

Visual and Material Culture: Play | Ulrich Museum of Art Collection



Heidi Zumbrun
American, born 1965

Rabbit, 1999
Duraflex print
Museum Purchase
2003.6

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Zumbrun's maimed and damaged Rabbit question notions of beauty and physical imperfection, issues that are personally significant for the artist. In 1996, Zumbrun underwent a surgical procedure to remove a tumor from the base of her skull that left her with partial facial paralysis. During recovery, the artist adopted a puppy named Walter who soon became her creative collaborator. The subjects of Zumbrun's photographs are Walter's ravaged chew toys—sweet and vulnerable stuffed animals that are the victims of excessive love and physical trauma. Identifying with the traumatized toys, Zumbrun made starkly clinical photographs of them that mirror her own size, thereby magnifying their imperfections and underscoring their human comparisons. In this sense, the disfigured and vulnerable stuffed animal in Rabbit stands as a compelling self-portrait of the artist. Against a pristine and glowing white background, the specimen-like figure cannot hide its physical flaws or traumatic history.



Kojo Griffin

American, born 1971

***Untitled (girls at birthday party)*, 2003**

Acrylic and graphite collage on wood panel

Museum Purchase

2003.19

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Atlanta painter Kojo Griffin plumbs the depths of human malfeasance in psychologically-loaded paintings that frequently feature rag dolls and stuffed animals. Embodying human characteristics, Griffin's characters play out believable domestic narratives laced with uncertainty. In this work, a child's birthday party—which is usually considered an innocent, happy occasion—is depicted as an event fraught with despair and awkwardness. A despondent green little girl sits alone, isolated from the joyous goings-on of the party. Her vacant, downward-looking stare and singularity within the composition makes one aware of the many different possibilities as to why she is excluded. Whatever the case may be, the viewer is made to rethink the superficially positive ideas that they associate with childhood.



Davis & Davis

American, Denise born 1959, Scott born 1954

Tack Boy, 1998

C-print

Museum Purchase

2004.3

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With his mouth open wide in surprise or pain, we might assume that bruised little Tack Boy has just jumped off of the chair next to him—on the receiving end of a childish prank. In this playtime scenario, we are reminded of how children can transfer feelings of pain and shame onto their dolls or stuffed toys, allowing them to unburden harmful emotions and distance themselves from the source of trauma. Relentlessly harassed by mean-spirited peers, the doll in Tack Boy is a victim with whom we can all identify—an imaginary recreation of a real event in the life of a child.



Davis & Davis

American, Denise born 1959, Scott born 1954

Dottie, 1998

C-print

Museum Purchase

2004.4

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According to the husband and wife team of Davis & Davis, the dolls that populate their photographs have experienced a horrible trauma or have expressed a problematic behavior that has led to their being cast out by their original owners. These abandoned toys rescued from parking lots, playgrounds, and thrift stores, are cast in dramatic reenactments of the imaginary events that brought about their expulsion. In *Dottie*, a cute little girl with pigtails stands naked before a mirror. Given her polka-dotted body, we might conclude that she was afflicted by illness or disease, perhaps something that was highly contagious, degenerative, or possibly fatal. Isolated from the others toys, she was perhaps quickly relegated to the toy box where she was soon forgotten. Or, maybe *Dottie* was discarded because she was no longer physically perfect, or had issues with her body and sexual identity. Whatever the scenario, the tainted *Dottie* met with the same outcome—she was no longer loved.



David Levinthal
American, born 1949

Untitled, 1989
From the series American Beauties
Polaroid Polacolor ER land film
Museum Purchase
2001.10

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David Levinthal
American, born 1949

Untitled, 1994
From the series Wild West
Polaroid Polacolor ER land film
Museum Purchase
2001.12

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Since the early 1970s, David Levinthal has been photographing toys and dolls. His arrangements of these objects take inspiration from diverse media images—WWII photographs in Life magazine, film noir stills, cowboy television programs, 1950s Hollywood pin-ups, and even mail-order catalogues. By using toys, Levinthal blurs the line between fact and fiction and asks the viewer to reconsider the world of popular images. In doing so, he questions such continuing myths as the macho cowboy and accepted sexualized representations of women as bathing beauties. In Levinthal's hands, toys serve as both comforting symbols of childlike innocence and iconic characters in an unsettling reality.



