

DOLLS FOR BOYS: MAKE HIM A MONSTER

by

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The problem with today's man is not one of inherent toxicity but one of prescribed, inherited toxicity perpetuated by patriarchy, a societal system that would see male dominance survive at any cost, even at the mental, emotional and physical destruction of the man himself (Goldberg, *The New Male* 5). My BFA thesis in art, *Dolls for Boys: Make Him a Monster*, is a series of sculptures, prints and an accompanying editioned artist book that strive to highlight what the founder of the Montessori Method of Education and one of the world's first children's rights activists, Dr. Maria Montessori, might describe as the willful destruction of a boy's psychic spiritual development as he is indoctrinated into masculine performance, a disembodied, unnatural mode of living that is repressive to the boy's humanity. Montessori's admonishment lends voice to the plea I make visually with *Dolls for Boys*: "Do not erase the designs the child makes in the soft wax of his inner life." It is not the right of society to undo what is innate in all children, "the vitality of their spirit, the maximum effort put forth in all they do, the intuition, attention and focus they bring to all life's events, and the sheer joy they experience in living" (Montessori 33).

*Dolls for Boys*, as a concept, was built around Toxic Toby, a monstrous face I used to revisit in one sketch after another while daydreaming, a face that quickly found its way into my prints as I undertook an artist's practice for the first time in my degree program at the University of Nevada, Reno. Toby was the embodiment of the toxicity I saw within myself as I struggled in therapy to reclaim the humanity stolen from me through masculine performance, which, for most of my adult life, saw my ego and intellect informing my values and driving my behavior. To cope with the pressures of performance without access to a rich emotional landscape or a support system, I began relying ever more heavily on self-destructive habits. The most dangerous of these was a severe eating disorder, orthorexia, characterized by an unnatural preoccupation with

health and wellness prompting extreme restriction. Whenever I'd draw Toby, it would seem as if his mouth—gaping, dripping, terrifying—was overtaking his whole face, seething with a hunger that could never be sated. At the worst of my disorder, I was literally starving, only allowed, by my own rules, to eat chicken breast and broccoli (two foods that seem bizarrely arbitrary in hindsight, mostly because they were arbitrary). By the time I sought treatment in 2018, my disorder had morphed into bulimia, a behavioral pattern so disturbing, frightening and humiliating that I could no longer deny its nature. Though I didn't understand it immediately, Toxic Toby's need was an artistic interpretation of my own desperate need for sustenance, and, more abstractly, my desperate need to be the perfect male achiever in all aspects of my life, from the size and shape of my body to the sum in my bank account to the accolades on my resume—all of which, my disordered mind believed, would make me valuable.

One day, a mentor in printmaking, Professor Sam Buchanan, asked me about Toby. In particular, she was curious why I never rendered him with a body. I didn't have an answer, but it occurred to me that Toby had yet to reach his potential. He was already a symbol of my disordered eating, but with some thought and effort, he could become symbolic in my artistic research as well. What would Toby's body look like if he had one? Immediately, I knew Toby's body would symbolize an "appropriate" male body, meaning an idealized male body, which is what I'd been striving for throughout my disordered years (the disordered brain struggles to understand that starvation undermines whatever disordered exercise one might engage in to build the heavily muscled or athletic physique that obsesses our culture).

Here, there came a dilemma. By this time, I was beginning to explore thematic content for my thesis work, and while disordered eating in men was briefly considered, I believed the topic too narrow. I didn't want to make work about my disorder; I wanted to make work about

what *caused* my disorder. The writer in me knows that an act is never as compelling as the motivation behind it, so I needed to examine why my disorder took root to begin with. Perhaps instead of an appropriate male body, I reasoned, Toby should *become* an appropriate male by patriarchal standards, just as all boys must when policed and punished into the extremely rigid male gender role they'll play throughout life (*The Mask You Live In*). Thus, Toxic Toby was reimagined as a demented children's book character, the leader of a ragtag team of toxic buddies, collectively known as Team Toxic, whose mission is to bring more boys into the fold by teaching them how to be "good" men. Children's picture books are one of any society's first tools of indoctrination, a fact not questioned but celebrated in the recent publication of *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Little Golden Book*. Therein, longtime Golden Book editor Diane Muldrow proudly proclaims, "We at Golden Books think there's a good chance that many of us learned pretty much everything that really matters about life from what we read between those sturdy, guilt-bound cardboard covers" (4). A critical reader must ask "Everything that really matters to whom?" and "Matters why? To what end?" which is not to say Little Golden Books, specifically, are problematic. Only to say that children's books are tools of manipulation—as all writing is.

