

## Deep Play: Joyful Revelry & Subversive Whimsy in the MAM Collections

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**THE INSTINCT FOR PLAY** is hardwired into the human brain. From our earliest days, the act of play has given us opportunities to interact, develop survival skills, solve problems and evolve our species and our cultures. In this light, play is a necessity, but for play to be truly playful, it must occur outside of the bounds of necessity and function freely for its own sake. Art making is an ideal arena for playful exploration of new ideas and reflection of past experiences. Many artworks in the MAM permanent collections incorporate the symbols, strategies, and goals of play: to transport both maker and viewer into fantastical realms of thought and experience.



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**PLAY COMBINES THE TENSION** of real-world risk-taking with the freedom to make choices. At its most basic, play is a refuge from the real world and at its most complex, play is a way to transcend the real world. Complex play—deep play—arises when the potential for loss far outweighs the potential for gain. Nineteenth-century utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham outlined this formula as not only illogical, but also immoral. Diane Ackerman, naturalist and author of *Deep Play*, takes a slightly different approach. While she agrees that deep play is “not always positive and uplifting” she observes that “in deep play’s altered mental state one most often finds clarity, revelation, acceptance of self, and other life-affirming feelings.”

**WHETHER PLAY IS PHYSICAL OR MENTAL**, skydiving or stamp collecting: when the intensity and ritual of the activity reach a certain level, humans can discover unshakable stability, profound peace, and creative insight. This is deep play, and art thus becomes the playground. Creative abandon within the safety of a studio, a sketchbook, or the bounds of a frame allows an artist to chase ideas through the mind’s shadows of fear and insecurity into new vistas of possibility. An act of playful sharing can itself be transcendent; within the museum, viewers are invited to follow artists on their quest for joy, ecstasy, and rapture.

Works by Lela Autio, Leslie Millar, and Jesse Wilber remind us that children are driven to play, while Lucy Capehart, Dirk Lee, and John Smart prove in their images that adults seek out the same calm relaxation and uplifting abandon. Reflections on past childhood play from Susan Barnes, Stephanie Frostad, and Sylvia Long are tinged with nostalgia. What is past is perhaps lost, and the heavy barrier between reality and the realm of play is underscored in ambiguous, psychologically-driven works by Paul Harris, Walter Hook, and Patricia Thornton.

**EXPERIENCING FEAR AND LOSS** through deep play allows us to move through trauma and transcend grief. Jim Todd’s homage to Jose Posada recognizes that artist’s playful handling of our very mortality with animated skeletons in the indigenous Mexican tradition of honoring the dead. Sheila Miles takes a contemporary cue in her autobiographical artworks about ill health and loss.

Holly Andres and Grace Carter also use signs of carefree, child’s play to negotiate death and its heartbreaking aftermath. For these artists, deep play’s ironic marriage of extreme risk and necessary freedom to escape seem the domain of childhood fantasy. In contrast, sculptures by Brad Rude and Joe Batt whisk us into a fantasy where anything is possible, and dangerous consequences are held at

bay. The purity of such a breathless, wishful moment is captured in visual poetry by Lorna Simpson and Elizabeth Dove.

**DEEP PLAY IS INTENSELY PERSONAL**, but author Johan Huizinga proposes that play strengthens societies by uniting individuals through ritual activity and helping them achieve common goals. Many artists included in the exhibition use symbols of play—toys, jokes, and games—to face collective fears about cultural issues that quickly overwhelm the individual: bigotry, racism, terrorism, addiction, and poverty. Jason Clark, Marvin Messing, Francis Pearson, and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith confront these themes with fearless images. Viewers who pause over Stan Healy's mid-century photos may wonder over humanity's haunting motivations for deep play, and consider whether or not the rulebook ever changes.



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Huizinga is considered an authority on the cultural concepts of play, and he claims that the essence of play is harder to discern in the visual arts, because they are not performed—played out—like poetry, music, or dance. The play-instinct that appears in art making is driven toward common decoration, construction and imitation, not the truly transcendent levels of deep play. Furthermore, an exhibition of a static work is not play, he argues, but “necessarily part of some rite or other, a festival, entertainment or social event” that does not “thrive in an atmosphere of common rejoicing.”

But he developed his theories before the postmodern era, where artists routinely demonstrate that art is more than mere imitation. *Deep Play: Joyful Revelry and*



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*Subversive Whimsy in the MAM Collections* offers counterpoints. The artworks are examples of the untarnished realm of freedom of expression: an ideal playground for the transcendent experience of the artist. The MAM Collections are dedicated to public celebration of unique expressions of our culture, and the individual artworks come to life only when they are perceived as active elements in the museum program. Finally, as contemporary viewers, we are free to engage in an intense witnessing, free to respond, and free to participate in a lively conversation that is the path to deep play.

#### Bibliography:

Ackerman, Diane. *Deep Play*. New York: Random House, 1999.  
Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950.

#### Images:

1 Jessie Wilber, *Family Album*, screen print, 1974, 23.25 x 35.25". MAM Collection, gift of Alison Merriam Payne, 2001.

2 Stan Healy, *Blackface Dancers*, gelatin silver print, date unknown, printed by Lucy Capehart, 2003, 10 x 12". MAM Collection, gift of Timothy B. Gordon, 2005.

3 Holly Andres and Grace Carter, still from *Dandelion*, DVD of Super 8mm film, 2005, 07:29. MAM Collection, gift of the artists, 2006.