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## Credulous Escapism

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

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## **Abstract**

My Master of Fine Arts (MFA), explores the world of toys. I do so following the Thesis Dossier Stream, which is, paired with a Thesis Exhibition *Credulous Escapism* (2022). My program of research reflects on the psychological impact of toys on myself and individuals. I have sought to create a series of works that expresses childhood wonderment and awe through paintings and installation works. The paintings depict apocalyptic landscapes in which toys explore an alternate universe to allude to a foreboding entity: the reality of adulthood. To contextualize my work, I examine the works of Marcel Duchamp, Diana Thorneycroft, Melanie Daniel, and Sean Landers. I situate the series in neo-surrealistic ideologies that follow the principle of comprehending the subconscious influence that toys can contribute to our personalities. This movement encompasses the exploration of perception in artwork that offers insight to alternate realities of the subconscious mind.

## **Keywords**

Marcel Duchamp, Diana Thorneycroft, Melanie Daniel, Surrealism, Neo-Surrealism, Toys, Naïve, Readymades, Subconscious, Sean Landers

## **Lay Summary**

Exploring the world of toys in a neo-surrealistic realm, this Master of Fine Arts (MFA) following the Thesis Dossier Stream is paired with a Thesis Exhibition *Credulous Escapism* (2022). The project offers an opportunity to reflect on how toys can subconsciously impact individuals. I create a series that emphasizes childhood wonderment and awe through paintings and installation works. In addition, I follow artists that have used readymade objects and toys in their practice to inform the pieces I have developed throughout the two-year degree. I situate my practice in neo-surrealistic ideologies as the movement emphasizes the importance of unveiling the subconscious mind in artworks.

## Acknowledgements

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Thank you, Dad.

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## Introduction

The exploration of toys and their subconscious psychological impact on children into adulthood has always been a source of fascination for me. As a child and young teenager, I explored various outlets of expression such as music, animation, and photography. These interests lead me to pursue the visual arts to communicate my interest in toys. I began to explore and to develop alternate worlds through toys. I often painted a world that mimicked reality while heavily distorted by my imagination; larger-than-life objects and toys came to life just they had done when I was a child. As I progressed in my studies, toys continue to influence the development of my work. While pursuing my MFA, I established a series that culminates my enchantment with toys and the conclusion of childhood. I produced painted works and installation pieces that engage with neo-surrealistic influences. My goal for this series is to reveal a subconscious relationship with toys. The components of the dossier stream will outline my wonderment with toys and how contemporary artists are using them within their practices. *Credulous* describes the readiness to believe in anything even with uncertainty of its validity. Viewers are welcomed into the space of possibilities and can escape from the realities of the world. *Credulous Escapism* reflects on a whimsical moment in life while acknowledging that the childhood wonderment inevitably comes to a looming end in the background.

The work I produced for my MFA is inspired by neo-surrealistic objects that delves into the psyche of human existence. Each part of my series contributes to an overarching theme of how toys can influence our various facets of our lives and actions. In my own experience toys are a continuous source of inspiration, particularly, a royal purple bear given to me by my Papa, (Leonard Johnson) when I was six years old. The bear contributed to my colour scheme in several visual works. This colour and the matching palette scheme have been prevalent in my

work for several years. Observing and contemplating my work, the royal purple aesthetic was realized by chance, when I glanced at the bear in my studio; an object that has been constant part of my studio as a continued reminder of my Papa. The familial and intellectual impact of the teddy bear inspired my fascination of how toys can have the potential to influence us subconsciously throughout our lives.

Chapter One of the dossier provides a comprehensive artist statement that outlines my research process and its progression. Next, I provide anecdotal experiences with toys that have inspired my artistic endeavour. The collection consists of series of artworks that evolved as I solidified my research of toys in contemporary arts and how I wanted to engage the viewers. In researching Marcel Duchamp, Diana Thorneycroft and Melanie Daniel, I began to consider how their strategies in art production that I could incorporate into my own practice. These artists either utilize toys, found objects, or neo-surrealistic practices within their work. I conclude by discussing how my work is anchored in neo-surrealistic ideologies and look at the work produced by Sean Landers. Landers produced a series of portraits that incorporate various identities of reality into one realistic piece that are meant to emulate vivid dreams. In my practice I seek to achieve this vivid-dream effect by subtle (and not so subtle) incursions by toys.

In Chapter Two, I document the evolution of my practice during my two-year program. Primarily using canvas and acrylic paint, I establish a story that outlines toys exploring an alien-esque world through a childlike form of exploration. As my studio work progressed, the paintings were condensed into frames that mimicked being hung in a gallery. I then incorporate readymades as toys take over the gallery space and create a juxtaposition of installation and painted artworks. Each of the mini-series relates to a larger narrative that ultimately seeks to allow the viewers to reflect on their childhood wonder and experiences. I finally address the

found objects, and how an object placed in the gallery interacts with my paintings of the toys. This juxtaposition changed my perception of communication of the medium for the viewers, which will be further explored in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three provides information relating to a conversation with Diana Thorneycroft. Her work is crucial to my study: Thorneycroft's work involves representing the harsh realities of Canadian history through toys. Her depictions are often controversial as she relies on perceived innocent objects to visualize facets of Canada's devastating acts. Thorneycroft utilizes toys to depict a reality of Canadian and world history. In contrast, I am displaying toys to represent a child exploring a world that is moving towards the end of the childhood naiveite and back into a harsh reality. The conversation considers: 1) the impacts of toys in contemporary art; 2) how they might hinder or elevate an artist's message to the viewers; and 3) how toys are a sculptural aspect of Thorneycroft's pieces. We further discuss the meanings and materialities of her work and how in my practice, I am incorporating painted versions of toys and objects to develop a dialogue amongst the various works in the series.



## Chapter One: Comprehensive Artist Statement

As an artist, I strive to create a space where a viewer can escape from the realities of the world by falling into a new realm that promotes the freedom of exploration. The viewer's melancholic world can stand still, giving them an opportunity to feel joyful and reminisce about familiar objects from their childhood. By re-establishing this familiarity with toys, I explore how objects can encourage emotional responses and develop strategies for viewers to reflect on their experiences.

My fascination with toys in the arts began during my bachelor's degree in Studio Fine Arts with a Minor in Visual Culture and Art History from Brock University. I began to explore the interactions between toys and the viewers' responses to them by developing a series that explored the effects of a post-apocalyptic world and what future societies would preserve about our current history. The found objects were splattered with fluid acrylic, a metaphor for contamination, to represent the toxicity of our lifestyles towards the planet. The series, titled *The Existential Bummer of Existence 2020*, provides a space in which viewers can take the time to see the world as a place that has been destroyed. In the peak of the pandemic, I witnessed many people struggle to support one another in profound ways, all of which took a toll on our collective patience and resiliency. In response, I aimed to create a lighthearted collection about the childhood experience with toys while simultaneously juxtaposing that joy with the devastation of the background landscapes to acknowledge the hardships our society then and still now endured. Recapturing the childhood experience through the use of toys that are seemingly boundless with a naïve sense of realism.

## 1.1 Anecdotal Experiences

Toys can be seen as epitomising Surrealism as they mimic another version of the world through the lens of child appeasement.<sup>1</sup> They are objects that embody fantasy and mythical stories in representing our imaginations.<sup>2</sup> During the late twentieth century, concerns about preserving children's innocence stemmed from the increasing degree to which political, social, and human rights issues seemed to be imposed on their imaginations.<sup>3</sup> With that in mind, this series emphasizes the importance of a return to a childlike freedom of expression and from the rigors of the adult world through interactions with toys. Interactions with an inanimate object potentially generate a subconscious impact on the viewer. This is true of my own experiences; at the age of six, I was given a royal purple bear that had a velvety texture with various tones of royal purple under different lighting. This bear, and the noticeable resemblances to it in my artwork later in life, inspired this venture.

My Papa won the bear for me at a claw machine. Since receiving the bear, I have been entranced by its rich colours, often discussing them with family members as the bear was my favourite plushie. While I paint, the bear has remained in my studio, a continual reminder of my Papa. After completing a painting, I often step back to take time to observe my work. Often, I realize I have unintentionally utilized the bears complementary. As such, the bear has had a lasting influence on me, and it has only been recently that I have understood that this influence was present during my early teenage years since I began to dream of a career in the arts. As an artist the recognition of the bear's impact on my art and childhood has inspired me to recreate similar nostalgic experiences for my viewers.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hopkins, *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid..