To emulate the way capitalist society bombards children with storybook franchises on multiple fronts, I rendered each boy in Team Toxic—with names like Tainted Ted, Rotten Robby, Noxious Ned and Curdled Kurt—in multiple ways: as sculptural "dolls" (a play on gender norms), as screen prints (to bring the characters to life in an animated/illustrative way), and as letterpress printed images in an artist book modeled after a Little Golden Book. Because *Dolls for Boys* was meant to be the culmination of my art-school tenure, my intent in rendering the characters in three different ways—each presenting different aesthetic qualities—was to

showcase a well-rounded printmaking practice, stretching the limits of my skillset by featuring relief, serigraphy and letterpress in one show. The addition of sculptural work was the most challenging aspect because I'd yet to receive formal training in sculpture. Because of limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, my only class in sculpture asked me to employ a hot glue gun and my wits, which, I'm proud to say, I made much of in *Dolls for Boys*. By making every print a sculpture and every sculpture a print (I consider artist books sculptures, as well), I was able to showcase my current transition from mere printmaker to multidisciplinary artist.

Each character in Team Toxic embodies a different aspect of patriarchy's vision of masculinity, and each is characterized by his own nursery rhyme, which details the character's unhealthy traits and value system. Toxic Toby represents heroism, so his body is a fire truck (because Toby existed before the other characters, and because he means a great deal to me personally, I gave him the role all men most want to play, even if the pressures of such a role are crushing and demeaning). Sour Sam, the baseball bat, represents competitiveness. Curdled Kurt, the chalkboard, represents moral and intellectual authority. Rotten Robby, the train engine, represents entitlement. Gangrenous Gregg, the football, represents brute strength. Putrid Paul, the computer, represents stoicism and emotional muteness. Moldy Mark, the tool chest, represents problem solving. Fetid Frank, the rocket ship, represents fearlessness. Tainted Ted, the rocking horse, represents independence and self-reliance. Noxious Ned, the piggy bank, represents status and success. Stagnant Stan, the pop gun, represents violence. And Rancid Ronny, the wagon, represents responsibility. One might wonder what's so wrong with values like independence or responsibility, but any quality can become toxic if exercised to an extreme, just as any substance can be lethal if over imbibed. This is why I avoid the term *toxic masculinity*, striving always for specificity in my language. One cannot be toxically masculine, but he can be toxically ambitious

or toxically self-reliant or toxically heroic. To survive, patriarchy must push the segregation of gender to its binary extreme, so any masculine trait is actually *meant* to be overindulged.

Therefore, the “toxic” man is not toxic; his indulgence is.

For the sculptures, each “appropriate male body” was procured through a rigorous search on eBay and in vintage and antique shops. I wanted toys that would feel lived with but also battered, neglected or otherwise ravaged by rough play and age—in this way, the bodies would visually suggest both the ideals of masculine performance *and* the rot such behavior wreaks on one’s spirit. I also specifically wanted toys dating to the Cold-War era, wherein American culture saw extreme heteronormativity and patriarchal control of the family and public sphere, a way of life marketed by the federal government as necessary to mitigate the threat of communist states like the USSR. Providing a glimpse into the political factors that fed into patriarchy at the time and resonated for decades thereafter, professor of women and gender studies at San Francisco State University, Dr. Nan Alamilla Boyd writes, “The postwar threat of nuclear annihilation sparked the development of national policies that influenced new social and sexual standards. National security, at least on the domestic front, seemed to depend on the solidification of masculine authority and the stability of heterosexual families” (84). Another factor in my search was the desire to find toys that would be marketed specifically to boys, including sports equipment, moving vehicles, and toys to develop the intellect. Through imaginative play, children prepare themselves for their eventual roles in society, so it was important to critique the way we gender toys to such extremes that stereotypes about appropriate work for men and women still exist even today (Plank 197). Two of my favorite finds were the baseball bat and the tool chest, because both included direct nods to the target market, and I was glad to include my own chalkboard from my childhood in the 1980s. Perhaps the most critical purchase was that of

