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FOSTER CHILD

by

BROOKE CREEF

Under the Direction of Stan Anderson

ABSTRACT

Foster Child is my attempt to bring to light my love for dolls as creatures to be created and imagined again and again. In terms of childhood play, toys function and exist on many levels. Each becomes a friend to some and, in some cases, a confidant. Dolls become more than a plastic play-thing and through the eyes of the individual take on a life of their own based upon the user's own personal experiences. What I deem my creation will inherently change to someone else's and even to my mood. I aim to offer the ability to create and blur the lines of these creations. My work is self-explorative and tells of the circumstances from my childhood I hold close.

INDEX WORDS: Brooke Creef, Graduate thesis, Graphic design, Toy design, Designer toy, Vinyl toy, Play, Childhood, Adoption, Blank vinyl toys

FOSTER CHILD

by

BROOKE CREEF

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

FOSTER CHILD

by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2011

DEDICATION

Being an adopted child has brought with it many questions, but most importantly, answers and an unconditional love of a family I call my own. I could never ask for a more loving, gracious father, mother, brother or sisters. I thank you all for the inspiration I hold with me each and every day. I love you.

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I would like to thank my committee of Stan Anderson, John Decker and Paige Taylor for pushing my creative growth and believing in me when even I was unsure. Additionally, I'd like to thank Phillip Webb and Joe Peragine for their patience and understanding. And finally, Jessica Blinkhorn for her inspiration and friendship that I will hold with me forever.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As I began this thesis I found myself wondering what motivates me to design a toy. I have long been drawn to the vinyl art toys lining various galleries, record stores and online retailers. The whimsical, ambiguous designs allow room for interpretation and creativity. The owner of each art toy is invited to create their own world around the creature they have chosen. My creative inquiry drives me to design my own vinyl toy prototype. The medium allows me to express the need for exploration in both myself and the end user of my design.

The aim of *Foster Child* is to stimulate creative thinking through the manipulation of a blank vinyl toy. By giving children the means to create something they can call their own, I invite them to channel their imaginations through hands-on learning and play. The end result of each design will vary from child to child and variances will be seen among each individual's subsequent design renderings. The accessories included with the toy allow children to adjust their creative acts in a myriad of ways.

Ever since I first laid eyes on the bubbly cartoon shaped vinyl toy designs of Kid Robot, I knew I was hooked on the equivocal, playful and even obscure design choices. The fantasy-based designs provoked me to learn more about each creation, its history and story. As I began to research this new evolving Designer Toy culture, I uncovered the roots of Japanese culture deeply embedded in this phenomenon.

In my work, I also began to draw on the influences of my childhood. The toys and monsters I created as a child also relied heavily on the same factors that are driving the Designer Toy craze. Like many others, I was drawn to Hello Kitty and the fancy good industry. The bubbly de-

sign and look of the creatures really drew me into the fantasy-based world. I yearned for the desire to know and collect each individual design. By doing so, I created my own utopian paradise complete with a beating heart and story to be told. Not only did I collect the Sanrio's company's products, but this obsession spilled naturally into creating personalized models to accompany my paradise. My medium of choice, as a child, was clay. During my adult career, I began to see this evident within my work. From an early stage in my artistic career, I was using clay to create objects. As the designs began to evolve I started to explore other mediums and stumbled upon the vinyl toy craze and the concept of 3D printing. The idea of creating a vinyl toy really began to consume me. The idea of allowing myself the opportunity to explore this medium while simultaneously designing something that allows children to create became the driving forces for this project. My work serves as modern day canvas for envisioning and creating friends for children as they tap into their creativity. My work can be seen as a crossover between vinyl toys and a medium to be explored as children are energizing their imaginations. Being the child of a first grade teacher, the desire to imaginatively play was instilled in me as a young child. My mother explored countless techniques to stimulate creative thinking in both myself and the students in her classroom. *Foster Child* aims to create a vehicle for creative exploration in direct opposition to the toys that simply serve to give children a story. My work allows children to create their world tailored to what he or she deems important. The beauty lies within this ability to create. Just as my mother saw intense participation and success within the classroom, I also see my work serving this function.