<sup>3</sup> Ibid..

To foster this nostalgia, I have furthered explored the influence of toys on people's experiences. I begin my research by simply asking family members and friends for their recollections about childhood toys. Hearing their responses further inspired me to explore this phenomenon visually. I have since broaden my investigation by querying others about their own experiences with toys and if they found any significant associations amongst their careers, interests, or relationships and their childhood toys. The responses were filled with excitement while reminiscing and recalling special memories about their past childhood experiences. Further, when purchasing readymade objects for the studio during my MFA program, I often was stopped by other shoppers and heard,

*"I used to play with that when I was a kid!" or "Wow, these bring back good memories from when I was younger; I haven't seen these toys in years."*

This moment of remembrance and excitement is what I want to recreate for viewers in gallery spaces. Such moments between individuals and readymade objects produce a robust response. As a result, I my studio practice seeks to triggers these fragmented childhood experiences. Each of the series developed over the two years of the MFA program encapsulates this narrative and provides insight into where I was in the research stage. It demonstrates how artists working in the contemporary arts changed my perception of establishing these emotional responses for more than one viewer.

## 1.2 Influential Correlation

### 1.2a Naïve Art and Pictorial Representation of Toys

By indulging in a subject that has a sense of naïveté, I have explored how contemporary artists are utilizing toys and found objects in their artistic practice. I began examining artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Diana Thorneycroft. Duchamp is well known for his use of readymades and its impact on the contemporary art world, which was a controversial approach to artmaking during his time. It is widely accepted that Duchamp's work significantly challenged the institutional standard of what is fine art.<sup>4</sup> In relation, Thorneycroft employs' toys to challenge viewer's and raise their aware nesses about the harsh realities of Canadian history; Thorneycroft uses toys to depict realistic scenes of social and political atrocities.<sup>5</sup> Finally, I consider the artistic vibrancy of Melanie Daniel; specifically I consider the use of colours to evoke emotional responses in the landscapes from her exhibition *After the Flood*. For Daniel's colour is used to place focus on environmental concerns.<sup>6</sup> Combined, these artists have influenced how I conduct my studio practice and research in order to create a coherent depiction of the impact of toys.

As children begin to perceive the world around them, they start to manifest their own realities to make sense of our complex world and society.<sup>7</sup> In my work, I enjoy creating pieces that are highly detailed with many elements colliding into one piece. Typically, in my practice, subjects are situated in detailed landscapes or astronomical bodies that contain animals and toys interacting within one space. As an artist I find fulfilment in creating alternate worlds that are

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<sup>4</sup> J.J. Haladyn, J. J., *Duchamp, Aesthetics, and Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Diana Thorneycroft, "A People's History." Diana Thorneycroft. Accessed July 6, 2021.

<https://dianathorneycroft.com/collections/12679/#:~:text=This%20series%20is%20about%20horrific,%2C%20disbelieved%2C%20or%20considered%20xpendable.>

<sup>6</sup> "Melanie Daniel: after the Flood." Mindy Solomon Gallery. Accessed February 8, 2022. <https://mindsolomon.com/exhibition/melanie-daniel-after-the-flood/>.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Freeman, "The Theory of Art That Underpins Children's Naïve Realism," *Visual Arts Research* 17, no. 1 (1991): 65–75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20715744>.

heavily obscured from the actual reality we are in, or in others I attempt to establish a state of naïve realism. Naïve realism is the state of developing a perception of the world based on a lack of awareness, judgement, and experience that children instinctually rely on.<sup>8</sup> Children are naïve to what the realities of the world are and will fill in those gaps with their imagination. My works attempt to emulate this child-like naïve realism to create another dimensional reality that is recognizable but does not make coherent sense.

In my practice and style of work, the terms naïve and kitsch art have been reoccurring terms that I have often encountered from viewers. This sparked debate of the validity of my practice as the visual information is stemming from a literal sense of storytelling with pictorial imagery. However, I am creating a renewed sense of naïve realism as the toys begin to explore the world around them. Naïve art has become well known during the twentieth century and challenged what would be classified as high art.<sup>9</sup> It is understood that the naïveté in art stems from the pictorial representation that is described as innocent, inexperienced, and effortless to digest.<sup>10</sup> In a study focusing on experienced viewers that had academic background in art, versus the naïve viewer that had minimal art courses, recognizes that there is a difference in preference over the content of art.<sup>11</sup> Those who are experienced in art practices prefer works that had challenging content, either minimalistic or abstracted, which made them question the artistic process.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the naïve viewers gravitated towards literal content, such as realism or impressionism, displaying clearer representation of what is being created.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Natalia Valentinovna Brodskaja and Rau Viorel, *Naive Art* (New York: Parkstone International, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew S. Winston and Gerald C. Cupchik, "The Evaluation of High Art and Popular Art By Naive and Experienced Viewers," *Visual Arts Research* 18, no. 1 (1992): 1–14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20715763>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

In my own experience as an artist in academia, I frequently navigate to artworks that narrate absurdity and are certain illustrative qualities through a kitsch sensibility with landscapes and lighthearted characters. The term kitsch was popularized during the 1860s to describe so-called cheap art that were considered crafty and lacked aesthetic qualities, compared to the work of traditional Europeans.<sup>14</sup> The aesthetic of kitsch revolves around artworks that are colourful, illustrative, and often are depicting silly scenarios. The term kitsch art has developed negative connotations as it lacks the ability to spark a deeper conversation about content of an artwork. However, kitsch or naïve art, provides offers an outlet for creation in my work to bring the viewers' joy through silly light-hearted sensibilities. I aim to have viewers that enter my artistic spaces to feel enjoyment from the toys and painted artworks that follow this aesthetic of kitsch.

Kitsch art further lends itself to evoke a feeling of nostalgia and craftsmanship as elders often made decorative objects and were gifted to the next generation. Therefore, triggering memories and that nostalgic quality.<sup>15</sup> Adopting a naïve or kitsch mode of representation in academia has been challenging; many miss the critical intent of my work that relates to nostalgia and alternate modes of reality. Rather than viewing kitsch or naïve art negatively, I recognize that they provide an aesthetic though which to challenge so called good or critically informed art. I am not considered a naïve viewer, yet my artistic preferences suggests that I am, as if I am an anomaly to what is conventional.

*Credulous Escapism* is meant to present a challenge to reflect on one's childhood experience as represented in an alternate world and to redefine the institutional standard of what is critically informed art with the consideration of contemporary artists working in similar themes. I am challenging naïve art as a genre and how it can impact viewers by the style to

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<sup>14</sup> John Morreall and Jessica Loy, "Kitsch and Aesthetic Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 23, no. 4 (1989): 63–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333032>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

narrate a story about the importance of connecting to your own childhood and how reality alters the perspective of the world, we live in. My body of work is seemingly naïve; however, it stems from the background of acknowledging the progression of society and how as we develop the world around us becomes heavier in socially, politically, and economically climate that is emotionally challenging to comprehend. Yet, as children we were all naïve to these realities and enjoyed a blissful world that were ignorant to those issues.

### 1.2 b Toys as Readymades – Developing Dialogue

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and his readymade objects emphasized the relationship between a reused object, and a readymade, as two separate identities; furthered he wanted to eliminate the hand of the artist in the creation of the work.<sup>16</sup> Duchamp questions how far art can be pushed beyond the institutional standard of what is appraised as fine art to question what art is. In my practice I am confronted on why this series is relevant, and why I am working with a style that is considered outsider art? I aim to provide a moment of reflection for the viewers as they interact with the toys and challenge the standard of fine or contemporary art. Duchamp achieves this challenge with the readymades as a radical critique of art, whereas I am critiquing the standard of what makes art, *fine art*. The reused object, toys, in my own work continues to maintain its intended purpose as being a toy. That is juxtaposed to a readymade which Duchamp defines as a found object that has been assigned a new meaning that provides its significance in a formal institutional setting.<sup>17</sup> For Duchamp the object must retain its original form which is given more value when it is reconceptualize by the artist through his signature.<sup>18</sup> As Duchamp states in an interview conducted in 1956, “No, they’re neither art nor non-art. It’s not the point.

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<sup>16</sup> R. Carreto and C. Carretok “Reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp in Design Reuse.,” in *Challenges for Technology Innovation: An Agenda for the Future*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (CRC, Press, 2017), 277–80. CRC Press. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315198101-48>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Haladyn, *Duchamp, Aesthetics, and Capitalism*.