the fire engine. Because this would be Toxic Toby's body, it needed to be particularly large, detailed and magnificent, just the type of fire engine any privileged boy would expect to find beneath the tree on Christmas morning. Indeed, the fire engine became my most expensive purchase at nearly one hundred dollars. It was worth every cent.

Once the doll bodies were procured, I could focus on the heads, the faces of which were derived from original pencil sketches drawn in random, visceral bursts of creativity. While I briefly considered tailoring each to a specific body (a cowboy hat for the rocking horse or a pig nose for the piggy bank, say), I ultimately decided the faces should be assigned randomly. I didn't want to make any obvious aesthetic choices because every man responds to his role in patriarchy differently, some remaining more human and others becoming more beastly (or some pretending to be more human while others play at being beasts to gain the respect of their equally unhealthy peers). The psychological process of male performance is complicated, as unpredictable as it is uniformly affecting. The successful man wears many masks, ever code-shifting to meet the needs of a particular situation, ever disingenuous, ever compartmentalizing rather than integrating (Goldberg, *The Hazards of Being Male* 43), so I didn't want my viewer to quickly and easily process what he was seeing in any given character or in that character's relation to the others. For these reasons, I also avoided creating a team of characters with primarily shared traits (like the Seven Dwarves or Alvin and the Chipmunks, for example). One positive effect of this approach was that the resulting characters did not come across as cartoonish—illustrative, yes, but still existing in the realm of fine art rather than the world of commercial art. In other words, the members of Team Toxic are meant to *represent* the selling of manipulative ideas to children rather than actually sell ideas to children. However, by emulating children's literature, they *do* sell the idea that masculine performance is harmful in a didactic

way, so while there's a great deal of nuance and sophistication in the making of *Dolls for Boys*, there is no nuance whatsoever in what the work wants viewers to learn. In this way, the dolls act as both a critique of didacticism and, in their supposed moral authority, a didactic lesson for the viewer.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the faces has to do with one of my most toxic male traits: perfectionism. Like most men, I struggle to believe I'm allowed to fail or come up short, so even in something as low-risk as art-making, my lack of skill in drawing causes incredible anxiety; this is one of the main reasons most of my work isn't figurative. I knew I'd never complete the twelve faces unless I relieved myself of any pressure to render them in a particular way (and indeed, I wasted literal months *not* drawing faces because the pressure to get them right, whatever that even meant, was petrifying). I'd just sketch a face or two per day, I reasoned, the designs purely spontaneous and not influenced by the others. Anything I hated would be thrown out, and anything I liked would become one of the characters in Team Toxic. Once I hit twelve faces, I'd never have to draw anything ever again. While this affirmation was, of course, a lie, it came in handy as a terrifying look at the calendar marked with my upcoming exhibition forced me to face my anxiety.

Such an approach may appear unprofessional—because it is—but there is a historical precedent that validates my cavalier tactics and the mental-health issues that prompted them. Writing for *Artland*, Neomi Martin explains the history of Art Brut, also known as outsider art, the movement in art history I most readily identify with.

Outsider Art emerged from psychiatrists' research on asylum inmates in the early twentieth century, who discovered that creative expression could flourish beyond the pre-established conventions of art. In the 1920s, the world was thus introduced to a number of astonishing artworks, products of the uncanny and powerful products of a naïve creative strength, emerging from the channeling of a sincere and unbiased intuition.



