




Spring 2022

Toys Are for Adults

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THESIS APPROVAL

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Toys Are for Adults:
An Exploration in Collecting Toys
and Why We Love Them.

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of Jacksonville State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
with a Major in Visual Communication

By

John Wippler

Jacksonville, Alabama

May 6, 2022

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John Edward Wippler IV

May 6, 2022

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of toys what they are and for whom they are made. The paper also provides a brief history of designer toys and pop culture, and how pop culture helped fuel the designer toy industry. The psychology of collecting is also referenced, and a direct correlation is made between the act of collecting toys and toy popularity.

The book I wrote is also mentioned and is a vital part of the purpose for the thesis. The book is an introductory guide to resin toymaking and is integral to the expansion of the designer toy community.

vii, 28 pages.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my professors within the Department of Art and Design at Jacksonville State University for their wisdom, knowledge, and guidance. If not for them, I would not be where I am today.

To my incredible wife, thanks for loving me and for being patient. You are the best, and I love you endlessly. To my two boys, may you always experiment, explore, relish the joys of life, and never stop playing with toys. To my parents, thanks for everything and for always supporting me.

John Wippler

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INTRODUCTION

For whom are toys made? What purpose do they serve in today's society? It is also important to question the definition of what a toy is, and what constitutes a toy. Until the late 1990's toys have been designated for children. Toys may have originally been associated with childhood, but they are not inherently childish. The argument that toys are for adults is easier to make today primarily due to the variety of "toys." Collectibles are a great example of a toy for an adult that clearly is not made for children. These are often expensive, highly detailed, or even inappropriate for children in terms of characteristics or content of the toy itself. Toys like those from the Spawn franchise by McFarland Toys are clearly not for children. Spawn figures are generally grotesque, frightening, or inappropriate. This supports the idea that toys are for everyone. Today, toys exist for those who wish to indulge in them.

So why make toys? Why did I choose to provide others with the information to make their own? The answers to these questions stem from my desire to teach myself and others how to make toys. This is the driving force for my thesis and the book that I wrote. The influential reach of toys is much farther than people might imagine. The love of toys is perpetuated by nostalgia. People can collect toys relative to their interests or to reignite memories. This collection of toys and related ephemera gives them the same feelings from past fond memories. This, for many people, is the reason they collect. The same could be said about the desire to make toys.

Designers often make things that bring them joy. When designers are given the opportunity to make something devoid of perimeters set by a client, a desirable option is to make something solely for oneself. This allows the designer real creative expression, the chance to experiment with something new, or the freedom to hone a specific technique. The ability to make toys opens up a realm of possibilities. An artist can now pour their thoughts and ideas into a three-dimensional object that can be reproduced and held in one's hand. As a designer, everything I make is a product of influences that have been acquired over a lifetime. These influences can come from a variety of interests, as well as from friends, family, internet research, and many other sources.

This begs the question for designers: “What kind of toys do I make? Do I make figures that sit on a desk, figures that articulate, ones that serve multiple purposes, or toys for educational purposes?” Making one's own toys is an avenue with a much different realm of possibilities when one starts to consider what one's purpose for making is. Designers typically ask the questions: Who is this for? What is its purpose? What do I want this thing to do? What am I trying to accomplish by making this thing? These questions change depending on one's background, but the process of making a toy is simple enough given the right information. Regardless of experience, anyone can do it with the right materials and instruction.

When I began to research the process of making resin toys, finding reliable information proved incredibly difficult. This frustrating experience is the driving force for my book, as it is a centralization of this information. As with many processes, easy access to information can be a challenge. In the context of designer toys, the step-by-step process of how to make them can be incredibly varied. The deep-stretching webs across the internet of YouTube videos, blog posts,

forums, Reddit pages, and social media posts are the bulk of the information found about this process. There is no central place where someone interested in toy-making can easily start. However, it seems that most people in the designer toy community are quick to help and are open to sharing ideas, techniques and findings. The issues for a new toymaker are figuring out who to ask, what to ask, and where to look. For example, unless one is following the right people, it can be hard to troubleshoot one's process when things go wrong. Part of the goal of the book is to create a resource that clearly outlines the steps to make a toy in a clear and linear way. This will allow the reader to follow the steps and processes clearly outlined in the book, without many of the difficulties and confusion I experienced. After becoming familiar with the process, the individual can decide when and where they want to make adjustments to the process or experiment along the way.

