

Hyein Cho

MFA Candidate (Metal)

State University of New York at New Paltz

Thesis

2017

***Catch Me If You Can***

Youth accepts no limit. Children's eyes view the world as infinite possibility, filled with wonders that only the young can imagine. As we grow old, we adapt to reality and learn that the world that we live in is not so adventurous; rather, it is a place with strict rules and limits. Nearly everyone has had a creative childhood with good memories that feel nostalgic during stressful times. The purpose of my work is to provide simple pleasures to the audience by making objects that evoke reminiscence of childhood that has been locked away by age and society. I challenge the separation of fun and adulthood by answering the question, "Why should fun be restricted by age?" My work demonstrates that it need not be this way!

During my research, I came across the word; *Kidult*. Kidult is a word that emerged in early 2000 to describe an adult who indulges in the culture of children. In the beginning, behaving like a Kidult was depicted as negative behavior because playing games, watching superhero movies and collecting toys were considered childish. As we age and mature, we are required to take on more responsibilities while becoming estranged from games and toys. Adults are expected to behave like adults; when a person resorts to such childish behavior, they are considered immature and are belittled by society. However, over time, this perspective has changed, and now, many adults are fanatical *Kidults*, creating a new cultural trend.

Why is Kidult culture spreading? One reason is attributed to the increase in stress and the consequential longing for simpler times: nostalgia. Today, people perceive their lives as mundane and harsh, filled with endless competition. Kidult presents the idea that people can escape from reality. In other words, it temporarily frees a person from the struggles of survival. These days, there are unimaginable amounts of stress as a student studying, employees working but most importantly everyone trying to survive through each day. To relieve such stress, people need vicarious satisfaction and are turning to “kidult”.

A mainstream example would be Johanna Basford's debut coloring book; *Secret Garden*, which has sold over 11 million copies worldwide and launched the coloring craze for adults. Aside from being a form of mindfulness therapy, these books also encourage adults to make creative decisions about which colors to choose. Basford believes that her books provide a connection to the past, as well as an outlet for stress. She also notes, “I think it is really relaxing, to do something analogue, to unplug. And it’s creative. ... So many people have said to me that they used to do secret coloring-in when their kids were in bed. Now it is socially acceptable, it’s a category of its own.” (Figure 1)

Psychologist Gloria Martínez Ayala said, “The relaxation that it provides lowers the activity of the amygdala, a basic part of our brain involved in controlling emotion that is affected by stress.” Additional studies show that childhood nostalgia acts as an accelerant in calming our nerves. In 2015, people created the first adult ball pool in London to help stressed-out workers relax. This was another intriguing moment for the kidult culture as it created a physical link to childhood rather than a purely psychological one. The concept of jumping into a pool of 81,000 white rubber balls seemed absurd at first, but the public quickly caught on to the trend. Now, the

ball pit is considered one of the greatest places to hold office meetings, as it aids creative thinking. (Figure 2)

The industrial designer, Matali Crasset said “Unlike adults, children take play all in at once. They really experience objects. Children don’t follow any social customs; they get engrossed right away in the scenario that the object creates.” Regarding this, I try to keep my work simple to create a wide familiarity with, or by which the audience can participate. I intend to transport viewers back to their time of innocent childhood, allowing them to be worry free by re-visiting their memories.

I am a kidult. I collect many toys and characters in my leisure time to fulfill my satisfaction. As an artist, I sought to make work that could introduce the idea of Kidult to a broader audience, stimulating everyone’s childhood memory. I recalled a childhood moment when I passed by an arcade claw machine and begged my parents for some change to play it. I believe that everyone has similar memories that can relate. The arcade claw machine is a good representation of kidult who collect dolls and toys in their leisure time. It also speaks to unrequited desires, as through playing, one does not always earn the prize; this reconnects us to adult reality, and presents an inherent tension between innocence and experience.

## THE DESIGN PROCESS

I began my thesis work by drawing and planning with paper prototypes. Forms are made by cutting out planar figures from sheets of metal, acrylic, and leather based on a precise scheme. Like the traditional toys, *Catch Me If You Can* is comprised by symmetrical shapes like hemisphere, cylinder and rectangular. *Catch Me If You Can* is engineered to hold its claws when chains or handles are pulled. Irregular shapes are not appropriate for movement, so keeping

geometrical forms is essential. Even through it is just simple kinetic jewelry; the movement can satisfy the wearer's hunger for engagement by offering something to fidget with.