While my mental-health issues aren't nearly as severe or challenging as those of patients in residential programs, my artist's practice did begin as an extension of my treatment. In fact, long before I knew of Art Brut, I took to calling myself a "therapeutic artist." With this title, I was trying to validate myself and my work within the contemporary art world—I knew I was a real artist with real talent, not just a sick man struggling to articulate trauma so degrading and painful that rendering it visually was my only means of opening up about it. I also wanted to acknowledge that my practice was, at that time, exclusively aimed at healing my mind, body and emotional landscape from years of self-harm and repression. Though I was taking in a great deal of formal training, I always worked from the raw, stunted and even animalistic parts of my psyche. If an inner child existed within me, it was he who was becoming a printmaker. In her description of Art Brut, Martin speaks to my approach to drawing the faces of the characters in *Dolls for Boys*. Art Brut was "meant to encompass the artistic creativity of minds sheltered from external influences, able to produce spontaneous and immediate artistic responses to their surroundings" (Martin).

Though this method left me wondering if some of the faces could have been stronger had I planned ahead or sketched more images to choose from, I loved that much of the spontaneity expressed in my early drawings of Toxic Toby carried over into a body of work that, by the nature of printmaking, could only present as incredibly refined due to the multi-step matrix-making processes that see an original sketch to a finished print. The act of printing is, to my reasoning, a metaphor for the taming of my inner Toxic Toby, who, in his most natural state, is exceedingly childish, rabid, impulsive, aggressive, and emotional—anything but refined.

Perhaps because my life has been so influenced by Toxic Toby, or perhaps because I'm a marginalized gay man of color, I'm also intrigued by another aspect of Art Brut: its disregard for

the ideals of the academy and methodology that, to my reasoning, serve to uphold white supremacy and sexism. This attitude doesn't exist in harmony with my toxic perfectionism or toxic over-achieving, to be sure, but the complexity of my formal training and my disdain for the systems that created it do yield compelling works, so the tension isn't a bad thing. If I'm a wild beast of an artist at heart, printmaking is the cage I live in and the master who tames me, evidenced by my attention to formal concerns and professionalism in my prints and editions, regardless of how raw my subject matter.

Troubled by the wildness lost in the digital refinement of the screen-printed heads, I chose to honor the outsider artist in me as best I could by rendering the heads of the sculptures in one of the most aggressive ways a printmaker can: relief cut. Early on, I discovered my style with cutting tools is rather primitive, and, perhaps coincidentally, I feel more comfortable with cutting gouges in my hand than with a pencil or pen. I printed these matrixes on unbleached muslin stained with tea—representative of the buildup of stains on a man's spirit as he harms himself and others in pursuit of masculine ideals—then sewed and stuffed the heads with straw and fluff, nods to the brainwashing and cognitive dissonance inherent in male performance. Unlike the hyper colorful screen and letterpress prints, I printed these heads in a deep sepia (a color I associate with rot), and only added brighter colors in a layer of crude marks sewn with embroidery thread, my nod to the male tendency to appropriate the artistic disciplines of women, often doing so while disregarding the level of skill a well-practiced woman might bring to the material. Here too is an example of the outsider artist in me. I've had plenty of time to formally learn sewing, embroidery and needlepoint since I was first drawn to the artforms in 2019, but I've grown ever more committed to *not* learning them in a formal way, instead teaching myself, cultivating a style of thread-based mark-making that feels authentic to me.

While the actual assembly of each sculpture was carried out with a drill, dowels and a remarkable number of hot glue sticks, hiding this work makes it appear that each head was brutally attached to its body with either nails, screws, rope, wire, bolts or duct tape—binding items associated with male-dominated work. Here, I illustrate a violating, violent and extremely destructive act: the willful detachment of a boy's intellect and ego (which, for the purposes of this work, we'll say reside in the head) from his spirit and emotional center (which we'll say reside in his body). The boy's real body (spirit) now discarded, the intellect is allowed to fester, birthing the monster patriarchy would have the boy become. While a boy doesn't literally lose his body as he's conditioned into his role as a man, he does lose his intuitive connection with it. Dr. Herb Goldberg, one of history's most respected voices regarding gender conditioning, writes of what he calls the "body-psychotic condition," perhaps the most abstract consequence of masculinity's disdain of self-care but the very consequence that creates a stable breeding ground for the concrete ones. As a boy ages, his conditioning makes it easier and easier for him to disregard his own safety and health in pursuit of male performance, not because he grows more foolish with the years but because he grows more disembodied. Men have "lost touch with their bodies. In effect, one could say they have *no body*, in the same way the psychotic personality has lost his sense of self and has *no self*" (*The New Male* 31). What Goldberg is getting at is that the man does not merely ignore the physical signs of danger, emotional troubles or poor health. He grows *unable* to see and feel the signs, nurturing an internal landscape ripe for self-destruction.