The point is that I wanted to go as far as I could in doing art.”<sup>19</sup> His approach resonated with other artists and art critics as readymades have continued to influence how artists approached artmaking and what it means to be an artist.

By relying on readymade objects, I attempt to foster a dialogue between my work and the viewer’s experience. In the exercise of working with toys and rendering them in a painting, I want to dissect what it would mean to bring the physical objects into a space. I found the complimentary elements of having both installation and painted artworks could generate a dynamic conversation that presented another way for audiences to connect with the work. However, despite the dialogues that can arise through the inclusion of readymade objects, I find the concept challenging as I struggle not to alter the objects. If I were to alter the objects, I ignore Duchamp’s intent not to manipulate the objects. Thus, I must ask, *how can I effectively eliminate my own self from the work that is being developed?* The role of the readymade was obscured from the fear of copying or appropriation of works and objects. My concerns hindered my ability to fully adopt the readymade into my art practice and how to recognize their relevancy to my studio research.

I have begun to embrace the readymade in my art production; specifically, I have collected toys that function as readymade objects that I am presenting in conjunction with my painted works. My toy selection is deliberate; I choose vintage toys that I feel will spark a sense of nostalgia from the viewers. Indeed, during my acquisition of the objects, fellow community members often stopped and divulged to me their relationships or memories of various toys. People actively reminisced about their childhood experiences, which made me realize first-hand

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<sup>19</sup> Marcel Duchamp and Don Bell, “A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp,” *Canadian Art* (1987): 55.



that the toys inclusion was necessary to the evolution of my artistic pursuits and installation works.

Readymades focus on the differences between rudimentary objects and how those objects are transformed into an art piece (Fig.1).<sup>20</sup> However, a new purpose is given to the object by the artists for the viewers to digest. I redefined for myself what it means to be an artist and how the inclusion of readymade toys to my work can enhance the series for the viewers by having a dialogue with the physical toys/readymades and the painted artworks. The role of the readymade (toys) acts as a confrontational object that evokes childhood memories and immediately causes a direct connection with the viewers. The original toys act as another vessel to engage with this body of work. It can spark great excitement to see a discontinued toy brought back for those who had once played with the object, while also complimenting the older toys with newer ones for viewers of all ages. I surrender the belief that my hand must be involved in changing the physical aspects of a piece, being a painting or installation, while I embraced how to include the object into my work and artistic space thus redefining the object to take on a new purpose of providing a renewed connection for the viewers. Duchamp left these readymades in these institutions (Fig 2.) and left them for the viewers to interpret.<sup>21</sup> This method proved to be highly effective in giving the viewers a chance to question what art is and self-reflect on how an object can transform through a new meaning. However, unlike Duchamp, my readymades interact with the paintings and I place responsibility on the readymades for evoking childhood memories for the viewers. The paintings and readymade objects are intended to foster a dynamic conversation, while also strengthening the harmony of the surrounding work.

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<sup>20</sup> Haladyn, *Duchamp, Aesthetics, and Capitalism*.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Goldsmith, "The Readymades of Marcel Duchamp: The Ambiguities of an Aesthetic Revolution," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no. 2 (1983): p. 197, <https://doi.org/10.2307/430663>.

Similarly, the Winnipeg-based artist Diana Thorneycroft relies upon readymade toys to depict controversial subject matter from Canadian history, that outlines social and political injustices and colonization. Her series, *A People's History*, considers the misjustices of Canadian history and traumas that still occur today socially and politically.<sup>22</sup> To facilitate these conversations toy figures engage in horrendous acts of dehumanization such as sexual assault, violence, torture, and exploitation of the vulnerable, that are difficult to digest. For Thorneycroft, toys are a mechanism to begin conversations about these traumatic events as she provides opportunities to enter these spaces and address the hardships that have and continue to occur. Thorneycroft's work has been deemed as controversial by viewers who have seen her exhibition on the devastations of Canadian history that exemplify the misjustices of residential schools and human right violations. The toys intrigue the viewers, however, spending time with the work, the viewers realize a gruesome reality. Thorneycroft's work manifests from the need to confront these realities. As an artist, she is gaining perpetual recognition in the contemporary art world despite viewer's discomfort and political motivations for not wanting to address them.<sup>23</sup> She acknowledges and provides academic sources about the horrific events in our history in her efforts to use art to educate viewers and to foster positive change.

For example, Thorneycroft's *Prostitute*, 2008 (Fig. 3) depicts a small toy as a young female child in only her undergarment while a large male watches her while he sits on a couch. The toys enact a scene that takes place globally and is a prevalent issue in our society. The uncomfortable subject matter makes one question why toys would be used in such topics as they are often associated and perceived as innocent objects. Thorneycroft states that she considers

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<sup>22</sup> Diana Thorneycroft, "A People's History," Diana Thorneycroft, accessed July 6, 2021, <https://dianathorneycroft.com/collections/12679/#:-:text=This%20series%20is%20about%20horrific,%2C%20disbelieved%2C%20or%20considered%20expedable.>

<sup>23</sup> Becky Rynor, *An Interview with Diana Thorneycroft* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, July 25, 2015).

these toys as sculptures that she chooses and manipulates to fit her narrative. The toys convey child prostitution that is difficult to witness from the viewer's perspective. There has been an increased awareness of child sexual exploitation in Canada, however, there is inadequate and insufficient measures to monitor and protect all children under the age of 18.<sup>24</sup> This is still a prevalent issue in Western society with Canada being a destination for human trafficking that largely includes women and children causing fear, anxiety and panic for those who are targeted.<sup>25</sup> Thorneycroft brings this atrocity to the forefront of her work by ensuring the viewers confront the realities of the situations by recreating a real life scenario.

In another series of her work, *The Canadiana Martyrdom Series*, (Fig 4.), Thorneycroft again utilizes toys to depict atrocities in Canadian history. James Campbell noted in a review that her work has the capabilities to address social madness and recognizes the destruction of our behaviour.<sup>26</sup> The dynamic of the toys pulls the viewers in but leaves them uneasy and stuck amongst the dichotomy of wanting to laugh at the pure absurdity and cry at the harsh reality.<sup>27</sup> The historical and contemporary realities of the horrific events are at the forefront of these works.<sup>28</sup> Indeed Campbell states, Thorneycroft is regarded as a “poet of restless darkness.”<sup>29</sup> She effectively tells the truths about Canadian atrocities, regarding the misjustices of human right violations such as child prostitution, residential schools, corrupted politics, economics, and societal issues that have yet to be resolved. Her use of toys proves to be an efficacious way of communicating those realities for the viewers to comprehend and confront our own truths about the world we function in.

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<sup>24</sup> *Civil Society Report on Canada's Implementation of the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography*. 2011. Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children. pp. 4-5

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> James D. Campbell, “Diana Thorneycroft, The Canadiana Martyrdom Series, Galerie Art Mûr, Montreal, November 17 - December 21, 2005,” *Ciel Variable*, no. 71 (March 2006): pp. 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Toys allow Thorneycroft to re-create reality as sculptures. She manipulates the appearance of the toy to fit her narrative and therefore do not take on the meaning of a readymade object. In my series, I am utilizing toys as readymades and not changing their appearance to align with a specific narrative that focuses on the impact of toys. Thorneycroft's series inspired how to effectively use the toys to invite viewers into the work and spend time with what is being presented. *A People's History* enables the opportunity for devastating subjects to be brought to the forefront similar to *The Canadiana Martyrdom Series*. The sculptural toys act as a familiar, safe object for the viewers to connect with the work. In my practice the toys within the surrealistic landscape create an uneasy response that separates them from their original intended playful quality.

Toys are play objects that reflect a distorted reality and represent fictional beings to be enjoyed and played with. Toys as readymades take on new meaning as being art objects to interact with my painted works, to confront audiences about their own experiences as children. The toys as readymades in my series allow the innocent objects to be the entry point into the work, similar to Thorneycroft's approach. The toys welcome the viewers to investigate the work while the apocalyptic and eerie background of my paintings acknowledge that this childhood phase in life is ending. Thorneycroft uses the strategy of welcoming viewers into her work with the toys and realizing the devastations that are taking place after approaching the work. She uses the objects to create a sense of reality while the toys pull the viewer back to a place that is non-realistic. This push and pull of depicting reality and going back to an unrealistic place generates an interesting dynamic within the work.