*Catch Me If You Can* is based on the claw shapes of toy arcade machine. The series consists of six necklaces made out of a variety of materials:

1. Silver + Acrylic (Figure 3)
2. Brass + Acrylic (Figure 4)
3. Silver + Acrylic + Leather (Figure 5)
4. Silver + Leather + Ply wood (Figure 6)
5. Copper + Leather + Ply wood (Figure 7)
6. Silver + Acrylic (Figure 8)

A variety combinations of materials for each individual work makes it possible to present different images within a sense of unity of platforms. By taking the form of a necklace, the wearer becomes the main subject that operates the claws.

My material choices further relate to the design of aesthetic toys. As many toys are made with plastic and wood, these materials have been the accent in my material investigations. Plastic and wood allow structural stability and can be used to give shape while remaining light durable. Unlike a traditional children's toy which is bold and simple, adult's toy is more delicate and fragile. For example, assembling plastic models requires a fine sense and patience that can be easily broken by a minor shock. Therefore, display is well developed in Kidult culture to protect those precious resemblances of their childhood pleasure. Some extreme collectors purchase acrylic boxes, glass boxes and frames for their toys. These collectors spend thousands and millions of dollars to fill a whole room for their toy collection. This can become an expensive hobby as valuable toys have its cost and popularity in their kidult world. Therefore, *Catch Me If You Can* includes various range of materials such as multi-ply wood, acrylic and metal.

*Catch Me If You Can* is not only about toys, but also art jewelry, so I explored various materials to create different experiences that the audience can visit. Also, they can deliver certain profound messages to audience. Silver, wood and leather represent life as these materials show change by their surroundings through time. Silver and leather change their colors, while wood expands and contracts. In terms of price and quality, plastic and multi-ply wood speaks to the mass-produced toy, while other materials such as metal and leather closely relates to the sentimentality of handmade craft. Furthermore, blending of various materials with all different characteristics can create beauty more than mere sum. Therefore, *Catch Me If You Can* takes a place between the art and toy, but most importantly, it is modern art jewelry.

#### TOY/ART/VALUE

Toys are going through a major transformation: no longer simple objects of pleasure, they are also works of art. The 'art-toy' is one of kidult categories that refers to a doll called a "platform" - a uniformed shape of plastic doll with different sizes that has been artistically painted or has been partially transformed into a design. The origin of art-toy comes from Hong Kong's starving artists who sold their designs on a plastic bear doll called 'QEE' when they were unable to make a decent living in the standard art market. Since then, the Japanese toy company, MEDICOM TOY released a teddy bear toy called 'Be@rbrick' which spread the art-toy worldwide. (Figure 9)

M-I-B (Mint in Box) is a common word in the Kidult world that represents the condition of toy still in the display box. Many kidult collectors care about the display packages as much as the toys themselves. The package is like a house for the toy that creates more meaning to the collector; more than a basic frame, it adds value.

This thrill of unboxing can also be shared by just looking at someone else doing it. There is a recent online trend that captures the experience of toy unboxing and its features. By watching someone else open the same toy as the viewers', the viewers can experience the toy vicariously while keeping theirs M-I-B. Not all people feel comfortable with unboxing their toy and simply just looking at. There is a recent online trend to experience the vicarious thrill of playing with the toy – “unboxing videos” where a host opens a collectible toy and demonstrates its features. This way, you can watch all the fun while your items stay M-I-B.

Even if you choose to not open your toy, watching video might not be enough to fulfill your hunger to open and play your toy. To further fulfill the hunger of consumers, TRY ME packages were created. TRY ME packages encourage people to try out a portion of the toy's feature by stimulating their fidget desires. By the 2000s, packaging for toys and collectibles had recognized a shift in the way kids and collectors approached buying and saving their items. New trends in package design addressed this: larger clear blister for action figures, larger windows in boxes, and lots of lots of “Try-Me's.” Therefore, people don't have to have a much mental trauma of whether to open or not to open. The visual enjoyment of the item can be restored while product is protected. (Figure 10)

I adopted 'try-me packaging' and 'MIB packaging' methods as an exhibition strategy, aiming to allow viewers to see and try to touch the works at the same time while preventing exposure to unexpected accidents. Moreover, the 'try me' package encourages viewers to touch their works, stimulating their fidget desires. We all have tried to put our hands into the claw arcade machine through the hole to see if we can reach the dolls inside the glass box. I combined this idea with the “try me” packaging and created in my pedestal. It is allowed for the audience to try to touch it. Thus, people do not simply feel like they are looking at artworks but feel like

they are playing with toys. Just as the toy without a box is incomplete, my work and its package are inextricable. (Figure 11) (Figure 12)