The nature of masculinity is such that the male is unable even to recognize that he is in hazard. His life seems to him to be totally in his control. Unaccustomed to self-examination, he blocks out awareness of the way he lives and the conditioning that created it. He stoically accepts his lot as a given, or at best a challenge that the "real man" will accept and cope with and only the "sissy" will not. (*The New Male* 8-9)

Thus, the well-performing man is left to rely disproportionately on his intellect, and particularly his ego, to make it through life, his emotional core and even his physicality replaced with the inauthentic posturing he's been prescribed. His ego, now severely overtaxed, replaces self-worth with self-importance, and easily confuses the two.

In the screen prints, I employed oil pastel to render the bodies in crayon-like marks, an obvious nod to the creative tools of children, pointing to the painful work the boy must himself commit to in order to become the man. In the artist book, which I have yet to complete, I will render the bodies in halftone printed photographs in an effort to evoke old comic books from the Cold-War, another aesthetic choice designed to link all the pieces—sculptures, prints, artist book—thematically. The boys growing up in this time of extremely limited gender expression are the very men most derided today by younger generations for their regressive thinking—including racism, sexism and homophobia. I'd never excuse a man's toxic behavior, as each of us must be held accountable if we are to change, but it is worth noting that every man who ever earned an "okay, boomer" was once a boy who could not consent to his conditioning, as was every man who ever found his head on a spike.

Having described the various printing methods involved in this body of work, I'd like to unpack what I believe to be one of the most remarkable achievements of *Dolls for Boys*: the aesthetic cohesion of purposefully disparate parts. When I would speak about what I was planning to do or describe what I was trying to achieve, I was met with skepticism. Images made with ink drawing and child-like crayon scribbling shouldn't work together aesthetically. Soft sculpture heads shouldn't be aesthetically pleasing when paired with cold, hard readymade toys. I wasn't afraid of combining wildly different styles because the heads and bodies were never meant to exist in harmony. If they looked off, it would only be because their pairing represented

an unnatural mode of existence. However, the sophisticated artist in me, the one who puts the outsider artist on a leash, understood that *disparate* is not synonymous with *ugly*, that the work didn't have to fail at pleasing the eye to succeed at making its point. This led to formal decisions that, perhaps covertly, lent the pieces just enough cohesion to work. In the prints, both the crayon marks and the pen marks were screen printed in the same colors of ink, and the pen marks were intentionally thickened digitally before screen exposure to lend them more weight so they could compete with the crayon-based bodies, owning their space in the overall composition. To lend cohesion to the sculptures, I avoided heavy colors in the printed heads, instead leaning toward the colors of rust and age that were apparent in many of the readymade bodies. I also distressed the edges of the fabric, reflecting the breakdown seen in the bodies. In this way, the soft sculpture reflected the decay of the toys, if not the tactile qualities of them.