The toy as an object is presented globally to take on the role of the innovation through play and recreating a new reality based on the child's imagination.<sup>30</sup> The moment of creation, the feeling of free expression, and endless possibilities are a mentality I would like to bring back to the viewer. Working with these found objects, *toys*, that are now readymades by giving them the responsibility to present a dialogue amongst my paintings and interact with them directly provides the audience stronger substance, who likely forgot what it is like to be a young child with little to no comprehension of the stresses of society.

Painting as a medium allows me to create an apocalyptic or eerie world that alludes to the realities of adulthood, the emotional devastations of how the world functions and the challenges that need to be overcome in society. As we enter adulthood, we learn about the hardships that take place in the world that we were once blissful too, are now at the forefront of our concerns.

Social and political issues become our own, anxiety and depression are prevalent, witnessing and experiencing human right violations, many working 40-plus hours a week to make sure all the extra costs in life are covered that seem to be endless with inflation growing and minimum wages stay the same. The readymades are innocent and are aloof to those realities. They are living in the child's ignorant bliss and are in a naïve realism phase of life while the landscapes recognize the hardships and stress of adulthood. In this exploration of artists, my next step was to solidify an alternate world for the toys to navigate in this series. I drew inspiration from British Columbia-based artist Melanie Daniel as she deconstructs reality in an eye-catching manner. Her vibrant landscapes and dramatic scenic spaces that interact with objects inspired the apocalyptic landscapes.

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<sup>30</sup> Hopkins, *Dark Toys*. pp.175-176

Daniel focuses on creating a colourful story about how subjects interact with their environments while skewing perspectives on reality.<sup>31</sup> When first reviewing her collection, I gravitated towards her series *After the Flood*, 2020 (Fig. 5). This series included sculptural objects that interacted with her paintings. This exhibition takes place in an antediluvian world that places focus on solitary figures and the survival of humanity.<sup>32</sup> This exhibition aims to provide a moment of reflection of how humans are marking their paths on this planet and generating a footprint throughout the landscapes —further explaining that the space radiates absurdity, optimism, and an opportunity for escapism to occur (Fig. 6)<sup>33</sup> This exhibition provided a blueprint of how sculptural pieces and paintings work together to generate a coherent series for the viewer's experience. The dynamic of the various mediums allowed the opportunity for the work to generate a dialogue amongst itself that created harmony in the exhibition. The sculptures and painted landscapes share the same vibrant colour palettes, stylization and distortion that aligned with what the paintings were facing. Reviewing this work, I was intrigued by the objects that seemed to jump out of the causing my eyes to move back and forth from the sculptures to the paintings. This led me to dissecting what Neo-Surrealism means in the contemporary art world and further to dissect how Daniel's work can be classified in this genre.

### 1.3 Surrealism and Neo-Surrealism

The paintings produced by Daniels have a vibrancy that has a sense of motion and a vibration as the colours interact. I focused on the atmosphere and its impact in a painted landscape and back to the sculpture. I wanted to capture a sense of one alternative world that the readymades and painted toys are exploring. The success of the sculptures and painted works

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<sup>31</sup> "Melanie Daniel," Asya Geisberg Gallery, accessed July 17, 2021, <https://www.asyageisberggallery.com/artists/melanie-daniel2>.

<sup>32</sup>"Melanie Daniel: After the Flood," Mindy Solomon Gallery (Mindy Solomon Gallery), accessed February 8, 2022, <https://mindysolomon.com/exhibition/melanie-daniel-after-the-flood/>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid..

from Daniel further reassured that the inclusion of another medium proved to be effective. In this exhibition, I found that the work gravitated towards Neo-Surrealistic ideologies regarding real-world problems in another form of consciousness.

Stemming from Surrealism, *Neo-Surrealism* encompasses the deconstruction of limitations of perception in an artwork that alludes to various realities simultaneously working together in one coherent form.<sup>34</sup> The conscious mind is no longer bound to the limits of the human condition and can be expressed through abstracted worlds that do not fit any criteria. The various levels of consciousness are explored and act as a vessel to escape the world's limitations. In this series, Daniel explores an alternative world that obscures our own reality and follows the shadows of what was in a dystopian future.<sup>35</sup> She deconstructs the world we know to create an alternative reality for the viewers to embrace. The coherency of the work demonstrates that this takes place in one universe outside of our own. Each piece has a distinct moment in this universe and works with the sculpture to bring a sense of distorted reality into our own for audiences to experience.

Focusing on developing a vibrant atmosphere in my landscapes, I started to create a coherent apocalyptic world with Daniel's strategies being implemented and focused on neo-surrealistic ideologies. I kept the landscapes consistent in stylization to communicate that this is one world at different phases of the apocalypse. Using various colours as the toys explored the space, I depicted this narrative of the apocalypse occurring gradually. The apocalypse starts brightly, and it becomes dark and haunting as it progresses. The work also focuses on the subconscious impact implemented by toys to evoke a moment of reflection for the viewers.

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<sup>34</sup> Puentes, Kalid. "Introducing Neo-Surrealism: The Social Science of Performance Art." Dissertation, Brunel University, 2017

<sup>35</sup> "Daniel: After the Flood."

I collectively used strategies inspired by these artists to create a dynamic collection of readymades and a cohesive world within my landscapes for toys to explore. I then began to situate my series in neo-surrealistic practices as this movement aligned with the denotation of this work.

As I progressed in my studio practice, I began to identify with the neo-surrealistic movement within my work. This is from the emphasis I place on bringing the subconscious impact of toys into fruition for the viewers to acknowledge. In my work, I dissect the differences between Surrealism and Neo-Surrealism, and how artist Sean Landers utilize neo-surrealistic strategies within his deconstructed portrait paintings.

Surrealism observes the principles and practices that have been influenced by the evolving cultural standard and political views that shaped the trajectory of society since its materialization during the 1920s.<sup>36</sup> In response to these advances, Surrealism perpetuated the innovations of art and how it is created that indulged in performance, photography, collage and more.<sup>37</sup> The movement focused on the aesthetic qualities and imagination from the artist in reflection of the political and societal climate. Surrealism has influenced many areas including art, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and literature.<sup>38</sup> André Breton's (1896 - 1966) first manifesto of Surrealism in 1924 titled, *Crisis of Consciousness*, includes detail about Surrealism tapping into the process of thought inhibited by reason.<sup>39</sup> Critiquing the standard of the functionality and dysfunctionality of the world as reason is subjective to the individual. The characteristic of a surrealist framework is the imaginative work that collides two distinct realities upon a singular act that is unrelated to one another.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Natalya Lusty, *Surrealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Clancy, "Surrealism and Freedom," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 8, no. 3 (1949): pp. 271-276, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.1949.tb00771.x>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



The extension of Neo-Surrealism continues to place significance on bringing the subconscious mind into fruition. Neo-Surrealism as a movement involves the demarcation of a conscious space that recognizes the importance of aesthetic and symbolism over socio-political constructs.<sup>41</sup> It is a complicit act against the limitations of perception and emphasizes the metaphysical qualities of our existence.<sup>42</sup> As humans, we have limitations and expectations for what is physically possible, and for artists, this is a movement to reimagine a world without those implications entirely. The movement relies on the connotation of surrealist practices but proceeds to move beyond the socio-political influences to highlight our subconscious thoughts.<sup>43</sup> Surrealism as a movement, questions what is to be discovered or can be discovered and not what is already known.<sup>44</sup> It perpetuates an infinite way of thinking and enables artists to express their curiosities autonomously.<sup>45</sup>

In researching Neo-Surrealism, artist Sean Landers has demonstrated Neo-Surrealistic practices with his works on obscured portraiture. Pulling inspiration from his subconscious perception of the world with dreams, he develops portraits that combine multiple realities into one coherent painting.<sup>46</sup> In his 2016 work, *Sailor Jack and Bingo* (Fig. 7), Landers combines animals, humans and the whimsical to create a piece that appears as though it is a scene taken out of a subconscious state. Landers is known for blurring the lines between reality and fantasy that allow him to infiltrate the viewer's consciousness to deepen the understanding of their humanity.<sup>47</sup> When reviewing this work, I felt that this piece could have been captured from a vivid dream. This interpretation is due to the bizarre combinations, smooth transition from one

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<sup>41</sup> Puentes, Kalid. "Introducing Neo-Surrealism: The Social Science of Performance Art." Dissertation, Brunel University, 2017

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Puentes, Kalid. "Introducing Neo-Surrealism: The Social Science of Performance Art." Dissertation, Brunel University, 2017

<sup>44</sup>King, Elliott H. 2016. "Surrealism and Counterculture." In *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, 416–30. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118476215.ch25>.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Hili Perlson, "The Enchanted Neo-Surrealism of Sean Landers," *Artnet News* (Artnet News, September 21, 2016), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/gallery-hopping-the-enchanted-neo-surrealism-of-sean-landers-657404>.