2 FLASHY AND GREEN

Before delving into the designer toy phenomenon I first investigated what defines a toy.

Del Vecchio groups the basic principles of toy design into two categories, the Evergreens and The Flash.

The Evergreens: These toys link generations and become an enduring part of kid culture. They were played with by parents when they were children, and many parents like to introduce their children to the same. A prime example is the Barbie doll. Evergreens are special because they have found a way to survive decades.

The Flash: these toys tend to burst onto the pop culture scene, sometimes based upon the launch of a new movie. They reach dizzying heights and then fizzle to far lower levels or completely vanish. Type 2 toys include toys that gained a lot of attention because of their fresh new perspective, but they too eventually decline.¹

Toys transform children. It is a subtle, but powerful idea. These toys have a way of immediately pulling children into fantasy worlds and giving the toy a life beyond its own mundane existence as an object. Toys are catalytic in that they help the user transform fantasy into reality and vice versa. In order for this transformation to take place several basic principles are paramount. Designers must invent toys and games that help a child best satisfy the need to become a master, thus being on emotional target. Master here refers to the desire for a child to become a master of his or her world. "Children come into a world with no apparent skills and must learn a multitude of task in order to survive, grow, and flourish. They quickly become aware that adults are the supreme masters in this world, and that children are the novices, always learning."² By creating a toy that allows children to tap into a new skill, the designer invites him or her to develop mastery skills relevant to real world experiences. Additionally, mas-

¹ Del Vecchio, *The blockbuster toy!*, 35.

² Ibid., 39.

tery builds self-esteem and ignites inner pride, thus meeting core emotional needs.³ They must also look to the past great toys and ideas, and add innovation to help the child attain even greater mastery by adding a new twist on already successful ideas.⁴ By unlocking playful tasks, innovators are able to discern the areas of play that best coax a child for repetition and mastery. It is this drive to master that guides the success of a blockbuster toy.

In addition to tapping into imagination and creativity, successful toys are on target with the popular culture as a whole. Let us take the “toy” itself. It does not make sense that the word “toy” in its rudimentary sense is lacking in reality.

And yet it doesn’t really have that kind of given, unitary meaning. A plastic plaything is actually quite a complex object. Recognizing it as a toy is precisely that, an act of recognition. Such recognitions depend on prior settings, prior experience, and culturally derived associations. Indeed what one means by the act of recognition will vary itself.⁵

Allowing individual recognition allows the users to place emphasis on values important to him or her. Popular culture deems certain fads worthy, and toys stay in line with this. The recognition that one holds will be tied to fads on target at the time. They are said to be on trend. Some toys, for example, rose from immense heights because they were introduced at a time of war (e.g. Army Men), the Great Depression (e.g. Monopoly Game), the emergence of industrialization (e.g. Erector Set), or grand shifts in society such as the greater empowerment of women (e.g. the Barbie Doll).⁶

Foster Child draws from previous influences such as Mr. Potato Head, Cootie and the Crayola crayon and adds a touch of innovation through modern design. In terms of mastery ele-

³ Ibid., 40.

⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

ments, the design begs for the user to channel his or her artistic instincts. Conceptually, the work is in line with the current Designer Toy phenomenon while drawing nostalgically from the form of Hello Kitty. In short, the concept pulls on all successful elements of a blockbuster toy: the evergreen, the flash and the mastery component.

3 INFLUENCES

3.1 Child's Play

I often remember playing and creating worlds and stories with the stuffed animals I held dear. My passion for creating also manifested in drawing, clay, and dolls - whatever I could get my hands on. My goal was to create a world surrounded by friends, people who knew me. Toys became my canvas for the world that I envisioned.