Toys have the ability to invoke thoughts and emotions that one may not even remember having.¹ Woodrow Phoenix, author of *Plastic Culture: How Japanese Toys Conquered the World*, describes toys as avatars, or embodiments of ideas. He says that they allow us to attach emotional bonds to them, and that they are shaped by the society that produced them, taking influences from the world around them.² How often has one truly given that much thought to toys and the role they serve in society? The question is what makes toys so special to those who consume them, and why do people collect them? When did toys begin to leave the toy store and find themselves exhibited in galleries and art shows? It is my aim with this paper to refute some of the theories that toys are exclusively for kids, as well as to define why people collect them.

¹ Woodrow, Phoenix. *Plastic Culture: How Japanese Toys Conquered the World*. (Japan: Kodansha, 2006), 9

² Phoenix, 1.

HISTORY OF DESIGNER TOYS: ORIGINS TO THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

Toys throughout time have been a direct reflection of the state of the society in which they are made. Until the 19th century Enlightenment, children were not allowed to play. For example: The BB gun in 1886 was invented shortly after the Civil War when shotgun factories were being converted into toy factories. Children were expected to help their parents work, cook, and clean, and there was no time or need for children to have fun.³ The toys of this time reflected the accessibility of toys: wooden rings, ball and cups, and other crude toys and games were what were available. The Ideal Novelty and Toy Company was founded in 1903 and, shortly after the end of World War II, began producing the first all-plastic dolls in the United States. This accessibility of plastic caused a surge in the production of plastic toys and changed the way toys were produced.⁴

With the increasing popularity of toys for play and education, as a natural progression of society and industrialization, toys became easier to produce due to the flexibility of metal and plastic and a larger demand for toys became apparent. As the decades go on, one can see a decrease in a focus on agriculture and an increase in the necessity for play. The idea of “recreational time” becomes more prevalent. In the late 19th century city councils began laying out public parks for recreation, denoting in our society when taking time for oneself became

³ Tim Lambert. “A Brief History of Toys”. *Local Histories*, <https://localhistories.org/a-history-of-toys/>. Accessed 9 February 2022.

⁴ Phoenix, 13.

important.⁵ The same can be said for toys and the children that use them. The idea that children having fun and enjoying their lives was more prevalent and can be observed with the creation of toys as educational tools. Some of the first tools a child may acquire are toys. Toys serve as a guide for growing up. Children are also influenced by those who play with them, and by how they interact with those toys. For kids, toys can be powerful imaginative tools and serve as the artifact of imaginative play. The appeal for adults is the ability to turn abstract ideas into something physical. For adults, toys serve as vessels for meaning and memory in the same way a cross or a flag are symbols of religion or a nation.⁶

In order to better understand the influence of toys and how they became so popular in the US, one needs to look to Japan. In the late 20th century, Japan became a prevalent exporter of merchandise and ideas. Toy companies began arising, and as film and TV was becoming more popular, so were toys to accompany these shows. Designer toys, as we understand them today, originated in Hong Kong, by Michael Lau, and Eric So in 1998. These two artists customized G.I Joe figures to reflect Japanese streetwear and culture. By modifying the bodies and clothing of the characters, they created entirely new figures from preexisting ones. Lau laid the foundation for what a designer toy could and should be through the creation and sale of his toys. From the most basic approach to designer toys known as “Kitbashing” or “bootlegging” (customizing existing toys or combining multiple toys and objects into a new one) all the way to designing and creating your own toys from scratch, Lau showed the community what designer toys could become. Their toys drew inspiration from the world and culture around them and were created with attention to personal design taste and sensibility. Formerly pop-culture toys had been known

⁵ Jordan, Harriet. “Public Parks, 1885-1914.” *Garden History*, vol. 22, no. 1, The Garden History Society, 1994, pp. 85–113, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1587004>.

