

Sacrosanct Sand Castles: A Dissection of Innocence

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Abstract

In our culture, there is a certain fixation on the 'simpler' times childhood presented. Throughout western history, the cultural ideas held of children and their capabilities shifted from one of being born of sin to born into purity as technology changed the modern world. Though all acknowledge childhood was not as simple and joyous as one recalls it to be, many still hold it with reverence and seek that which evokes nostalgia for that time. When the unrealistic standard of innocence is placed upon children, the expectation to conform underestimates a child's natural ability to understand the world around them. By creating spaces which juxtapose the reality of childhood alongside idealized notions of childhood, we create a world where children are unable to be accepted for being themselves. Through this body of work, innocence is portrayed as an unrealistic ideology and is damaging to both children and society.

1. Introduction

Artists have exhibited a nostalgia for the childlike for many years. Nostalgia, coined in 1688 by scholar Johannes Hofer as a formation of German *heimweh*¹; was considered a serious illness. When faced with the idea of childhood, we often think about how simple the time was, and how we yearn to be innocent like we once were. Imagery of children is something one connects to strongly without forethought. We have an innate desire to protect the child if seen in a less than ideal situation. The surrealist movement expounded on this desire and used it within their imagery to create an unease. Though it is well known childhood presents many of its own challenges and is rarely as picturesque as we remember it to be, why do we continue to idolize it so heavily? How does the child as inherently sinful and born of sin juxtapose the child as innocent and how do modern ideas of innocence affect how we view and interact with children today?

2. Historical Precedence

Artists' pursuit of the 'childlike' and childhood naiveté is well known, and spans more than a century². Artists such as Chardin, Renoir, Picasso, Matisse, and Cezanne - their works exemplify this desire for what was considered 'unrefined' by academy standards (Figure 1)³



Figure 1. Figure 1: Portrait of Paul Picasso As A Child (1923), Pablo Picasso, © The Gallery Collection/Corbis; © 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (A.R.S.), New York.
<https://www.pablo-ruiz-picasso.net/work-127.php>

Though the pursuit of the ‘childlike’ in art may seem rather benign on the surface - speaking to a desire to create art without the boundaries of traditional skills and classical training, to have art that is passionate and deeply individual, and to gaze upon art as an idea with new eyes – underneath hides a much darker history. As modernism began to push its way into the collective art consciousness, it carried with it the culture and thought of the ‘modern era’⁴. Victorian Europe was rife with progress in many ways, but cultural respect and understanding of non-European peoples was not one of them. The concept of childlike mannerism was often placed upon indigenous peoples of the surrounding world as a lens of scorn and used to validate the pursuits of the European governments to colonize other countries⁵. The paintings created in this period reflect this ideal. The scientific world also bred this othering, thinking non-European peoples to be of a lesser form of humanity, and that their bodies reflected sexual deviancy and disease. The art world both fetishized and preyed upon indigenous peoples and their art forms, buying pieces from ‘traders’ who acquired them by less than acceptable means, often pillaging them from sacred spaces. These artists used them as vehicles to further their own art aspirations to escape the ‘suffocation’ of the academic standard, doing little to press past the standard that non-European art was little more than ‘tchotchke’⁶. The European consensus on non-European countries was simple: That they were violent, sexual, despicable, and were a good reminder of how far they had supposedly ‘risen above’ such means⁷. these cultures needed to become ‘civilized’ and Victorian Europe saw themselves as the parental force of the world, ordained by God to teach the ‘naïve, childlike’ cultures of the world to become as grand as Europe through assimilation⁸. So, if childlike tendencies have typically been associated with violence and deviousness, how is it that they came to be the pinnacle of innocence and holiness? When did children start to be seen as beings to protect from the vile evils of mankind? At what point did childhood move from a demeaning, xenophobic and racist concept to one of reverence, nostalgia, and protectiveness? Innocence has been used- and continues to be used- as a tool for manipulation. Innocence is the assumption that a certain group or individual simply “did not know any better” due to lack of “proper schooling” or “how they were raised”. Innocence is classist. Innocence is sexist. Innocence is racist. Innocence is destructive.

Children in pre-Victorian Europe were farmhands, workers, and were numerous due to a short life expectancy. Children from earlier periods such as the Tudor period were deemed adults as young as ten and were expected to do the tasks of full grown men and women. Children worked alongside adults within factories at the turn of the century, and mass injuries and deaths resulted. This encouraged an evolving idea of preciousness (Figure 2).