Design helps me to understand myself and the life I have lived. As an adopted child, I have often found myself reflecting on several aspects of my adoption; the experience, the love I have been given, the fact my parents chose me, and that my life was given the chance to evolve into a dream that I never could have anticipated. This dreamy state has been with me since childhood. The hands-on approach to play is symbolic of the toys I collected, which in turn, served as friends. Hands-on here is closely tied to the Montessori method of learning where the play environment is designed for self-directed activity. This freedom allows children to follow their inner guidance. As a foster child, I envisioned a toy as a friend, to support me until I was a part of the family I so desperately needed, and additionally, to make sense of this world I did not understand. My play environment was also tailored to the free flow of creativity with an em-

phasis placed on exploration and self-guidance. Toys became a natural progression from this environment where I utilized my own imagination to conjure up designs that spoke to my desire to belong to something bigger than myself.

Reflecting on my childhood and my desire to create this world, I began to think of children and their need to imagine, grow, and learn. I also began to think about the preponderance of interactive media, video games, Internet games, and social media. I considered how these engaging mediums seem to hinder a child's imagination; the simplest of toys will hold a child's attention because children want to create, and to own their world. *Foster Child* is my answer to this challenge. By providing a blank plastic toy complete with accessories, I invite children to design their own experiences tailored to what he or she deems relevant to his or her own world. The blank plastic toy becomes a canvas for creation, allowing children to recreate it as their world evolves. Since this work acts as a vehicle for exploration, the toy can become anything. Once created, it can serve as a friend and confidant. Even as its user grows the toy can be recreated and re-envisioned.

My mother, a first grade teacher, instilled the importance of education and creative thinking in me from a very young age. Over the past ten years she has seen a consistent decline in her students' ability to imagine and play. It appears that this might be a direct result of the video games and interactive media with which children spend most of their time. As Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University points out, children do not need information fed through toys. They need to play and to become creative problem solvers.⁷ While children are drawn to these flashy games and media, the information being fed through interactive media is not

⁷ Hirsh-Pasek, "Brains in a box: Do new age toys deliver on the promise?," 3.

sparkling their artistic endeavors. Even with this current onslaught of media, children still own this desire; when given a marker, a blank sheet of paper still becomes a canvas for creation.

Foster Child answers this need to create by offering a malleable medium begging to be brought to life through the thoughts and desires of the children interacting with it.

My work is a direct reflection of this desire to create that I have always carried with me; it is inspired by a combination of toys, friends, and art that have been part of my creative development. As a young child I was drawn to fantasy-based animals. I remember a particular need to create monsters as an answer to the thoughts and dreams that sparked my creativity. My life has constantly been engulfed by a love for creatures and science fiction based nostalgia. After thinking more about my childhood and the importance of imaginative learning, it started to become clear that my work was looking to answer my need to build and fashion my own creature that embodied the friends I had as a child. At the same time, this toy has begun to serve as an ever-evolving friend that learns and grows with me.

I see my work as promoting a child's creativity through the manipulation of this specially designed toy. With the bundled accessories, I allow children to design their creation and mold it over and over. The toy never stays an idle friend; it is always evolving. I aim not to create a toy that tells children what to believe, but to create a work that allows them to create. Educational toys and their symbiotic relationship with creative and cognitive skills became a central focal point after WWII as Amy Ogata points out:

Although a broad sector of the middle class adopted good parenting as both a personal and national obligation and looked to playthings as a means of teaching their children, it was the educated upper middle classes who most readily embraced the notion that personal creativity could become a source of societal renewal. As a result many "educational" toys achieved new recognition, not only for their pedagogical qualities but also for their design and promises to stimulate invention. While the word creativity has con-

notations of deception, its literal meaning (forming, making, inventing) is relatively neutral. The term as it was applied to children acquired utopian associations of beginning anew from a pure source. In looking at the ways that the ideal of creativity permeated the language of advice writers and the strategies of toy designers and manufacturers, I want to suggest that what was accepted as a natural relationship between creativity and childhood that characterized the years after World War II not only was a construction of the toy industry but also developed along with discourses on psychology, education, and art. In examining educational toy design and promotion, I aim to show how creativity, a longstanding ideal of experimentation, originality, and productivity, became desirable, consumable, and even redemptive for baby-boom parents.⁸

During the baby boomer decade, many toys aimed at stimulating creativity flocked the market, from Lincoln Logs to Crayola Crayon. There was increased demand for toys to promote invention. As a child of the baby boomer generation, this demand remained evident in the toys I utilized as a child. Concurrently, my work draws on these same desires, fostering the need to invent, design and create.