<sup>47</sup>Sean Landers, "Biography," Sean Landers, accessed 2022, <http://www.seanlanders.net/biography>.

segment of a known identity to another, and the overall calming aesthetic implemented with the soft blue and grey tones. The realistic qualities of the work reflect how dreams can mimic our reality but be heavily warped based on our subconscious influence (Fig. 8). The paintings I have produced have larger than life toys incorporated into the landscapes, playfully interacting with the space. While other pieces will interrupt the combination of realities to further push the viewers deeper into the apocalyptic event. Landers play on presenting various compositions of portraiture that become more obscured inspired the need to go deeper into this world that I am creating.

Dissecting these closely related movements in my practice and the work of Sean Landers, I found my practice to align with the neo-surrealistic ideologies. Therefore, I emphasize the subconscious impact of toys within my work and attempt to bring that realization to the viewers. By combining the environments that focus on dreams and nightmares deep in our psyche, toys act as the main vessel to this narrative. They encourage audiences to be drawn in and reflect on a moment in their life. Toys can subconsciously impact an individual significantly, and for myself, the purple bear that reoccurs in my colour palette has affected the way I conduct a painting without my conscious acknowledgment. It's this subconscious phenomenon that I want to emphasize while enabling enough room for the viewers to interpret their own storyline. Considering the metaphysical landscape that the work falls under, with the subconscious being the source of inspiration, I wanted to create a sacred space for audience members to have the potential to think about how toys affected their personal experiences.

I am fascinated with the dichotomy of creating artworks that has a sense of reality with the use of the toys while pulling the viewers out of their own realities to explore a new world. Following the inspirations of Neo-Surrealism, I focused on creating a unified alternate universe

that takes place in our subconsciousness and symbolizes the deconstruction of our childhood. The illustrative quality of the work pays homage to storybooks, while the toys are painted realistically to create a sense of a distorted reality. The frames around these works represent the boundaries of reality that eventually become deconstructed as physical toys are placed into the pieces. The work by Landers unified how to coherently put a painting together seamlessly to promote the dreamlike sensation. With the inspiration of Daniels on how to incorporate vibrant colours effectively to create a unified alternate space for the toys to explore. Neo-Surrealism deconstructs the limitations of our physical capabilities and offers various realities that simultaneously work together.<sup>48</sup>

#### 1.4 Conclusion

I strive to create a sense that these works are a part of one world that progressively becomes enriched in subconscious realities. Art traditionally has the functionality of providing aesthetic value, expressing emotions, and embodying meanings.<sup>49</sup> In addition it has the role of challenging the viewers and perform visually for the audiences.<sup>50</sup> My series acknowledges the importance of reflecting into a simpler time that is childhood using artistic representation. Toys subconsciously can influence our perception throughout our lives, and I use these objects as a vessel to acknowledge that phenomenon. However, the reality of adulthood has never left. There is an apocalyptic landscape in each of these works to represent the hardships we face as we are integrated into society. The dynamic of the subconscious and reality has continued to be a source of fascination within my practice. The work provides a mode of escapism as we are exiting a global pandemic that greatly affected our traditional way of living and presented conflicts

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<sup>48</sup>Puentes, Kalid. "Introducing Neo-Surrealism: The Social Science of Performance Art." Dissertation, Brunel University, 2017

<sup>49</sup>Abell, Catharine. "Art: What It Is and Why It Matters." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 3 (2012): 671–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41721256>.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

amongst society on how to best navigate this and other difficult situations. I believe that this is a time to take a moment to reflect on the happy times in our lives and enjoy a blissful moment of *Credulous Escapism*.

## 1.5 Image List

**Figure 1.** *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915, Editioned Replica 1964, Marcel Duchamp, Wood and Metal, 51 ¾ x 14 x 5 ¼ inches, Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York



**Figure 2.** *Bicycle Wheel*, 1951, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Marcel Duchamp, Metal Wheel mounted on painted wood stool, 51 x 25 x 16 ½ inches, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) 2019



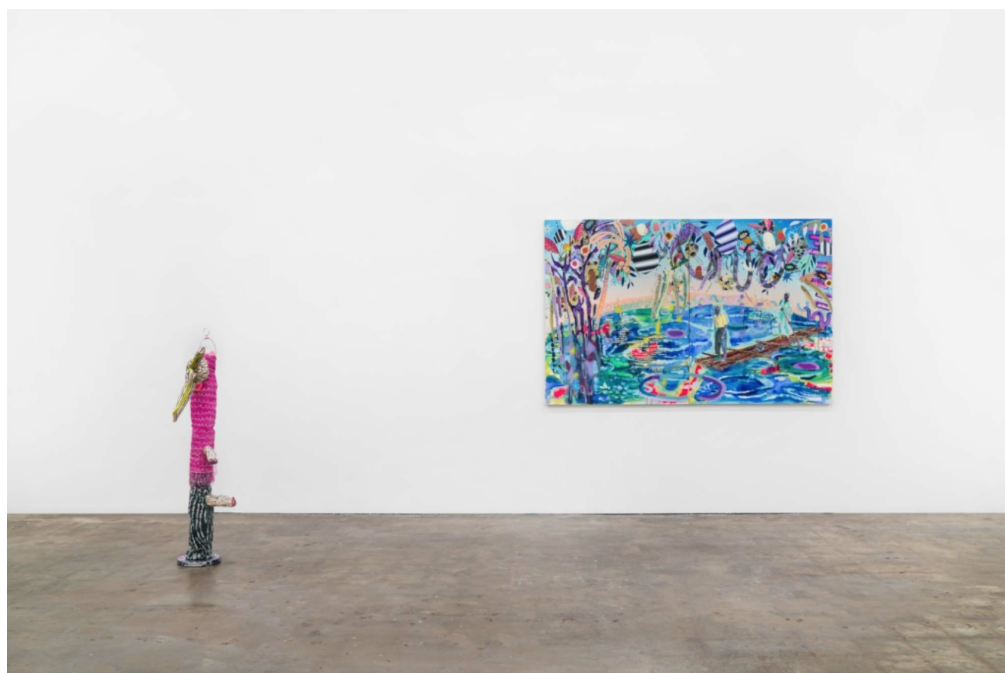
**Figure 3.** *Prostitute*, 2008, Diana Thorneycroft, Digital Photograph, Toys



**Figure 4.** *Martyrdom at the Ski Hill*, 2006, Diana Thorneycroft, Digital Photograph, Toys



**Figure 5.** *After the Flood*, 2020, Melanie Daniel, Installation View, sculpture, painting, Photography by: Zachary Balber



**Figure 6.** *After the Flood*, 2020, Melanie Daniel, Installation View, sculpture, painting, Photography by: Zachary Balber



**Figure 7.** *Sailor Jack and Bingo*, 2016, Sean Landers, Oil on Linen, 48 x 41 inches



**Figure 8.** *Peanuthead George Washington*, 2016, Sean Landers, Oil on Linen, 48 x 41 inches





## Chapter Two

### Practice Documentation



*Tin Toy Car 1930*, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 3 feet x 3 feet