⁶ Leon, Melissa. “How ‘Star Wars’ Revolutionized the Toy Industry.” *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company, January 7, 2018. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-star-wars-revolutionized-the-toy-industry>.

as merchandise for movies, comics, or video games, and until their toys, the general population did not know any differently.⁷ Especially important to note were the first *Star Wars* action figures introduced in 1978. Until this point, no movie had successfully launched a toy line. The launch of the first *Star Wars* figures, produced by Kenner, revolutionized the toy industry. This ever-expanding series of toys allowed kids to relive the movies and shows they loved by interacting with a physical embodiment of their favorite characters, and by bringing into the physical world, the ideas that exist in their own personal dreams and meta-realities.⁸ Now one can start to see the beginnings of designer toys, or toys not for the purpose of play, but for the purpose of ownership.

⁷ Chelsie, Chan. “*Designer Toys: Redesigning Childhood.*” <https://prizedwriting.ucdavis.edu/sites/prizedwriting.ucdavis.edu/files/sitewide/pastissues/13-14%20CHAN.pdf>. Prized Writing, 2013, 52.

⁸ Leon.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COLLECTORS: DEMAND OF DESIGNER TOYS

Designer toys bring about a new realm in the world of toys that directly correlates to collectors' interests. Similar to sneaker culture, in which the consumer follows their favorite brands to obtain and collect the newest “drop,” toy collectors follow their favorite makers, anticipating the next “drop” of toys. These releases take different forms—new colorways, full-color special editions, exclusive packaging and add-ons, and much more. As with collecting anything, the thrill of obtaining the newest release is exciting. This concept of “exclusivity” is what drives many collectors to collect, which in turn increases the value and demand for these designer toys.⁹

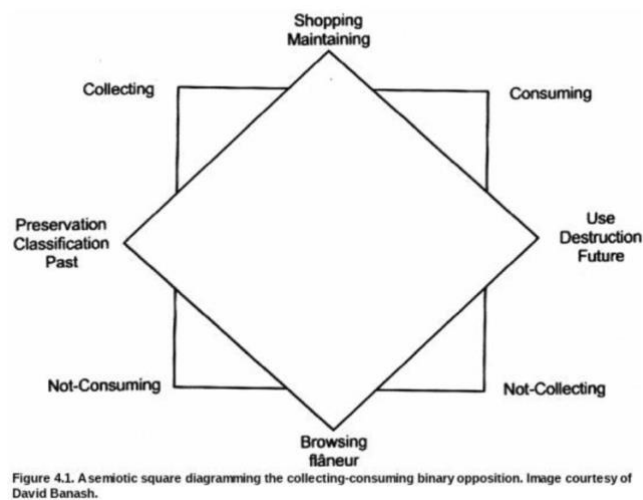


Figure 1. Semiotic Square

⁹ Louis, Bou. *We Are Indie Toys!*. (New York: Harper Design, 2014), 8.

Collection can take many shapes and forms. We collect furniture, décor, clothing, and objects. Consumer collection is prevalent in the United States, as one unknowingly collects things that one consumes. This can be most easily understood when looking at clothing. Many people collect clothing that matches their likes and interests, and while they are collecting the clothing, they are effectively “consuming” the clothing by wearing it. Viewing the above semiotic square, one can see there are a myriad of categories that consumer-collectors can fall into. The role of the flâneur¹⁰ is one of which the person is not collecting, or consuming but merely browsing.¹¹ This is most commonly associated with the phrase “window shopping.” The role that I will be focusing on is the role of the Preserver.¹² Consumption does not have to be viewed as “destruction” in the sense that what is being “consumed” is gone forever. Consumption can be as simple as playing with or enjoying what is being collected.

Figure 1 shows the different positions those who collect can take and is viewed across the lines of each square, creating eight profiles one can embody. Most people who collect toys fall into the far left of the chart, employing a collecting method devoid of consumption.¹³ The type of collector existing on the far left collects with the motive of preservation at all costs.