3.2 Designer Art Toys

Several factors have fueled the designer toy phenomenon; first, Japanese society and the subsequent Otaku subculture resulting from WWII. The atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed approximately 370 thousand people.⁹ The resulting postwar years saw Japan struggle back to its economical and political fleet of the prewar era. Japanese society began to grapple with the subsequent role of America and its search for identity in Western culture. With a population heedless of the cost of embracing immaturity, the nation is in the throes of a dilemma: a preoccupation with anti-aging may conquer not only the human heart,

⁸ Ogata, "Cultivating and Commodifying Everyday Creativity in Postwar American Childhood," 221-222.

⁹ Murakami, *Little Boy*, 100.

but also the body.”¹⁰ In efforts to retreat into a utopian society, modern Japanese culture has morphed into a fully functioning science fiction world. The pervasive obsession with monsters, mushroom clouds and cute characters are a direct product of the ambiguous Japan and the profound frustration at the rift between reality and the information available in the media. Post-war Japan subsequently promulgated the Japanese Constitution, or Peace Constitution. Article 9 of the document explicitly renounces war as a “sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as mean of settling international disputes.”¹¹ Article 9 provides the framework for Japan’s ambiguous stance to military power, and although the establishment of the Self Defense Forces in 1954 seemingly contradicts this amendment, the government has successfully danced around the topic. The Japanese people have begun an obsession with reality and realism as the attempt to identify the source of frustration.

Take the 1954 release of Japan’s most infamous monster movie to date, “Godzilla”. The giant amphibious reptile lies dormant in the ocean floor until it is awakened by a hydrogen bomb, which morphs the creature into a giant man-eating monster. “The horrific form that is this ‘H-bomb’ monster assumes on screen represents the enormity of the fear struck by the A-bombings into the Japanese people. Notably, the movie carries the strong anti-war and anti-nuclear message of ‘never again’.”¹² The film speaks directly to the Japanese nightmarish memory of war.

The mutated monster became a metaphor for the hydrogen bomb and subsequently represented the unparalleled psychological and physical trauma experienced by the Japanese people in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Such a frightening monster had never before been conjured up by the Japanese imagination. The dread of nuclear holocaust

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Ibid., 7.

made an indelible mark on Japanese creativity, and this disquieting undercurrent would persist in popular culture for decades to come.¹³

The government's ambiguous military stance coupled with the crippling fear of nuclear defeat spawned a generation of artists hoping to recreate postwar society through their imagination. This group of artists would collectively grow into the *otaku* culture. *Otaku* literally means "your home" and is derived from subculture.

Otaku subculture grew directly from rapid Japanese growth characteristic in the 1960's. The time period prompted rapid economic growth over the preservation of national culture and tradition. This policy prompted the dissolution of community life, separating individuals from their extended families¹⁴. Collectively, housewives assumed the role of full time mother as husbands traveled into the city for salaryman jobs. The wives were abandoned to husband-less households and formed extensive relationships with other women and communicated through interactions discussing *otaku*. The discussion of *otaku* in the home coupled with the solitude felt by the housewives was mirrored through the new generation of children as they retreated to their rooms filled with popular manga and anime iconography. Manga and anime as described here refer to cartoons and comics in overt Japanese style (see fig. 3.1).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 189.



