

**Ryan Reiss**

**The Creation of (Little) Man and Other Wonderful Critters**

**IP Thesis 2016-2017**

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## **Introduction:**

Is creativity only for the creatives? Currently, if you ask an adult off the street if they consider themselves creative you will receive an awkward laugh, maybe some blushing, and an answering along the lines of “I can barely even draw a stick figure.” When did being able to draw directly correlate to being creative? As a child, creativity is encouraged as a way to get children to express themselves, release energy, and communicate their feelings. When and why did this begin stopping at childhood? Creativity is problem solving in a way unique to yourself, but how can an adult be shown that they are still being creative?

This creative view of life is very particular to my own lifestyle growing up. I was encouraged by my parents to do what made me happy. For a while that was science, and I thought maybe I want to be a veterinarian. After that I thought maybe the Peace Corpse would be an interesting way to become an explorer. Until I was older and choosing what program to apply to for college I had not seriously considered pursuing art as my career. Art was always a large part of my life but I believed that to be successful and to ideally make enough money to live, I would need to give that up to pursue a *real* job. I took the leap and decided to pursue my own form of creativity and it opened my eyes to seeing that many people around me were not given this idea even as something to consider. Creativity was for starving artists and people who had free time. However, looking around my environment that just didn't seem right. Scientists were coming up with new experiments to prove things that I could never dream as possible, mathematicians were creating equations that only they could prove were solvable, activists could

figure out ways to get hundred of people to follow their ideas. This all seemed pretty innovative to me, dare I say, creative even. The problem I seemed to be facing was not to turn on some major creativity button, the problem was figuring out how to have people participate in something outwardly creative without them stifling their natural creativity because of the stigma that they have somehow lost the ability to act creatively.

My project will attempt to bridge the gap between high art and creativity of the adult mind. I set a space for adults to be able to interact with materials similar to the ones they were encouraged to use as children. In my activities the adults are able to use as much time as they want, as many materials as they need, and whatever quantity they wanted to use to create any object they could imagine. A completely open-ended project, eliminating the idea of failure. After the participant declared their piece finished they each wrote a description of what they made. This allowed for participants to be as literal or not as they wanted about what they created. After collecting around 150 pieces over the course of 19 hours of active building events I set out each piece and began the process of documenting my first reactions to the pieces. I photographed the moment with a polaroid camera. This was my way of beginning to blend their creativity with my own. After this process I chose the pieces that I thought spoke to me in a unique way. I chose eight of these designs and began to transform them into large, human-sized, stuffed figures. Now expanding my creativity from first instance to something more thought out and much more timely, beginning to incorporate my skills creatively as someone studying art. To allow the project to go full cycle, I am allowing the viewers of the show to interact with the large animals I made and photograph themselves with a polaroid, making sure that the creativity from the first moment a person touched the clay until the show was displayed to come together through the interaction during the live piece.

For this project to come together I have needed to do research on creativity while growing up and when/why it began to be less available and less encouraged.

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### **Contextual Discussion:**

Joy; such a simple word, so elegant, and yet a concept that has almost become abstract throughout the process of maturation into adulthood. Joy as an adult also heavily differentiates between the type of joy felt as a child. The sense of joy as a child is connected with the overall ability to go with ones gut instinct- this can be expressed through making objects, dancing, singing, and being able to openly admit if they are feeling happy or sad (Huffington Post). This is where a barrier begins with adults and children. Admitting feelings as an adult is a show of weakness or even occasionally thought of as whiney or complaining. This is the first barrier for adults to truly feel the same sense of joy that they did as children- this understanding of cause and effect, an understanding of consequence. With relation to the creativity aspect of joy, the instinct to create, as we grow, at least within the life of growing up as an American, within an American schooling system, creative time is blocked out through our schedules. Beginning with having a large creative block throughout our days, preschool is about exploring different ways to understand the world around you, making life fun so that it is more approachable and less overwhelming as children develop (US Dep. of Edu).