These choices led to a compelling outcome I didn't recognize until the exhibition was installed: the more fully dimensional the character, the more honestly his sickness and dysfunction shined through. The sculptures came across as creepy, cruel and disturbing, a deliberate perversion of the objects many men associate with their best memories from childhood. The prints, on the other hand, came across as gleefully evil, joyful in their bright colors, the innocence of the crayon marks marred only by the facial expressions and sculptural binding elements at the necks. Enclosed in boyish attempts at framing with pallet boards, the prints, taken as a whole, suggested the camaraderie and even intimacy one would find in a boys' crudely-built clubhouse, a place symbolic of the boys'-club mindset that begins to exclude, other, and eventually objectify girls and women. The prints in the artist book, the only versions that will be rendered in a mere two dimensions, will be the most deceiving of all. Bright and engaging, free of any hint that the marriage of head and body is a vicious, ruinous act, the only

indication of something amiss with the characters in this iteration will be the devilish expressions on their faces, which, when viewed through the playful lens provided by the text, may merely come across as the naughty expressions of little monsters, not so much creepy as mischievous. Though this outcome was unintentional, I appreciate that it speaks to a phenomenon seen in masculine performance: the realer (more dimensional) the piece, the more honest the piece. In patriarchy, many of the ideals of manhood don't appear to be toxic at first glance. It's only in their practice by real boys and men that their inherent toxicity becomes apparent.

Though I'm glad the work succeeds formally, I have always been more concerned with the work's conceptual success, which, despite my years of schooling, I struggled to situate in the greater context of art history. The key to finding this work's place in the larger picture, I discovered, was to first recognize its historical and cultural place independent of art. This is because I've never taken inspiration from other artists, past or present (which is not to say I don't respect them or am not a fan of many of them; only to say that the art of others is something I experience as a viewer, not as a fellow artist looking for a tribe or a lineage). This is why it came as a pleasant surprise when I discovered the obvious: *Dolls for Boys* fits squarely in a well-known movement in art history, the feminist art movement of the 1970s.

While not directly inspired by this movement or its leader, Judy Chicago, *Dolls for Boys* is inspired by women's liberation, which is to say that if second-wave feminism exists in art history, and its goal is to contribute creatively to the undermining of patriarchy and the advancement of women, *Dolls for Boys* does not exist as a unique work of men's liberation art (for no such art movement exists) but as a drop in the bucket of a decades-long movement of *feminist* art. Take as evidence, the words of Faith Wilding, an artist involved in Chicago's

Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College (now California State University, Fresno), which echo much of my experience as a man making art about being a man.

As each woman spoke [in class] it became apparent that what had seemed to be purely personal experiences were actually shared by all other women: we were discovering a common oppression based on our gender, which was defining our roles and identities as women. In subsequent group discussions, we analyzed the social and political mechanisms of this oppression, thus placing our personal histories in a larger cultural perspective. (Meyer 56)

My goals, too, reflect those of Chicago's program. Laura Meyer, author of "From Finish Fetish to Feminism: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* in California Art History," states, "The primary goal of the Feminist Art Program at Fresno was to help women art students gain a positive sense of identity, both by encouraging them to expand their ambitions and free themselves from stereotypical conceptions of what Chicago called 'the female role' and by affirming the validity of 'female experience' as artistic content" (56).

Men's liberation *is* feminism. One of the best ways a man can exercise a feminist value system is to perform the challenging work of self-liberation while encouraging other men to do the same. This work generally requires a great deal of study to understand how the system of patriarchy works, its links to white supremacy, sexism, misogyny, colonialism and imperialism. Patriarchy doesn't want men, particularly straight white men, to understand their oppression or the oppression of anyone else, so this quest to raise consciousness must be taken on intentionally and with rigor. Any man who's freed himself of the shackles of his gender performance is likely to be a learned ally to women and queer identities. This is how a man arms himself to fight *alongside* women, not merely cheer them on in ignorance and impotence. In essence, *Dolls for Boys* is the most tangible example of feminist activism in my artistic career.

It is my hope that viewers of *Dolls for Boys*, particularly men, recognize something of themselves in the characters and that this recognition brings about critical self-reflection, the first

step in radical change and healing from the trauma of male conditioning. Many men fear change because they believe it might undermine their manhood, but nothing could be further from the truth. Liberation asks one to become more fully what he truly is, not less. If more men were to recognize the oppression of patriarchy for what it is, a condition that harms them far more covertly than it does women, a sea change may finally come, resulting in a world where we see men living as flexibly, fully and joyfully as their unbridled, innate potential allows.



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