Fig. 3.1 Manga and Anime

Subsequently otaku began to fill the role of this generation and the anime and manga inherent within. “Their small rooms were filled with the paraphernalia of manga, tokusatu, and anime, all of which embodied the sensibility of the subculture generation, utterly alien to their parents.”¹⁵ Present day otaku subculture is characterized by an obsessive fan of anime and in the work-obsessed culture of Japan, as deviant dropouts in wake of the burst of the 1980’s economic bubble. Otaku was pushed to the margins of society, yet a huge part of the population covets the objects of their obsessions.¹⁶

Japanese subculture is characterized by not only manga and anime, but also by the simultaneous Kawaii movement (see fig. 3.2).

¹⁵ Ibid., 190.

¹⁶ Heartney, “A Marriage of Trauma and Kitsch,” 57.



Fig. 3.2 Kawaii

“Kawaii or “cute” style means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and experienced social behavior and physical appearances.”¹⁷ The kawaii subculture grew out of an underground handwriting craze among Japanese teenager girls in the early 1970’s. The new style was “written laterally, using a mechanical pencil and extremely stylized, rounded characters with English, katakana, and little cartoon pictures such as hearts, stars and faces inserted randomly into the text”. Teachers did not look favorably on this new handwriting craze and in some schools it was banned. Yamane Kazuma refers to the movement as “Anomalous Female Teenage Handwriting” (see fig. 3.3).

¹⁷ Skov, *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, 220.

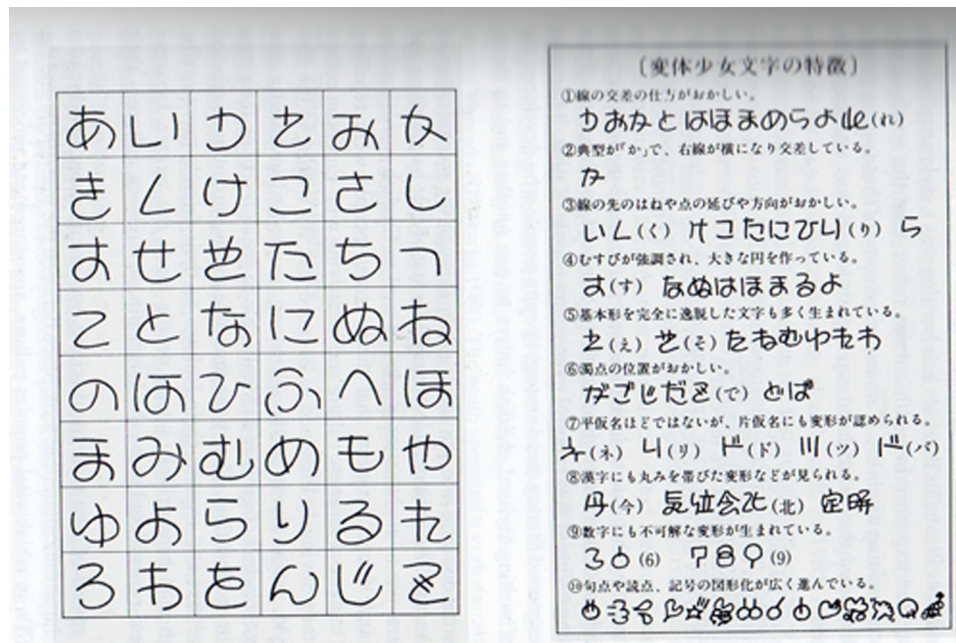


Fig. 3.3 Anomalous Female Handwriting

and through his research reveals that the older the student, the more likely she is to use cute handwriting; the craze is indicative of exposure of youth culture.¹⁸ Moreover, cute did not originate from multimedia, which is viewed as exercising mind control over youth, but rather as an underground literary trend evident though the handwriting craze sparked in the 1970's. These youth identified with "European culture, which they envisioned to be having more fun." The spread of cute handwriting was an element of a larger cultural shift between the 1960's and mid-1970's where "popular culture pushed the traditional arts and strictly regulated literary

¹⁸ Ibid., 222-224.

and artistic culture to the margins of society.”¹⁹ The resulting restrictions led to an increased artistic expression amongst the Japanese pop culture. Kawaii encompassed everything from fashion, consumer goods and even corporate mascots (see fig. 3.4).