Once elementary school hits there is a problem growing beginning in 1987 where the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement decided

that art (creative arts such as painting, dance, and music) are not considered one of the four core curriculum categories (english/reading/language arts, arithmetic/mathematics, social studies/history, and science) and therefore are not required during the weekly activities for children grades K-4. During the 2009-2010 school year on 4% of American public schools offered education in the arts for all students and “less than 20% of secondary schools coursework in arts was not required for graduation.” (USDE) This is mainly because the onset of the No Child Left Behind Act that was passed by congress and signed into law in 2002 in an attempt to replace the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The act was passed in an attempt to make the competitive nature of schooling a more leveled playing fields between wealthy majority students and poor and minority students. It attempted to increase competitive energy by requiring more testing, particularly standardized testing, within schools beginning as early as first grade (6-7 years old). With this emphasis on testing particularly in math and reading schools have been forced to remove their arts programs to dedicate more time and funding to test preparation.

This stifling of creativity is what began to lead youth (especially the late half of Generation Y and all of Generation Z) to overlook the focus on creativity. By not fostering creativity during the essential stages of youth children grow up often believing that it is an aspect of their humanity that has been lost. Often students are taught to over evaluate their work, always look for the *right* answer and the *right* way to do things, dwelling on a constant fear of ambiguity and crippling fear of failure (Reik). In the first year module for students joining University of Massachusetts Dartmouth there is a “Navigating the System” section where the school tries to suggest ways in which students should go about activities. They call it the S.M.A.R.T. goal system. The acronym stands for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. This plan then goes on to break down how to use this method to maintain a desired GPA. Nothing on the

schools First Year Guide discusses pursuing any of the arts except for a small excerpt in the section labeled “Educated Person Learning Outcomes and Measures” which then goes on to not bring up the arts again and instead refer to historians, mathematicians, and scientists are easily able to be categorized as “The Educated Person.” (UMassD) USA Today released an article in March 2016 titled “How to set realistic GPA goals in College.” GPAs are understandably important, it is always important to try your best, but this system is really just a reflection of the competitive testing system many Americans grew up with. A system where success is rigid, goals are more like rules, and education is more about thinking towards your future than it is about purely the joy of learning.

In my personal situation, I grew up in a very creative family. My mother is a designer of many fields, my father is an avid hobby photographer, and my sister is an art teacher for children nine years old until eighteen years old. In my own world I consider myself unbelievably lucky to have been pushed to pursue my own creative path through multiple means not only in the visual arts, but also in music and theater.

As a child I was required in school to play instruments and sing in the school choir, my parents took advantage of growing up in Manhattan and encouraged me to see plays and musicals as often as my schedule would allow. Particularly important in my current situation as an art student, my school, a private school in Manhattan, required students to participate in studio art and other visual art programs beginning in kindergarten and only becoming optional in sophomore year of high school. This requirement and constant encouragement to continue to better understand my own creativity ultimately led me to pursue art. Through all of the practices I was given to explore I found myself through visual arts.

I am taking a leap with my project and attempting to give adults (18+ years old) the opportunity to connect with the whimsical and open beauty of creativity that used to be encouraged within childhood. I set up a table during five events at three different locations throughout the University of Michigan campus; the central square of the University (the Diag), the lobby of the Undergraduate Library (the UGLI), and the lobby of the Ross School of Business. My table was set up with four colors of modeling-air-dry-clay and a selection of crafting objects including bottle caps, beads, and markers. When a participant approached the table I would tell them that they can make anything they want out of any of the materials on the table. The participants were given freedom of expression with a material that many of them had used when they were children in colors that are reminiscent of childhood. There was no time limit, I would not tell them what to make, I would just talk to them. I would play with some clay while we chatted, talked about weather, talked about hobbies, but they were in charge of what we discussed. Some people decided not to talk at all and get fully absorbed within the piece they were constructing. When they decided their object was finished they would hand it to me, fill out a form asking for a description of what they made, and go on their way. In those moments of creation I hope that the participant feels some type of joy, or nostalgia, or even a tinge of happiness for being given a reason to procrastinate from studying for five more minutes.