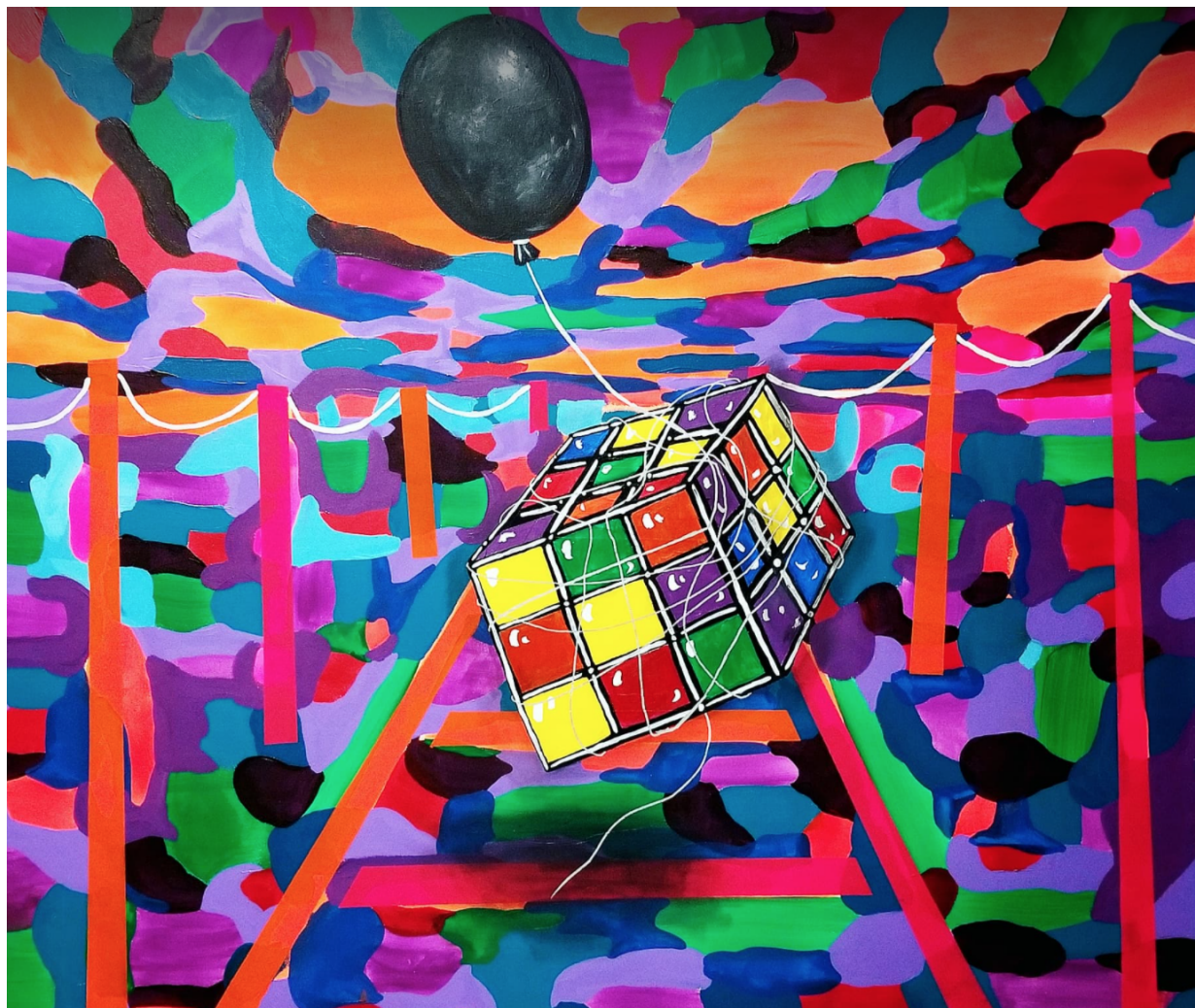
Toys have continued to evolve throughout our history as they gradually become technologically advance. Reflecting on the popular toys throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I was fascinated with their diverse materiality. The toys are painted on a larger scale that distorts the reality that is being created. The landscapes become increasingly apocalyptic as the sense of adulthood seeps into these spaces. The balloons are representational of taking away the old and making room for the new.



*Mrs. & Mr. Potato Heads* 1950, 2020

Acrylic on canvas

5 feet x 4 feet



*Rubik Cube 1970s, 2020*

Acrylic on canvas

5 feet x 4 feet



*Wood-Duck 1960, 2020*

Acrylic on canvas

5 feet x 4 feet



*Etch-A-Sketch 1980, 2020*

Acrylic on canvas

5 feet x 4 feet



Another World, 2021  
36.5 x 27.5 inches  
Acrylic on Canvas  
Brienne Casey

*Another World*, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas, 48 x 36 inches

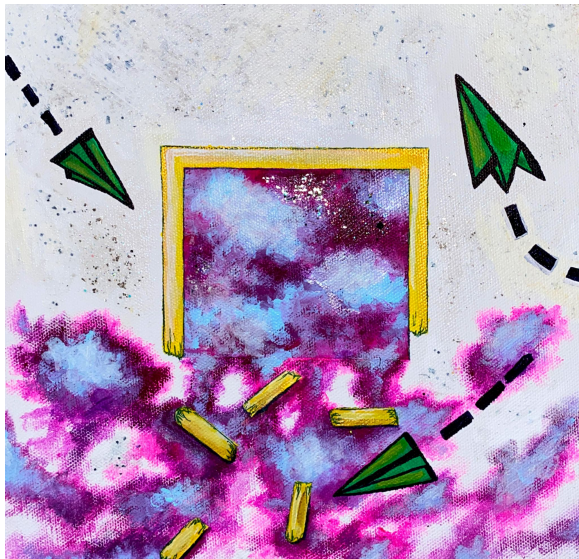
As I progressed in my studio work, I focus on incorporating toys into the landscapes as a reflection of children exploring our own world. The alternate world becomes more detailed as it is falling deeper into the subconscious reality. I attempt to capture the materiality of the toys to have a sense of reality as influenced by the photographic work of Diana Thorneycroft. In her series, *A Peoples History*, she maintains real-world essence although it is toys depicting the scenarios. The toys bring the viewers back out of reality and into another world. This is a dynamic that I wanted to pursue in my practice. The painted frames make it look as though this is a snapshot captured to push the illusionary aspect of these pieces.



*Into the Depths*, 2021  
Acrylic on Canvas  
23.5 x 31 inches



*Studies*, 2021, Glitter, Acrylic on Canvas, 10 x 8 inches



*Break*, 2021  
Acrylic, Pearl Shift,  
Mica Flakes, Glitter, Pen on Canvas,  
8 inches x 8 inches



*Toys to Play*, 2021  
Acrylic and Pen on Canvas  
4 inches x 4 inches





*Spill*, 2021

Acrylic on Canvas

2 feet x 2 feet



*Joker*, 2021, Fluid Acrylic, Acrylic, Pearl Shift, Glitter, Mica Flakes on Canvas, 4 feet x 4 feet



As I began to solidify the final series of artworks, I utilize strategies from the influential artists to inform the visual successes of the work I had produced and now incorporating those tactics in the last portion of my studio practice. I use paintings, physical objects, and installations to create a coherent collection of work that facilitates conversation for the viewers about the toys potential impact. Images are sourced from the final critique presentation taking place April 22, 2022.



*Final Critique Display*, 2022, Installation View, John Labatt Visual Arts Centre, London, ON



*Final Critique Display, 2022, Installation View, John Labatt Visual Arts Centre, London, ON*



*Final Critique Display, 2022, Installation View, John Labatt Visual Arts Centre, London, ON*

### **Chapter Three: Interview with Diana Thorneycroft**

During the first semester of the MFA program, I was introduced to the work produced by Diana Thorneycroft. As a contemporary artist, I was fascinated with how she substitutes the human body with surrogates to depict her narratives. While similarly, in my practice I am using the toys to emulate a child exploring the world that is inevitably come to an end. Although our use of toys and narratives deviate, we both approach toys with the understanding that they are representing a reflection of ourselves and how we navigate the world we are in.

Our conversation provides further insight into her artistic journey, personal opinions on toys in art and how to successfully engage an audience. We discussed her process of choosing appropriate toys and figures in her work and how her images can be triggering to audiences. She speaks about her experiences with controversy and how she wants to shed light on social and political injustices in Canada to promote awareness of what has and what is still taking place. Prior to our conversation I attended her exhibition opening, *Past and Present* 2021 at Mayberry Fine Art Gallery to see her work in person and to meet her as well. After our initial meeting and seeing her photographs in person, I was very enthusiastic about discussing her work further and getting to know her personally as an artist.

#### **Brianne Casey: What is your background and what is the focus of your artistic practice?**

Diana Thorneycroft: I'll start by providing a brief history of my practice, experiences and what I'm currently working on. I started drawing when I was in grade 10 with my sketchbooks and pencils ranging from to like a 2H, 4H to H to B, 4B. Early on I knew I wanted to be an artist. Later in life I went with my father who was transferred to Montreal, and I attended Cégep for a year and then we were transferred to Yellowknife. During this time, I was attending the

University of Manitoba. I went to grad school and majored in printmaking and pursued printmaking for a while.