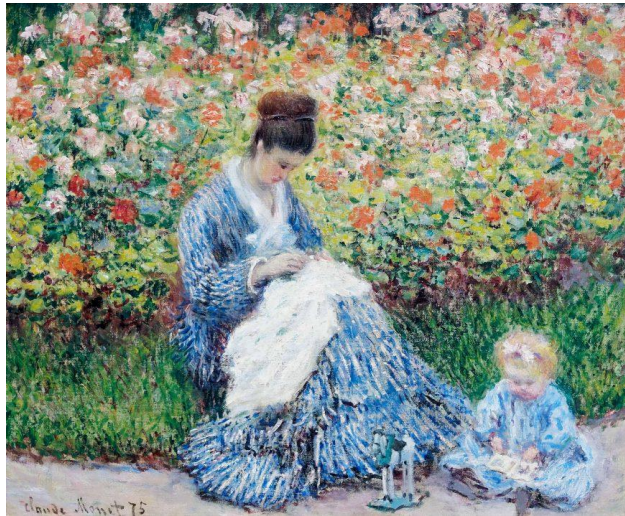


Figure 2: Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil (1875) Claude Monet. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

<https://smarthistory.org/impressionism-optical-realism-monet/>

Families began to have fewer children, children obtained work rights and eventually child labor was banned entirely. Children began to be seen less as inherently sinful as science began to gain more power as enlightenment began to shift the western worlds' lens away from the all-powerful catholic church. Soon, lifespans began extending due to the introduction of modern medicine, also extending the period we are considered children. As there became a lessening demand on children's bodies as worker's hands, so too did the immediacy of adulthood wane. Children were slowly becoming a way for adults to protect the ideas of innocence and what it is like to be ignorant to the world at large and all its ugly visages. By preserving their 'innocence' for the longest time possible, parents – and thus society at large – could live vicariously through them as a portal into 'better days'.

3. The Psychology of Childhood

During the rising interests of the Victorian era in the sciences, so too gave rise to one of the most famous - and infamous - doctors in the psychological sciences: Sigmund Freud. His works on the psycho-sexual and inner workings of men became household discussion. The works were quite ravenously consumed by the art world, heavily influencing their art and art scholarship. This way of dissecting the self was a prime catalyst for the shifting views of art subject: away from the art meant to create classical views of fantastical or historical landscape and portraiture for status. The new frontier was placed before them and too tantalizing to pass up: The artist's themselves. Art had new direction, to understand one's own psyche and life and make art as a reflection of that (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Dorothea Tanning, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943), oil on canvas, The Tate Gallery
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tanning-eine-kleine-nachtmusik-t07346>

Sigmund Freud's daughter Anna Freud continued her father's groundbreaking research, but in a new niche; away from man, and focused on the nature of the child⁹. Her research spoke on her father's ideas and of "developmental lines", the basis of this idea speaking on how everything one experiences as a child and how a child learns to deal with these stressors determines one's physiological profile later in life, and can even allow one to potentially predict certain outcomes before they happen¹⁰. In the studies viewed for this paper, many focused on the concept of the influences of circumstances on children throughout childhood and the different effects of coping forms. Focusing further on the relationships of the parental and peer, isolation that can be observed in some children can greatly affect their social cognition as well as ability to forget unpleasant memories¹¹. The after-effects of parental rejection can vary, but are similar across all cultures¹² and will greatly affect relationship developments down the line. Societal expectations placed upon the parent affect how they may raise their child. In herd animals, young that cannot learn how to function within the pack dynamic or are unfit for survival can be rejected by their parents and the herd. The goal: remove those members that are unfit or undesirable to maintain the health of the herd¹³. When applied to a non-survival-oriented species, such as humans, the question becomes more complex as the core behaviors remain. Observing the rejection of a child from a peer group or parental figure, the child has lasting social and emotional consequences. In this outcome parents' desires to reinforce social norms can sometimes outweigh their desire to comfort and support their child. The child is then left to navigate its shortcomings and trauma, and given circumstances that inhibit flourishing in its future life. Children can be extensions of parents' desire to reinforce social norms, and this can sometimes be translated to the brutal and fickle nature of children's social circles and social understanding. The unconscious nature of the innate desire to maintain order and status-quo makes it a tougher behavior to overwrite in the greater social consciousness. Society is a circle that feeds itself, and is often subject to subliminal thoughts and actions to 'correct' what is seen to be 'wrong', even if the child's behaviors are normal for their age group. The guilt and punishment mentality used to teach them order creates a moral 'right' and 'wrong' which may lead to the avenue of guilt-orientation or shame-orientation. Whichever path is travelled can determine likelihood to commit 'devious behaviors'¹⁴.