I used the designs created by participants to further my own exploration into the visual arts. After sitting with the figures and going back and forth between multiple ideas and methods I decided that I would give the figures life and allow them to be big enough to participate in the world. Looking at artist Jeff Koons and his larger-than-life sculptures it became clear that making something small into something large has a very powerful impact. It allows people to see with a new perspective something that they have previously only seen in one way. However, my

pieces are interactive, allowing for viewers to feel them, hold them, and play with them. They are not a piece of art on a wall that you are not supposed to touch- they gain life through their interactions with viewers.

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### **Methodology:**

From the start of my project I have attempted to convey the message of my thesis through multiple visual ways. In the beginning I thought about allowing adults to create art using the methods that would be offered to a child (in our generation, usually children born in the 90's), specifically finger painting, play dough, and sculptural beads. After allowing some of my peers to spend some time playing with the materials provided to them and giving me their final work, it came to my attention that for the finger painting adults did not know how exactly to move their hands on a piece of paper and were hesitant about working with an object that got them dirty. With the group that chose to work with the modeling beads, there was not enough time and not enough freedom for the participants to feel done within a fifteen minute period. The last group, the group that worked with colored modeling clay, seemed to enjoy the movements and flexibility that the clay was able to give them. The other two groups were close to envy while looking at the clay group. This lead me to discover that for an adult, it seems to be a bit more difficult to approach a 2D material when given no instructions. However, clay allowed the participants to fidget and move with their material without any inhibitions. From their I decided to focus on giving people clay to work with, specifically people who were not pursuing a visually



creative field. To allow people a range in texture and hopefully open their minds to more possibilities while building I provided small beads and plastic gems for the participants to incorporate into their work. I also decided that I did not want to give any instructions other than the object must be made using the materials provided. By asking an adult to create something like a house, for example, there is a pre-made idea of what a house *should* look like. I strictly wanted to avoid any possibility of making the participant feel that they somehow did not do the activity correctly. I had them build their designs and then fill a form with their name and what they thought they had made. This allowed me to give them the chance to justify what they created, even giving them a new level of creative opportunity.

From here I began to play with the figures that I had collected and narrowed down a group of eight figures that I believed had their own character. I took these figures and began to play with modes of interpreting them. First considering clay sculpting, then photography, and finally, after much thought and testing decided on sewing. I created large scale figures that were able to hold their own in a world much larger than their original designs would have allowed. The smallest of the original pieces was a two inch square (little man). His final design ended up being a four foot tall plush toy. The largest of the sewn creatures is eight feet long and weighs about thirty pounds.

It was important to me that the audience could interact with these creatures. Creativity is something that can be life altering for people who are exposed to it and if I could show that and give a welcoming weight to this that is what I would try to do. This ultimately led to my decisions of how to install my work. I created a play space that allows for people to feel welcome to sit, lay, and arrange the creatures however they would like. On either side of the carpet that I had the creatures sitting on there was a small plastic children table that each help

different objects. The table on the left held a book that documented all of the original designs that anyone built for me during the first building process. On the other table was an empty book with pockets to hold photographs and a small polaroid camera. People were encouraged to document their experiences with the creatures and leave their mark on the project in the form of an image (see below for photographs).

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## **Creative Work**

**Rephrase of thesis question:** How can clay and fabric be used to show adults that they are always able to be creative and why is it important that they recognize this specifically as adults?

My formal choices of materials were meant to mirror the visions we have seen as children. Trying to pull the part of our brain from the past by colors, textures, possibly even smells. I chose to give the participants the three primary colors and white for their clay options because this is how we were taught to understand color. It is also important because of the texture of the clay, it needed to be an easily molded material that did not dry quickly but overall did dry to preserve the shapes and the details that the individual decided to create. Color is eye catching, especially in the environment we are in now as college students or educators, living in an environment where colors are mostly shades of grey and tan. Seeing a large selection of materials displayed on a table in a bunch of colors makes the individual feel like they want to touch it.

