

In her installation “Play is Practice”, artist Barbara Ryan utilizes bright colors, nostalgia, and the lure of sweet treats to initially seduce the viewer into the space, and into a conversation. Small printed toy guns line the walls like prizes at a carnival. The old-fashioned plastic prize egg dispenser entices the audience to participate and even rewards them for it. Object studies of plastic toy guns may conjure in the viewer fond memories of childhood games like “Cowboys and Indians” or “Space Invaders”. Finally, a wall of mouthwatering candies may incite a psychological reaction of comfort, pleasure, and satiation.

But the artist herself describes this body of work as “saccharine and deceptive”, as initial reactions of pleasure and sweet nostalgia ultimately lead to a larger conversation about our history, our American mythology, and the way in which we continue to feel the negative impact of that mythology.

Parts of culture manifest in material form. In her treatment of these artifacts, she seeks to elucidate the ways they signify. A cheap, plastic toy Six Shooter is not simply a symbol of gendered play, but a symbol of the American West, our historical glorification of Gunslingers, and our notoriously gun-crazed society. It is in moments of national crisis like the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary or the movie theatre massacre in Aurora that we feel the consequences of that history. And yet, these commodities continue to be sold in dollar stores across the nation to children as a plaything. Put your fifty cents in the dispenser, and along with a flaccid felt gun, you will see that the artist is donating that money to the Children’s Defense Fund.

For the artist, the metaphysical implications of these deceptively benign objects are symbolized by their shadows. Indeed, in the series of paintings, the shadow is often given compositional preference. One might notice how the paintings themselves cast shadows on the wall, and the seductively rotund shadow cast from the sculptural object in the corner. The shadows cast from the works themselves reminds us that, like the artifacts which they record, they too are physical manifestations of a specific time, place, and consciousness is American history.

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