I started drawing self-portraits and took photographs of myself as references. I thought I should learn how to take photographs and develop them on my own. Immediately, I'm looking at these photographs and they were more interesting than any drawing I have produced. There is a privileged relationship of photography that has with our reality that was fascinating. I was creating self-portraits, but then I occasionally would hire surrogates. Before self-portraits, I always used a surrogate as a replacement for the body. It informs the work and from the very beginning I was using dolls as a surrogate. The segue was using Barbie, and GI Joe dolls and then I started collecting more figures. When I started doing things such as the *Group of Seven Awkward Moments*, I had figurines that were quite small. A lot of them are tourism dolls, that can be offensive as they were stereotypical. In some ways, I was emphasizing that stereotype to my own benefit to promote a recognition that stereotypes are not accurate representations of who they are portraying. This relates to bringing uncomfortable and difficult subject matters to the forefront of my work with the use of toys that comes close to reality but is far away enough to be digestible for the viewers. I focus on bringing awareness to Canadian Atrocities to promote change and conversation surrounding those sensitive topics.

**BC: I appreciate how you work is interconnected, and how you worked through the various mediums to create a language amongst your pieces and the viewers when handling difficult subject matters.**

DT: When you've been around making art for 40 years, I learned that I come up with the concept and then I find the best medium for that concept. Rather than being locked into one medium. If

I'm doing photographs and think this should really be a drawing, then I'll do a drawing, and so on. You can adjust the medium to the story you want to convey. That's the most important thing and is something I continue to exercise in my practice. Once I come up with an idea, I think about what's the best way to show this that engages me. I'm the first audience that I consider, I must be entertained and if I'm not intrigued or made to feel a certain way, I don't make it.

**BC: That's a great point, as each medium will alter the viewers experience of the work and how it is perceived. How do you approach a new subject or topic in your work? How do you know what toys to utilize in your photography to convey a message?**

DT: The *Canadian and Martyrdom* series that focuses on apathy and the humour of human suffering in media such as in TV shows is the series that inspired the *Group of Seven Awkward Moments*. The awkward moments continue with the use of dark humour, however, there are subjects that cannot be made into an awkward moment. Initially, I attempted to do a piece about the residential school system, but it was more than an awkward moment. It was atrocious. I decided to move on from that subject as that needed careful consideration in how I can appropriately approach that topic as there is no dark humor in the residential school system. You need to know how to handle these subjects with care as they have the potential to trigger the audience.

From there I did *A People's History* and *Canadians and Americans Best Friends Forever*. The action figures that I was going to use in these works had to exist in popular culture. If they didn't, then I will sometimes I would shift my focus to characters that are being produced. *A People's History* was different because I knew I wanted to do some very specific atrocities that existed and needed the figures to work with that. An example is the KKK in Canada and Louie

Riel, they would not make such dolls of these people of course. I would then use GI Joe figures to recreate these characters to align with my narrative and re-make the toys to look like how I needed them to look. I used plasticine for Louie Riel's hair and doll clothing that looked similar to what he would've worn and made it work.

I did a piece about the Japanese Internment Camp; I found a site that offered dolls that were used for educational purposes. They were dolls that I would say represented a group of diversity that deviated from the typical dolls you would see in stores. For the Japanese Internment Camp piece, I alter the clothing of the dolls to again, fit the narrative I wanted to discuss. However, it wasn't always that easy and I sometimes, would need to repaint the dolls to be appropriate for the atrocity. I wanted to include the atrocities that happen to all Canadians, regardless of their skin colour, religion, or background because they all need to be recognized and heard. A lot of the dolls I made from scratch as there was a lack of diversity in toys for children to engage with which is sad to think about.

**BC: With those experiences in mind, what are your opinions on toys being used and contemporary art?**

DT: I thoroughly enjoy it when I see other artists using toys. There are so many! As an example, Hans Belmar, he used a mannequin doll toy in his work. It's a great way to tell a story without using the human body but still having a close representation to us that is impactful in an artwork. In my narrative *A People's History*, if I use an actual body in the making of that work, it would be recreating those real moments that people had to live through. With the use of dolls, I can safely approach these difficult subject matters without needing to involve another person. It's one of the gifts of using dolls is that you have permission to do what you need to create a piece about



any atrocity as you cannot harm plastic.

**BC: What are the limitations to using toys and art, if any? Do you believe that there are limits?**

DT: I do believe that there are limits to using toys in art and this also goes for any other medium. That is to be considerate of what you are representing as an artist, you can create work about anything but the notion of portraying harm of innocent and young members in society is unnecessary as it happens frequently in the real world. This is a personal opinion, there is no dark humour attached to what is prevalent in today's society and what is taking place in the real world. With that being said, there is a need to bring awareness to these issues and that is what I did with the piece called, *Prostitute*. It was challenging to create that piece with the little girl and the man because it was occurring in the real world globally.

When I give artist talks, I would talk about the process of doing that one because I didn't have the right doll. I went shopping to various toy stores looking for the doll I was going to use in this narrative. I found one that she was close aside from her hair was a bit too long. I wanted to show her from her back that I wanted to show the vulnerability of her body. I cut her hair shorter. I stripped her and made her fit the story I was recreating about the harm of sexual violence against children. It was such an icky experience that made me feel uncomfortable, but it is a very powerful piece that makes you think when you look at the photograph.

**BC: The image is quite uncomfortable for the viewer. It made me understand that the power comes from acknowledging the devastations that take place. Through toys you're recreating a real difficult moment safely for the audiences to confront for themselves.**

DT: Yes, and there was an exhibition in New York, I saw where the purpose of the of the show was for the audience to take on the perspective of a Nazi perpetrator and that made viewers had visceral reactions. The artist had recreated artifacts with Lego pieces of the Jewish community's property that was taken away during this time and to see that provoked emotional awareness of what is occurring. Similar to this exhibition I attended, *Prostitute*, had the intent of a participating viewer identify as the perpetrator and in that you are directly confronting the subject matter. It is uncomfortable and it has the potential to be triggering which means these subjects must be handled appropriately for the audience to view. But it'll always have a reaction regardless of the intent.

**BC: That can be a challenge for viewers to digest and be controversial due to the nature of the project, such as *A People's History* that had a strong reaction and critical reviews. Do you believe that this would have been the same if there were no toys involved in this series?**

DT: Compared to other work I've done *A People's History* was not controversial in my opinion due to other experiences. The work I've done before that was an installation that involved rabbit carcasses and I received a Canada Council Grant to work on this install. Because I was using carcasses my car was vandalized, the show was vandalized, I got hate mail and more. I have a thick binder of all the fallout from that exhibition. *A People's History* in my mind was a breeze and I did not have to defend the work. I can't imagine doing that series any other way. I see the toys as sculptures that I then photograph, especially because I had to alter so many of them. There would have been a reaction regardless, purely because of the subject matter I am investigating.

**BC: Toys allow you to approach difficult subjects with a closeness to reality. What is your approach to bringing political and societal issues to light with the use of toys?**

DT: The toys follow the atrocities that I want to convey within my practice. I go out and look for ones to fit my narrative specifically or will alter them to suit my own needs. I thought I was done with the series, but then learned about the KKK in Canada, I did not know that they were here in our country. I want to bring awareness these things as they need to be at the forefront of our concern. There are so many atrocities that we are guilty of. Canadians tend to think we think we're very kind within our country but that is not always the case. Where the political and societal issues go in my work that I believe need to be voiced, the toys will follow.

**BC: Can you describe your process of choosing the atrocity or subject matter? Is it an initiative process, or is the work researched-based prior to creating it?**

DT: For every atrocity I recreated in my work, I did as much research as possible on the topic. The work about Colonel Williams as an example, I watched the entire tape when he was finally caught and provided his confession.

The work on the starlight tour for *Neil Stonechild* the Indigenous boy who was murdered in Saskatoon, had a book on the cover up that I had read through. I had a personal experience with that story. For two summers when I was in art school, I was a Supernumerary Special Constable with the RCMP at the Yellowknife detachment. The second year I was in Inuvik, and the phrase starlight tour was used by my fellow cops. They would drive them to the outskirts of Yellowknife or Inuvik and drop them off. They did this with *Neil Stonechild*, and he died and that's what my photograph is based on. I learned about the how they wanted to cover that story up and their priority to protect themselves instead of giving justice to *Neil Stonechild*.

All the work is based in research and proper representation of the hardships that those people had gone through. It takes a lot of time and dedication to fully understand what is taking place and can be an emotional challenge at times.