In order to inform people that these works are motivated by claw arcade machine, there are plaster teddy bears and Lego displayed together as the prize. These colorless prizes are shaped to symbolize children's toy and colored white for pureness. (Figure 13) (Figure 14)

As a result, the work can provide some shelter; it stimulates the "young at heart" to play the toy and, in doing so, "unbox" one's younger days. So, even though people cannot be young again, they can be rejuvenated through this sense of play. We don't have to actually handle the toy to experience that feeling. (Figure 15) (Figure 16) In his poem, "Songs of Innocence", William Blake, an 18th-century English painter and poet, describes that we should go back to the world of innocence which is the paradise because this world has fallen. Innocence is the essence of childhood. As adults, our childhoods are obscured by experience, and we strive to reconnect to past memories. My work explores this longing through the creation of objects that inspire memory, nostalgia and the possibility of enriching our lives through play.....

Images

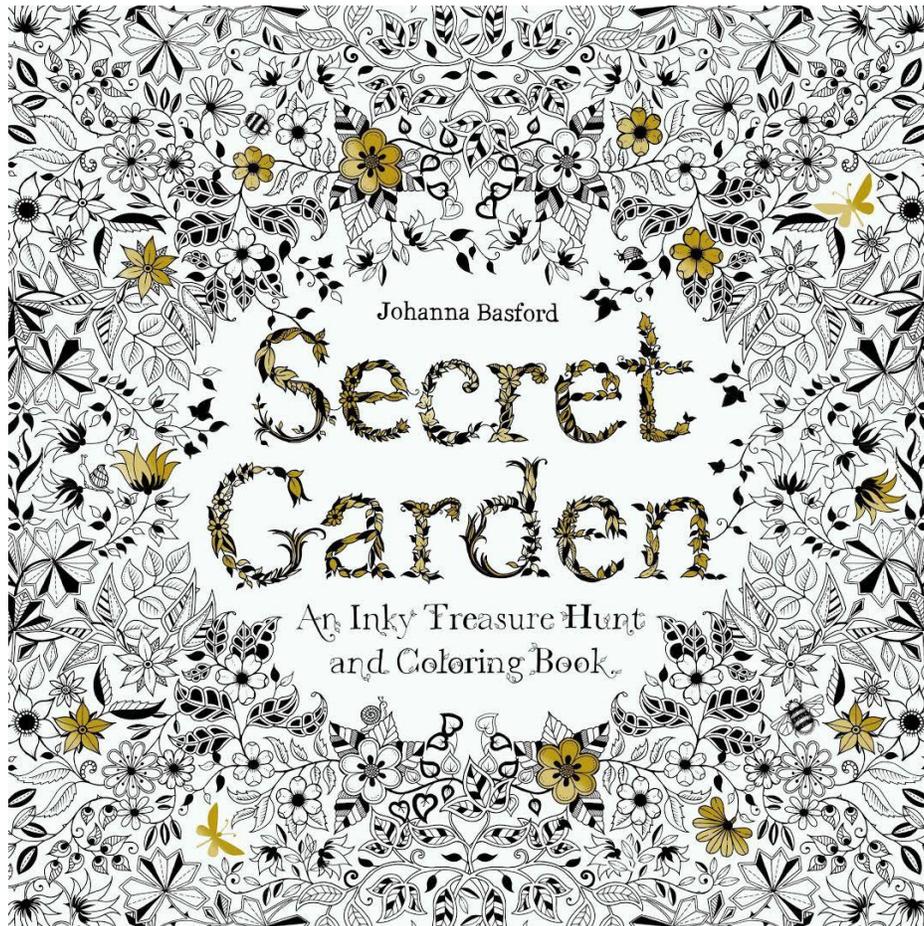


Figure 1. *Secret Garden: An Inky Treasure Hunt and Coloring Book* by Johanna Basford



Figure 2. *The ball pool in west London* Photos by Ben Rowe



*Figure 3. Catch Me If You Can (1), silver, acrylic, bolts and nuts, clear coiled tube, stainless steel*



*Figure 4, Catch Me If You Can (2), gold plated brass, acrylic, bolts and nuts*



*Figure 5. Catch Me If You Can (3). silver, leather, acrylic, found mechanism, bolts and nuts*



*Figure 6. Catch Me If You Can (4). copper, ply-wood, leather, bolts and nuts, nails*



*Figure 7. Catch Me If You Can (5). ply-wood, silver, leather, bolts and nuts*



*Figure 8. Catch Me If You Can (6), silver, acrylic, bolts and nuts, stainless steel*