Reasons for collecting vary, and the rationalization for a collection often arises when the collector realizes loss.¹⁴ That “moment of loss” does not inherently mean that something itself is lost but references an idea or period that is no longer present. Collecting not only comes from the concept of creating complete collections but can be more deeply rooted in nostalgia. Therefore,

¹⁰ Flâneur- is a [French](#) noun referring to a person, literally meaning "stroller", "lounger", "saunterer", or "loafer".

¹¹ Moist, Kevin and Banash, David. *Contemporary Collecting : Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things*. (Maryland, Scarecrow Press, 2013), 62.

¹² Preserver- a person who maintains something in its original or existing state or condition.

¹³ Banash, 62.

¹⁴ Banash, 67.

many collectors focus their efforts on objects that relate to a past time in their lives. Many collections embody this idea through old, antique, or vintage objects. Susan Stewart, a professor of English at Temple University states in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*: “In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection’s world.”¹⁵ Stewart’s book examines the ways in which the "souvenir" and the "collection" are objects mediating experience in time and space. Collections with this idea attempt to preserve the past as coexisting alongside the present. Most collection is deeply tied to personal and cultural memory, as memory of these objects is channeled through the process of collecting them.¹⁶ This, perhaps, is why many adults collect toys from their childhood. This process of collection is a way to relight the fire of their youth and hold onto the memories and feelings they felt when they were kids. Chelsie Chan, author of *Designer Toys: Redesigning Childhood* asks “Why collect toys, and not some other object reminiscent of childhood? And why do people collect at all?” She writes that often the source of collecting is childhood trauma. When deprived of basic emotional essentials from those close to them, children seek something else to provide those feelings, and they do this through the attachment to inanimate objects.¹⁷ This essentially means that one collects as a way to feel control over what is being collected. The thing that is collected is a physical object that exhumes nostalgia or personal connection, and is both relieving and comforting. The desire to collect can also come from the catharsis the collector receives when they complete a collection. Designer toys, in particular, are generally formed around unknown or non-mainstream

¹⁵ Susan Stewart, Quoted in, David Banash, “Virtual Life and the Value of Objects: Nostalgia, distinction, and Collecting in the Twenty-First Century” in *Contemporary Collecting : Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things*,(Scarecrow Press, 2013), 68.

¹⁶ Chan, 57.

¹⁷ Chan, 56.

subcultures, which provides collectors with a sense of owning something unique or special. This relates to the excitement around limited releases. People collect toys, obsess over them, and cherish them.

PSYCHOLOGY OF MAKING TOYS: DESIGNERS ARE NOW WEIRD

Because of pop culture, toys became precious objects and not playthings, so a new purpose for toys was born – collecting them. People became obsessed with their favorite characters and ideas, which enabled collectors to become a large part of any fandom and communities. This idea of collecting toys and ephemera that resembled or symbolized certain peoples’ interests created a new niche for past and present designers. Many designers responded to this new demand, which created a community around these designer toys which differentiated their toys from a traditional mass-produced toy. The biggest difference between what we understand as a traditional toy and a designer toy is the community to which designer toys belong. Designer toys are often made in small batches by hand, by artists who do not have the financial backing to invest in sophisticated product manufacturing. This factor then turns the release of a new toy into an event that can lead to increased hype. Because of the exclusivity of owning one of the few toys that were released, this gives the toy an added level of desire which causes collectors to stay invested.¹⁸

This leads to the idea of “Toys for Adults.” Collectors today often collect toys from their childhood. This means that the toys they collect were not made with this kind of collector in mind. It is hard to know if Kenner would have ever predicted that their toys made in 1978 would be obsessed over in 2022. Today, toys known as “designer toys” or “art toys” are created specifically for adults or for the creator. Toys can now be used as playthings, collected, and more

