. A renewed nostalgia and identification with the toys for adults beckons a call back to the toybox, a call back to empathy, and subsequent action.
References


Appendix

The Political Stance on which *A Pawn’s Toil* is Based

In the United States of America, influencing power and money are intrinsically linked. Evidence of this can be easily found in the ruling government, occupied almost exclusively by people of elevated financial status with a tendency to do everything in their power to grow wealth and influence at all others’ expense: capitalists. While exceptions as to the motives of individual people working within government exist, the government as entity currently threatens fascist rule. This statement is here to establish the deceitfulness of capitalism and hierarchy on which the thesis artwork is based. Neoliberalism is in part to blame, deceptively advocating for the whole of the population by giving way to laissez-faire economics, based on the faciled notion that this gives individuals the freedom to prosper. This makes for fruitful ground for capitalists to accumulate ludicrous amounts of power; now, one sits in the nation’s highest political office. Nationalism, disguised as wholesome patriotism and used as a political tool to gain support, consequently manifests into the thinking of the general population. Tellingly, Americans seem to live by a slew of regressive clichés that lack context, and that are hollow and misleading without it: “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”, “freedom isn’t free.” These sentiments are misinformed but they do imply that hard work and commitment are important staples of moral and patriotic behavior, and Americans are nothing if not devoted. Continued American support for Israel’s colonization of Palestine, which is at its highest in decades across the political spectrum, is exemplary of this, and why should anyone be shocked when North America is colonized land itself. Nationalism as a modern political tool is socialized; it instills nearly blind devotion based
on falsified rhetoric surrounding history, and justifies it with the rational of “tradition”, making little room for opposition. Therefore, the people of the nation are largely placated, either satisfied by the false sense of atmospheric calm that financial stability can provide, or unable to protest their neglect at the hands of U.S. government. The critiques of conservatism in this body of work are obvious; both fiscal and social conservative ideals stand in opposition to humanitarian needs. Additionally, I denounce neoliberal politics which far too often accompany the social democrat, and which advocate for capitalism while publicly making claims to support equal social rights. They advocate for the individual while praising competition among the lowest classes, qualifying their advocacy with the notion that “sacrifices [among the population] must be made”, and letting persuading promises of change fall flat. I am communicating to the audiences of these artworks, especially those with abundant resources to spare, that capitalism cannot continue to operate parallel to revolutionary change, and that to commend and endorse one means to abandon the other.

In both private and public schools across the United States, capitalism is insidiously taught as if it were the only sustainable and viable economic system, though neither of these are true. It does, however, instigate callous competition. Supposedly, it results in the achievement of the “equal-opportunity” American Dream, advertised as being accessible through sheer means of determination and hard work, though it is practically flawed in that it fails to take into account systems of economic and societal privilege (based on race and gender, as well as other factors). I stress the need for early education reform, which teaches of systemic inequality as a preemptive tactic in combating fascist propaganda, as well as considerate collaboration with adolescents.
Otherwise, the phenomenon will remain cyclical: fat cat capitalists frame peoples’ initiatives in forming unions, civil rights laws, and a livable minimum wage as part of communist influence, unamerican and supposedly counterproductive to workers’ liberation. Dogmatic propaganda suggests that financial success is a reward of loyalty; it places patriotism on a moral pedestal. These ideas are geared towards, and convincing to, those workers whose sense of pride is greater than their income. In order to powerfully oppose this rhetoric, one must acquire the time, tools, and education to do so (all requiring money), though these resources are withheld by the gatekeepers of capitol. Foucault (1979, p. 177) provides a great rational for this phenomenon:

Thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the 'physics' of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics, according to a whole play of spaces, lines, screens, beams, degrees and without recourse, in principle at least, to excess, force or violence. It is a power that seems all the less 'corporal' in that it is more subtly 'physical'.

He is here talking about the structural makeup of hierarchies: they train people to police each other with mutual surveillance, to analyze behavior and making judgements based on cultural understandings of normalcy that are established by the hierarchical elite. He details the evolution of a “guild” system - where those functioning within it do so communally and on an equal playing field - into a grander pyramid system where scrutiny is used as a ruling tool. Surveillance trickles down from the “head” so that an individual’s resistant power is most contained in the lowest tiers, and individual power towards the “head” goes comparatively and virtually unchecked. This discipline/control is taught via a system of reward and punishment. Punishment in this case is not physical, but mental; people are manipulatively willed into adhering to the rat race in exchange for its “rewards”. Foucault goes on to give an example of discipline in the context of the
École Militaire: students’ uniforms are marked to distinguish the well behaved from the unruly. Individual privileges are used as rewards to encourage obedience and peer policing among the collective students. This execution of discipline bares an alarming resemblance to the methods of discipline used in the elementary schools of the United States, where color coded cards symbolize a range of student behavior and the rewards and consequences associated with each to distinguish the rule abiding student from the “delinquent”. They are used to encourage elementary students to take an active part in managing the classroom and surveying their peers.

"The art of punishing, in the régime of disciplinary power, [...] refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed. It differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move. [...] it normalizes. (Foucault, 1979, p. 182-183)

Specifically within early childhood education, “the art of punishing” socializes. It makes individuals “know their place” among their small hierarchy of peers. Foucault’s talk of socializing/normalizing this practice of judgement is most recognizable in its manifestation among children: one child casually remarks on the condition of another’s worn clothing or hand-me-down toys, resulting in the subject’s recognition of their economic status as compared to the status of the child from whom the critique came, and the negative association with that status. This class status is internalized as a poor reflection of them self and the drive to advance in a broader national context is instilled over time, not by merit of moral goodness and skill but by merit of productivity, efficiency, and one’s ability to invest in the economy in determining individual worth.

Contrasting punishment as a disciplining force, and in part driving children, as well as all others, to be disciplined under hierarchy, is the offer of a reward (i.e. a toy
object for a job well done or monetary compensation for work performed). In a global
economy where power and money go hand in hand, the “rewards” of capital are the
primary motivating forces of the population, necessary for their immediate survival.
Increasingly, however, the “reward” for one’s service either is insufficient or goes
undelivered altogether, regardless of the nature or demand of the work. Working class
people are manipulated by capitalism: overworked and undercompensated, the resulting
stress, inability to meet one’s needs and desires, and lack of fulfillment means the
deregulation of desire, and the increased likelihood that one might seek substitutes for the
needs and desires they struggle to meet. This phenomenon can be attributed in part to the
implementation of the 40-hour work week around the time of the industrial revolution,
where the prescription for each day became 8 hours work, 8 hours rest, and 8 hours
leisure. This breakdown leaves no room for time commitments such as travel to and from
the workplace, household maintenance and family care, or the day’s lunch break, all of
which sap time from the sleep and leisure slices of the pie. The deregulation of desire is
instigated by a system of profit and its correlation to the comforts of leisure, meaningful
work, and individual autonomy. Consumer objects become one substitute for the
promised but undelivered rewards of labor and loyalty when the supposed rewards of
ormalcy (a manageable and meaningful living) are unobtainable. Those families
specifically who fall victim to capitalism’s unrelenting greed influence further
generations. In regards to this, studies have shown that an individual will usually
replicate the financial constraints of their childhood into adulthood, similarly limiting
social and financial opportunity and mobility. To combat this repetition of history, I
advocate for the people’s participation in efforts to defy capitalist/hierarchal agendas and, more broadly, for a radical redistribution of the nation’s wealth and resources.