Figure 9. MEDICOM company's BE@G BRICK



Figure 10. Toy, Moschino's new fragrance in Toys R' Us-style packaging



*Figure 11. Try Me display with Catch Me If You Can (1)*



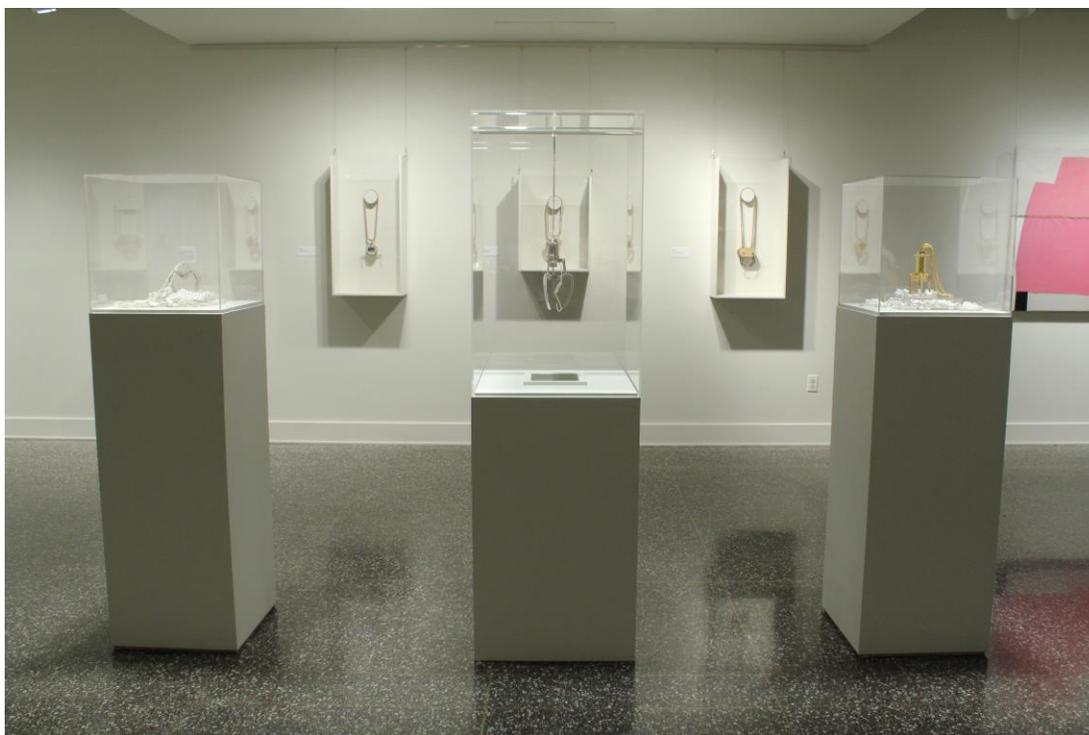
*Figure 12. Try Me display with Catch Me If You Can (5)*



*Figure 13. teddy bear prizes with Catch Me If You Can (2)*



*Figure 14. Lego prizes with Catch Me If You Can (6)*



*Figure 15. MFA thesis show installation at Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art*



*Figure 16. MFA thesis show installation at Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art*

## Works Cited

- O'Leary, Timothy. Foucault ad Fiction : The Experience Book (1). London, GB: Continuum, 2009. ProQuest ebrary.
- Just Kidding!: A to Z Designs for Kids & Kidults.* , 2013. Print.
- Basford, Johanna. "Secret Garden." Johanna Basford. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 May 2017. Print.
- NADIA, SALEMME. "Just Kidding Around." Mx (n.d.): Newspaper Source Plus.
- Fobar, Rachel. "A DIY arcade claw." Popular Science 2015: 66. Academic OneFile.
- Guins, R. "Beyond The Bezel: Coin-Op Arcade Video Game Cabinets As Design History." Journal Of Design History 28.4 (2015): 405-426. Scopus®.
- "Packaging and A Collector." Smith Design. N.p., 07 Oct. 2016.
- Beck, Julie. "Stress Toys: Mindlessness With a Purpose?" The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 15 July 2015.
- Barraclough, Sue. A plastic toy. London: Franklin Watts, 2009. Print.
- Chevel, Saadia R. "Kidult Culture - Why Should I Act My Age, Not My Shoe Size?" The Huffington Post. The Huffington Post, 23 June 2015.
- Miller, David. Materiality. Durham: Duke U Press, 2006. Print.
- Blake, William, and Richard Holmes. Songs of innocence and of experience. London: Folio Society, 1992. Print.
- Lowey, Ian, and Suzy Prince. The graphic art of the underground: a countercultural history. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.