¹⁸ Chan, 52

recently, made. They serve the purpose of existing because the consumer is emotionally influenced by the toy's looks. This, in turn, causes someone to purchase it for the sake of owning it. Ownership is the most intimate relationship that a person can have with an object.¹⁹ The idea that something you own is solely yours, belonging to no one else is what is enticing and empowering to collectors. Chan believes that the (Millennial) artists behind the creation of these designer toys are doing so to extend a childhood or the idea of a childhood that was taken from them or never obtained.²⁰ For toy designers, it is not an inability to become an adult by societal standards, or a desire to extend one's childhood, but a drive and passion to reclaim what never came to fruition.²¹ They create something tangible that gives them authority over what they are making, which is a concept built on power and control.²² This idea of adults who do not want to grow up relates to the idea of Millennials' (1981-1996) being what is called the "Peter Pan Generation."²³ This simply means that Millennials are often accused of being kids for too long or putting off responsibility in order to remain in a realm of childhood that feels comfortable and familiar. This is why we often see independent toy designers interested in similar nostalgic ideas and concepts. All of this goes back to the beginning concept: toys bring people joy, and the need for toys is a direct correlation to a society's desire for them.

Play is an important concept that reflects one's time by encouraging freedom to make choices that are purely for one's own enjoyment. Play can be described as many things and can have a multitude of definable characteristics according to many scholars, which can make it hard

¹⁹ Matthew, Vechinski. *Contemporary Collecting : Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things*. (Maryland, Scarecrow Press, 2013), 27.

²⁰ Chan, 55.

²¹ Chan, 55.

²² Chan, 55.

²³ Chan, 51.

to define what play is, and how it relates to toys. However, some main concepts of play are applicable:

1. Play is self-chosen.
2. "Means" are more valued than "ends."
3. Play is mentally removed in some way from seriousness or "real life."
4. Play involves an active but "non-stressed" frame of mind.

When considering these ideas of play, the connection to toys feels very natural. Even in our dialogue with children, we see verbal connections: "What toy do you want to play with?", "Go play with your toys," "If you want to play with your toys you have to do your chores." The connection between toys and play is inherent. For the duration of one's life, one has been told that play is the purpose of toys. So, when one thinks about toys and their purpose in the world, it is easy to come to the conclusion that the very creation of toys is for the enjoyment of the user, or that toys are a vessel for enjoyment. Toys are the fuel for imaginative play. Toys suggest play-scenarios and open the door for more to arise.²⁴ So why are they important? Toys allow children to enact their deepest fantasies, as well as rationalize concepts and ideas that they may not fully understand. Jerome Singer, American clinical psychologist, and co-author of *Toys, Play, and Child Development* describes imaginative play as a way to mentally explore infinite possibilities, worlds, scenarios, and futures.²⁵ Unstructured play allows children the greatest freedom to create pretend or imaginative scenarios. This form of play allows children to develop their own mental

²⁴ Chan, 55.

²⁵ Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Jerome L Singer, "1/Imaginative Play and Adaptive Development," in *Toys, Play, and Child Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

images that are uninterrupted by the bias and constraints of adults' thoughts and ideas. The toys with which they play also determine what the play looks like. Toys that are non-representational open up more possibilities for imaginative play than those that are facsimiles of real-life objects. However, this does not discredit realistic objects, as things like doctors' kits or dollhouses still incite imaginative scenarios. Jimbo Matison recounts a story of imaginative play brought about by an infatuation with a popular movie. He describes a scenario in which he and childhood friends play a make-believe game: [On the 1974 *Godzilla vs. King Kong*] "My friends and I loved it so much that at school we would play a game we called Monster Island Battle Royale. We would each take on the personality of our favorite monster and wrestle each other until the concrete wore through our jeans."²⁶ This is a great example of how a movie with a toy following and fanbase can pour over and outside of the realm of toy-play and is comparably endless to those scenarios that can arise during play. The consumption and creation of designer toys illicit these same reactions. The play aspect of creation allows designers to reenact experiences or memories related to the toys they are making. This is true for the way that I make toys. I become the conductor of my own tiny realities and I am able to have agency over every aspect of the toy.

²⁶ Jimbo Matison and Michael Garlington, *So Crazy Japanese Toys!: Live-Action TV Show Toys from the 1950s to Now* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003).