Reverend Ethan Acres

American, born 1970

***Face vs. Heel: The Battle for the Soul of John Travolta*, 2003**

Performance and mixed-media installation

Museum Purchase

2004.7

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An artist and practicing minister whose goal in both art and life is to “put the ‘fun’ back into fundamentalism,” the Reverend Ethan Acres creates works that provoke humor and simultaneously explore the serious subject of Christianity. For the past several years he has been busy spreading the Word through a variety of unconventional channels--staging performances, delivering sermons from a converted trailer-home he calls the Highway Chapel, and producing mixed media works based on Biblical passages and pop culture. The unexpected union of off-the-wall antics and sincere liturgical celebration is what gives Acres’ work its unique punch. Acres’ unabashed religious fervor points to a new strain in postmodern art—the embrace of religion as part of culture. Although most Western-trained artists have been influenced by Western religious art, either directly through imagery or indirectly through ethics, few have felt free to broach the subject, much less promulgate it as Acres does. His art, while good-natured and funny, is absolutely sincere. According to the artist, his work is often misconstrued as ironic. “It’s the most common misconception people have, but I hope my art presents Christianity in a new and interesting way,” he says. “I grew up around hell fire and brimstone, but what touched me most was laughter in church. I believe humor is just as powerful an expression of faith as terror or guilt.” And humor is in the forefront of this work, which depicts Jesus and a devil-like L. Ron Hubbard (the founder of Scientology) fighting for a celebrity’s soul.



JeongMee Yoon
South Korean, born 1969

***Emily and Her Pink Things*, 2005**
Lightjet print
Museum purchase
2008.2

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JeongMee Yoon
South Korean, born 1969

***Yerim and Her Pink Things*, 2007**
Lightjet print
Museum purchase
2008.3

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These photographs come from JeongMee Yoon's Pink Project, a series inspired by her 5-year-old daughter, Seowoo, who loved all things pink. After carefully arranging all of Seowoo's pink belongings in her room, Yoon photographed the child. The project expanded to include similar portraits of other young girls in the U.S., where the artist then lived, and then children in her native South Korea. Regardless of geographic or cultural location, the images are strikingly similar: a young girl, dressed in pink, becomes lost in an array of pink clothing, toys, and other objects. Whether in the U.S. or Korea, pink pervades the desires and identities of many young girls as well as certain products and brands. Collectively, the photographs in Yoon's series raise a rich array of questions about gender stereotypes, an increasingly globalized consumer culture, and how children's identities and understandings of the world are shaped by commercial marketing.



Nic Nicosia

American, born 1951

***Near (modern) Disaster #2*, 1983**

Cibachrome (TM)
Museum Purchase
2002.9.2

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Nic Nicosia

American, born 1951

***Untitled (Sam!)*, 1986**

Cibachrome (TM)
Museum Purchase
2002.9.1

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For more than twenty years, Nic Nicosia has been exploring suburban middle-American life—and its often humorous and dark underbelly—in his photographs and films. Nicosia is among a group of artists who gained recognition in the late 1970s and early 1980s by using staged photography to challenge the notion of the medium’s authority as a recorder of fact. Iconic early work such as *Near (modern) Disaster #2* and *Untitled (Sam)* self-consciously expose the artifice of photography through a multitude of conventions: the expressive use of unreal color, the staging of exaggerated gestures and expressions, and by drawing attention to obvious technical seams. Sometimes taking more than a month each to complete, these large-scale color photographs were created on elaborate full-size stage sets that Nicosia built himself. The artist’s friends, family, and acquaintances were enlisted to overact slapstick scenes of chaos and melodrama inspired by (but always a bit weirder than) everyday life. Central to all of Nicosia’s work is an innate sense of humor—an underlying wit that is also subtly evident in all his recent work.



Nic Nicosia

American, born 1951

***Middletown*, 1997**

Video
Museum Purchase
2002.12

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