Fig. 3.4 Kawaii Corporate Logo

The Fancy Good industry, Sanrio, began to produce cute stationery and fancy diaries aimed toward the dreamy youth of the times. Typical fancy goods were stationery, cuddly toys and gimmicks, toiletries, lunch boxes, bags, towels and other personal items (see fig. 3.5).

¹⁹ Ibid., 224.

written in fractured English and pseudo-French.”²¹ It is important to note here that in addition to the otaku movement characterized by manga and anime, the youth subculture was simultaneously retreating into a dreamy world of innocence and romanticism with childhood and the lack of responsibility. Young teenagers embraced this notion in disdain for adulthood and overwhelming obligations. Additionally, Japanese youth performed vulnerable and pre-sexual identities in order to emphasize immaturity and the inability to carry out responsibilities.²²

Hello Kitty and design of these characters had a direct impact on the designer toy craze. The urban vinyl scene explosion is tied to Hong Kong artist Michael Lau. His style is loosely based on the underground hip-hop and skateboard culture. He his first “toys” sprung onto the scene into 1999 (see fig. 3.6).



Fig 3.6 Michael Lau Art Toys

In America, designer Kidrobot burst onto the American market in 2002. Founder Paul Bundtz and his proprietary Munny and Dunny dolls (see fig. 3.7), which resemble anime characters with an influence of stencil and graffiti art.

²¹ Ibid., 226-227.

²² Ibid., 242-243.

days of nostalgic youth through tailored accessories that can be combined in various combinations, resulting in a cluster of innovative designs reminiscent of Mr. Potato Head design schematics. Even further, the design includes the blank canvas that can be painted with washable acrylics and recreated over and over (see fig. 4.1).



Fig 4.1 Foster Child

Functionality and ease of creating are the overriding forces of this direction. The importance of stimulating creativity drives the focus for this project. Imperatively, my vision is to design a toy allowing children to focus their efforts at gaining control of their world. Even more important, my work looks to instill the same values my mother deemed important in both myself and her classroom. The decline in interaction between children and the variant notion of play invites children to interact with each other and the world around them in a myriad of ways. Although

the onslaught of social and interactive media does hold children's attention, the importance of fostering interaction and creative play must be at the forefront of early childhood toy design.

4.2 Ramifications

The versatile design of my toy allows it to easily cross generations and socioeconomic classes. The aim of Foster Child is stimulate creative thinking the manipulation of a blank vinyl toy by giving children the means to create something they can call their own. This will inevitably vary amongst all children, but herein lies the beauty of the design's mass appeal. By designing a platform that appeals broadly, Foster Child can be marketed strongly as a toy. I also see this design being utilized with sick and handicapped children as a means of therapy. As discussed earlier, the act of recognizing a toy is just that, recognition. Not only can the design be used to foster creativity, but also as an aid to comfort. The brand can also be expanded interactively, by touching on the positive elements of interactive design. I invite the exploration of an online game tailored to the design of each child's toy. Here users can interact with each other, discussing their own design and story. Pictures of each design would be housed in a virtual online gallery. Additionally, there will be a virtual version of the design where children can interact and dress it up with the various accessories that can be added.

V CONCLUSION

The desire to create a medium that in and of itself behaves as a vehicle for creative exploration still lies at the heart of this project. *Foster Child* serves the need to explore and challenge the world around ourselves. By stimulating creative behavior, I see my work promoting a generation of new artists and designers that question the notions of strategic thinking within their own artistic endeavors. The simplistic, kitschy design appeals to a broad audience and capitalizes on current trends. Yet, the true beauty of this design lies within its ability to offer a range of design solutions for each user. Unlike play with video games and social media, this choice focuses on reaching children during their formative years and promoting self-reflexive art. The blank canvas serves as more than a stationery object and by taking on a role of a living entity within the eyes of its owner, offers the chance make home anywhere they are.

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