PURPOSE FOR THE BOOK

My personal connection to toys stems from my childhood. I remember falling in love with the “collectible” toys my dad displayed in the garage. My favorites among these were his collection of Spawn figures. The Spawn figures by McFarland Toys were always heavily detailed, with many articulated points. He also had a large collection of original Kenner *Star Wars* figures and vehicles. I always loved robots like Gundams, Power Rangers, and mechs. The toys I make are heavily influenced by the toys I had and those that surrounded me when I was growing up. My dad and grandfather were lovers of Japanese culture due to the collective years they spent overseas. I grew up around the Japanese art books and artifacts they had collected over the years. These lived in glass cases in their living rooms. I still often find myself studying these toys and artifacts, picking apart articulation styles and different design techniques to model in my own work.

My personal love of toys has only deepened as I have witnessed the collective enthusiasm of the toy community, and with the ability to make my own toys. This is my sole purpose for creating the book “Toys are for Adults: An Introductory Guide to Resin Toy-Making.” I want to provide easy access to this information to anyone that wants it. The book introduces the concept of Designer Toys and gives a brief history of their origins. It also breaks down in detail the materials and tools needed to begin the toy-making process. After explaining what tools and materials are needed, the book includes illustrated step-by-step explanations of the processes of sculpting, mold making, casting, and finishing. All of these processes lead from

concept to finished product, and it does so in a concise form that is neither wordy nor complex.



Figure 2.1. Front and Back covers.

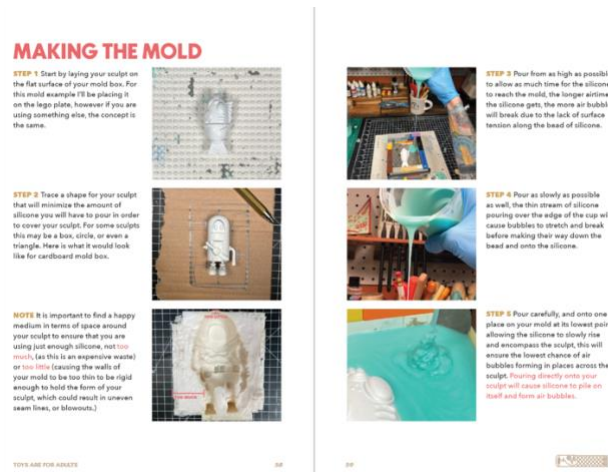


Figure 2.2. Two page spread.

Seeing my kids play with the toys that I have made with my own hands brings me an unexplainable joy. I want the toy community to experience the fulfillment of making their own toys and giving them to friends and family, setting them on their desks at work, or even selling them. I am also fully aware of the benefits of toys and play in child development and desire that more children have the access and the ability to make toys as another form of play, further developing crucial mental images necessary for children to take part in healthy imaginative play.

THE SHOW: BRINGING THE CONCEPTS TO FRUITION

The Thesis Exhibition is the intersection of my research. The concepts outlined in this paper are experienced at the show. The overarching concept for the show is to replicate a toy store. I want my attendees to feel as though they are walking into my own personal toy store. I spent months making toys and products to fill the store to solidify this idea. This show is the culmination of nearly a decade of art and design school. Presented at the show is the apex of every skill, influence, and inspiration I have acquired through life and graduate school. From screenprinted wind-socks and designer toys, to a custom Gameboy and game, all elements showcased represent my layered research. While the installation is still an art exhibition, it is also an active toy store. Most elements in the show are for sale, and a price list is available. My goal with toymaking is to make designer toys accessible. It is important to me to keep prices as low to allow them to get into the hands and homes of as many people as possible. The book I wrote explaining the toy-making process is available for purchase at the show, which is important to my desire to spread the word about designer toys and how to make them.

While at the show, the attendees have the opportunity to collect three special-edition toys. The first is presented upon entering the show and is given to the first 45 attendees. The idea with this is to allow those in attendance to receive one toy from the collection, and then be driven to collect the rest, subconsciously referencing the psychology of collecting discussed in this paper. Attendees are able to play a Gameboy game I designed and developed featuring two of my toys

as playable characters. Seeing these two toys existing as characters in a video game is yet another facet of extending childhood through means of nostalgic experiences.