I then wanted to make all of their original designs into a book with the writing that they had given me to describe their work. The purpose of the book is to provide a type of key to the work overall. With so many little figures it is easy to get lost in each one. I wanted each participant to feel as though their work help equal importance to the show I was trying to produce. The best way I could think of doing this was through a simple book with photographs showing each piece and letting the maker of the piece have their name proudly displayed next to it.

Aside from having people create, there was still the dilemma of trying to figure out what brought this to the level of *art*. How do these non-artists works get translated so that they are viewed with the same respect any piece of art made by an artist would get? The eight designs that peaked my interest first when looking at all of them together are made into large scale (2 1/2- 3 ft tall) stuffed figures. These figures are soft much like children toys but are multiple times larger than their original designs so that they are able to interact with a larger world. To go full circle and allow the creativity to be recycled throughout this whole process there will be polaroid cameras available at exhibit to allow viewers to take pictures of themselves interacting with the stuffed dolls and to give them a chance to put their own image onto the wall.

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## **Conclusion**

This project has allowed me to open my eyes and widen my horizons with what I thought I was able to do both mentally and physically. The mental stress of this project has been exhausting. This is because I had to delve into my own joy and creativity to be able to begin this

process. It is easy for me to create art around the emotions and lives of others but I very rarely find that I need to understand the emotions in my own mind. Although tiring I do not believe that my project would have been as successful if I had not gone through the process of trying to understand myself first. In addition, physically the strain of this project was unlike my experiences as a growing artist. I had to work with participants for my project to get off the ground, ask outside sources for funding, learn new forms of sewing, and explore a new way of storytelling. I believe that this story telling process is going to be what I take away most from this work.

The years I have spent at stamps have allowed me to find my own way of telling a story. However, this usually involves my camera.

My artistic process has allowed me to discover that the art form I would like to pursue is documentary photography. The reason behind my love for this art form is my deep love for telling stories, particularly stories that would normally go unseen. I like to uncover stories whether they be a story of the “average joe” or of the President of the United States of America. Everyones story deserves to be told and with a visual story it is an aspect that is much more difficult to dismiss. Words can be powerful but images are an undeniable truth. You are seeing people, understanding the human connection, and seeing someone else and their realities. This project allowed me to tell a story in a different visual way. I was able to tell a story of creativity and prove that it is alive and well in everyone. I was able to show that joy was brought on by this creativity. Each interaction with my project adds another layer to the project. The initial building of the clay sculptures allows for people to show what they are capable of, both physically and imaginatively through the descriptions and stories of the pieces that were given to me. The next process was a journey of my own, trying to find a way to express the pieces in a

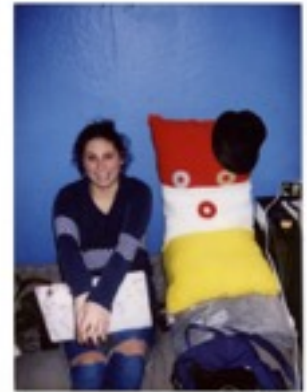
way that I believed showed the weight and importance of the creatures. The last stop of the story is how the creatures interacted with the world. How people interacted with their undeniable presence. The documentation of this allowed for this end of the story process to be documented with something physical, a third part for the story: clay, fabric, photograph.

For my future endeavors I hope that this project will guide me in a way that allows me to work better with others and will open a door to collaboration. After seeing the positive response people had to my project I would like to continue striving for that reaction. A reaction that shows to me that my work is helping someone or giving someone more knowledge about topics they didn't know before.

The original clay designs that were chosen out of the 150+ Creative U submissions.



Me posing with the original Little Man design.



The originals of five designs, about a third the size of the final designs.



All of the finished and updated designs before installation.



All of the creatures installed in the gallery with accompanying books.



One of the first groups of participants posing for a photograph on the creatures.



Participants lounging on the creatures looking at the book of original designs.



A participant taking photographs of others with the polaroid that was provided.



A girl posing for a photograph with the creatures.





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