4. My Practice

In the act of painting, I strive to depict spaces where either an innocent idea is displaced and perverted, or a child knowingly participates in questionable or unruly behaviors to create discomfort within the viewer. While I attempt to emulate the 'childlike' in my stylistic approach, I also embrace the complex nature of 'innocence' through my subject matter by shining a spotlight on the disturbing realities of childhood. The world of the child is often without sound logic, and the harshness of isolation and othering one can experience while growing up outside of the ideal can be

scarring. My work delves deeply into personal memories and how I process the detritus of my memory. I make memory drawings which are often multi-layered landscapes of moments in my life, be them traumatic or mundane (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Her Influences, Their Imprints, Missouri Called But I Told Them To Leave A Message (2019-2020)
Morgan Overby

These works focus on my personal experiences with severe social othering and isolation. Throughout my childhood, my thought processes often relied on a very deep sense of escapism to cope with an inability to cope or to understand. Similarly, my drawings bounce between surrealism and a crystalline-clear, zoomed-in sort of specificity. The interplay of symbolic and realistic is integral to conveying the riotous space of the memory. As the child-self attempts to exist within the world it is experiencing, the adult-self attempts to understand and empathize with the child while experiencing the moment from the perspective of an observer.

The utilization of cut-outs and clipped images within the memory-based works is to convey how memories often have moments of clarity and opacity. I might have a very acute, clear memory of the way the socks of my sister mismatched on the day of my seventh birthday, but no memory of how she looked that day I can remember the way it smelt on that cold winter's day playing little league soccer and how the grass was so perfectly dewy, but remember very little of the game itself. Memory works in fickle ways, latching onto seemingly non-important moments just as strongly as you would a major moment.

My practice often involves many steps to delve deeper into my own world, using poetry, music, and tactile sketching with many mediums to re-enter my younger mind space. My work is designed to be a form of catharsis and exorcism, allowing me to re-experience my emotions and trauma in totality to fully release them from my current self. Utilizing art in this way is well-founded within both the arts and sciences; its utilization within mental health institutions was to allow an outlet for people to process their world in ways intangible with language and to soothe. Art helps to bridge the gap between individual experiences and realities, creating a common language where other senses fail to read. Artists like Bacon, Bourgeois, Basquiat, Kusama, Pollock, Kahlo, even as far back as Gentileschi have all used art in this manner (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Painting (1946), Francis Bacon. MoMA Collection. © 2020 Estate of Francis Bacon / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79204>

I am an extension of this practice. My goal is to expel my own emotional baggage and to heal, as well as to bring upon the world an uncomfortable question: why do we feel a sense of unease with works of art? I want to find a segue into creating discussion and internal dialogue with oneself as to why these social norms are so present and why they allow us to reject ‘ugly duckling’ children so flippantly? Is one’s own comfort greater than that of the child’s? Why is the child innocent? What is innocence? My works may not pose any answers to these questions, but the body of work questions one’s own inability to reconcile the ideals of the child and childhood with its stark and squeamish reality. My desire is to create a space where viewers start to question their own preconceptions and notions of the child and their own childhoods.

5. Innocence in Culture

Innocence in the modern context is seen within many facets of society. When applied to childhood and children, innocence undervalues and underestimates a child’s inherent ability to understand the world around them and their role within it. Children often exhibit a much stronger understanding of the world they exist in, responding better to being talked to like a peer than the more coddled version we tend to adopt. Innocence is an inherently unrealistic and harmful ideology, underestimating a child’s inherent ability to understand the world and it is harmful to try to overly shield them.

The more modern forms of innocence are not left solely to that of children, but also extends to ideas surrounding modern day problems such as white fragility. Innocence is used to mask ignorance on a given subject and to pardon others’ behaviors and activities in problematic scenarios. This concept is also used within education, deeming what can and cannot be taught due to the inherent innocence of the children being taught these lessons. This leading to many important pieces of history to be left out of the common narrative, effectively erasing them without choosing to seek them out (either independently or through higher education). The idea of innocence is also used as a tool for perpetuating misogyny, portraying women as fragile and incapable throughout history into modern day. ‘Innocence’ is conflated with ignorance, or a lack of ability to understand. Innocence is formed when society or individuals see fit to overly shield individuals from the world, creating these spaces with which leave individuals-whether it be children or adults- underprepared to participate within the greater world stage.

6. Conclusion

Childhood is never idyllic, even if our nostalgia tries to cover it all with roses, glitter glue, and the smell of birthday cake chap stick. There is no such thing as ‘innocence’, and it is an impossible ideal placed upon children for adults to revel in. It is rarely challenged because we want to believe in it, that it exists. That it existed in us before we lost it to ‘growing up’. Innocence was a concept created as the world industrialized, a desire for man to hold onto the ‘peaceful’ feeling of a world untouched by man and ‘sin’ - an ideal pursued heavily by the romanticists. It has become a phenomenon of fixation in our culture. The way we learn to process the world as children is heavily influenced by the negative effects of imbued and assumed innocence, often undermining a child’s inherent intelligence. Our world’s fixation on innocence is harmful when placed on a child as a social expectation of what normal is for children, as no mold will ever fit.

7. Endnotes

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