ABOUT THE BRAND

The aspects that influence my work are the same ones that gave birth to designer toy culture. Japan and its symbolisms and iconography are a dominant inspiration, with the primary goal being to honor and show appreciation for the culture that has had such a big impact on my life and my work.

The main logo was created based off of a traditional “Koinoburi” or “Japanese wind sock.” The Koinoburi is historically associated with a Japanese holiday known as “Children’s Day (こどもの日, Kodomo no Hi).” This is a day for celebrating children’s happiness and personalities. Families decorate carp-shaped wind socks and fly them over their houses in celebration of this event. The black Koinoburi is representative of the father of the household. Choosing this imagery to bear the weight of the brand was important to me as a father and a husband, as these are two roles that are very important.



Figure 3.1. Brandmarks.

The typography utilized in the brand identity represents both English and Japanese characters. This is not only to solidify the roots from which the design is inspired, but to add visual context to the brand (as seen on the left). The English font was chosen as it complements

the Japanese font by sharing typographic nuances of curvatures met with sharp edges (as seen on the right).



Figure 3.2 Typography Comparison.

Thesis Show Documentation



Figure 4.1. Front of Building.

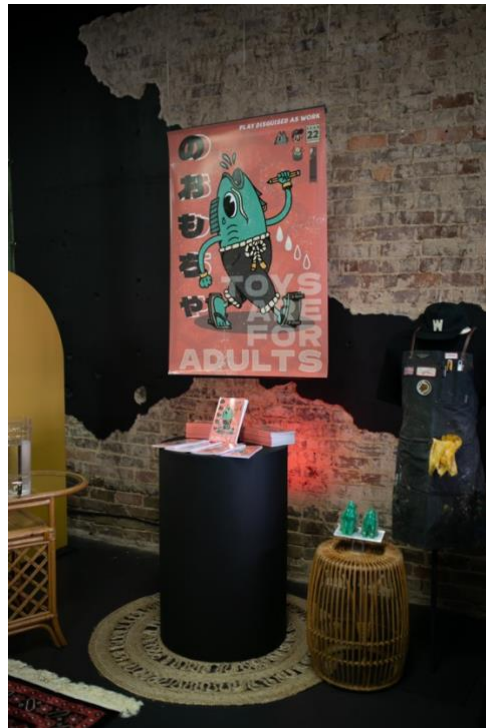


Figure 4.2. Book Display.



Figure 4.3. Detail shot of items for sale.



Figure 4.4. Detail shot of toys.



Figure 4.5. Detail shot of toys for sale.



Figure 4.6. Detail shot of register.

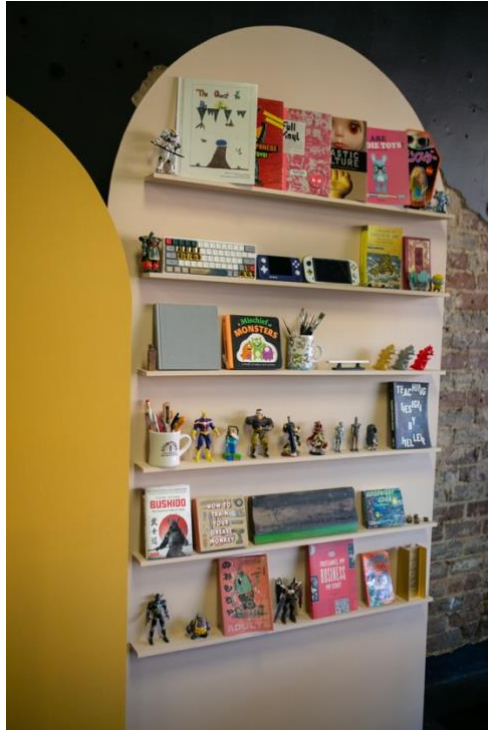


Figure 4.7. Detail shot of inspiration wall.



Figure 4.8. Detail shot of toys.



Figure 4.9. Detail shot of Gameboy game.



Figure 4.10. Product shot of elements from the show.

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