**BC: Committing to that type of research must be very challenging as you are engulfed in this atrocity you are working with. You discussed using dark humor in your work specifically in the *Group of Seven Awkward Moment Series*. Can you discuss further how you incorporate that element of darkness in your work while maintaining a sense of lightheartedness?**

DT: The light heartedness comes from the base of dark humour that is the humour. Then there's that eerie feeling when you see the work. A piece that gets a mixed reaction is called *Tom Thompson in Algonquin Park*. It began with me finding toy flagpole and it had two kids about to lick the base of the flagpole and then I added severed tongues to it. I had figurines of kids holding hands in a semi-circle, a man standing there and his dog looking up at them with a tongue in the dogs' mouth. In real life, this scene would have been horrific, but the level of darkness incorporated benefitted the humorous aspect. As they're tiny toys, I can get away with it and make it gory. It's not always about the dark humour, but in many of them it is.

The work of the igloos on fire, you got to work hard to have your igloo catch on fire, it's ironic. Right away, I play with the darkness. In the winter *Avro Arrow*, there are little vignettes of narratives throughout the piece that are dark like a polar bears showed up and it's about to devour some kids, while someone else has fallen off a cliff. Two cops are drinking coffee and looking down and a guy has been cutting wood and he's got a big slash in his forehead. But people don't see that at first, because they're tiny and it's a big photograph. The viewers will see

the playfulness of the toys but as they spend more time with the pieces, they will see the gruesome acts that are being portrayed that are so dark and ridiculous that it becomes humorous.

**BC: What challenges have you faced as artists and working with toys?**

DT: I faced no challenges except for finding specific representation of a group of people or pop culture icons that I want to incorporate into the story. As an example, the Trailer Park Boys figures I could not find as they did not exist. I commissioned another artist to make the figure for me to use in my work. There are million action figures but when I was creating the awkward moments, I really wanted the Trailer Park Boys because they were, at the time, an integral part of the Canadian comedic landscape. I would say finding the appropriate action figures that fit my specific narratives. Other than that, toys are a joy to work with!

**BC: I've also sculpted onto toys and manipulated them to look like another character.**

**Although it's difficult to find toys to fit the narrative it provides a chance to recreate the identity of what the toy once was. Why are you using found objects to build upon versus making your own sculptures from scratch? Is there an advantage to using found objects?**

DT: There are several advantages, I would say found objects are easier to start off with versus creating something from scratch. Regardless of how you use the toys they already carry content of what they are. There's a specific piece I did for *Canadians and Americans Best Friends Forever* series. There was a Donald Trump doll and since then, the meaning behind that work has shifted purely from the toys in that photograph. This was before he ran for president and took office that I made that piece. Over time the toys take on a new meaning for themselves. If I made a sculpture from scratch, it would take on a completely different meaning. Certainly, the

characters, their notoriety will fade, but some will become bigger than life like Donald Trump, and others will disappear. Snoopy, is in my work as well and he's going to stay famous forever.

**BC: How can toys impact your work and your final product?**

DT: Toys intrigue people and reviewing your work I can see how we are similar in our use of toys. We want to draw the viewers in to come and get closer to the work and then they are hit with what is taking place? When I first showed the pig farm photograph that I donated to a fundraiser, is a beautiful landscape of a farm scene. People were writing their bids then they're going around to look at the title of that piece is called. It was pretty, there's toys in there like miniature pigs. It was seductive, but then when they read what it was about, it was horrifying.

Using toys, you have the advantage of seducing your audience into looking and staying as long as they want to before realizing what is happening. Some people walk away quickly, some people stay even longer, you would be intrigued. I know you would stay as you are also interested in toys. Whereas other people would want to get out of the space as fast as possible. Toys make my work seductive, and I can touch on subjects that would have otherwise been off limits.

**BC: It was great to hear your thoughts and experiences and that concludes our discussion.**

**Thank you, Diana!**

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## Curriculum Vitae

### Brianne Casey

Website: <https://bcaseyarts.wixsite.com/bcaseyarts>

#### Education

- 2022 Western University, MFA Candidate in Studio Fine Arts, Graduate Studies (Expected Convocation July 2022)
- 2016 Brock University, BA Bachelors Studio Arts Honours Program, Minor in Visual Culture and Art History (Convocation June 2020)

#### Awards

- 2021 Visual Arts Internship Award Fund, Department of Visual Arts, Western University
- Western Graduate Research Scholarship (WGRS), School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Western University (Fall and Winter)
- 2020 Western Graduate Research Scholarship (WGRS), School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Western University (Fall and Winter)
- Dean's Honours List, Brock University
- BMO 1st Art! Competition, Nominated by Shawn Serfas, Studio Professor/Chair, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University
- 2019 Visual Arts Honours Scholarship, Brock University
- Harrison-Thompson Bursary, Brock University
- Dean's Honours List, Brock University
- Bluma Appel Scholarship for Excellence in Humanities, Brock University
- 2018 General Brock Soiree Scholarship, Brock University
- 2017 Warren Hartman Bursary, Brock University
- 2016 Brock Scholars Award, Brock University

## **Professional Experience**

### **Teaching and Workshops**

- 2021            Studio Art 1600: “Foundation of Visual Arts,” Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) –  
September - April, TA Supervisor: Professor Tricia Johnson
- 2020            Studio Art 2610B: “Introduction to Drawing,” Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) –  
January - April. TA Supervisor: Professor Soheila Esfahani
- Studio Art 2500A: “Art Now!” Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) –  
September - December,  
TA Supervisor: Professor Christof Migone
- 2019            Photoshop Editor, Carrie Perreault, St. Catharines
- Painting Instructor, Niagara Health Hospital, St. Catharines
- 2018            Visual Arts Instructor, Youth University at Brock University, St. Catharines

### **Gallery and Museum Work**

- 2022            Events & Exhibition Technician, THEMUSEUM, Kitchener, ON
- 2021            Project Coordinator & Exhibition Assistant, Guelph Arts Council, Guelph, ON
- Curatorial Assistant, St. Catharines Museum & Welland Canal Centre,  
St. Catharines, ON
- 2020            Digital Communications & Outreach Researcher, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON
- 2019            Curatorial Assistant, St. Catharines Museum & Welland Canal Centre,  
St. Catharines, ON
- Gallery Receptionist, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts,  
St. Catharines, ON
- 2017            Gallery Receptionist, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts,  
St. Catharines, ON

### Volunteer Work

- 2019 Brock Art Collective President, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts
- 2018 Brock Art Collective President, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts
- 2016 Performance Speed Painter, Concession Street Fair Hamilton ON

### Past Publications

- 2020 Editor. *Splinter Vol 2 No 1*, tba: Journal of Art, Media and Visual Culture, Western University, December
- Couse, Candace. *i'm not ready*, 4F06 Honours Exhibition Catalogue, Brock University Press, April
- 2019 Czegeny, Leslie, “*Art and Climate Change: An Unlikely Duo*”, *The Brock Press*, The Brock University Press, October
- 2017 Niagara Press, “*The Niagara Falls Night of Art*”, Exhibition Catalogue, September
- The General. “*Building 573*”, Cover Page art, *The General Brock University Undergraduate Journal of History Volume II*, Brock University, April

### Invited Lectures/Talks

- 2021 *MFA Discussion & Artist Talk*, Information session, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.
- 2019 *Alejandro Cartagena's 'Presidential Guide to Selfies'*, Exhibition Information Session, Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.

### Curated Exhibitions

- 2022 *Fever Dreams*, Satellite Gallery, London ON, May
- 2021 *Simulation*, Brianne Casey, Satellite Gallery, London, ON, September

*Coming Home*, Brianne Casey, St. Catharines Museum and Welland Canal Centre, August

*A Christmas Story - Revisited*, Brianne Casey, St. Catharines Museum and Welland Canal Centre, July

2020 Group Exhibition, *Nodus Tollens - The One Night Biennial*, Brianne Casey, Virtual Showcase, March

2019 *Marking Time*, Brianne Casey, St. Catharines Museum and Welland Canal Centre, August

*A Christmas Story*, Brianne Casey, St. Catharines Museum and Welland Canal Centre, July

*The History of Rowing*, Brianne Casey, St. Catharines Museum and Welland Canal Centre, June

Group Exhibition. *BAC at Regent*, Brianne Casey, Brock Art Collective, Regent Student Living, St. Catharines ON, September

### **Solo Exhibitions**

2022 *Credulous Escapism*, Artlab Gallery, London ON, July

*Fever Dreams*, Satellite Gallery, London ON, May

2021 *Simulation*, Satellite Gallery, London ON, September

2019 *Galavant Boxes*, Chartwell, Edinburgh, Ottawa ON, December

2018 *Virtual Landscapes*, Small Batch Co., St. Catharines ON, September

*Escapism*, Niagara Health Care System, St. Catharines ON, July

2016 *City*, City Brokerage, Hamilton ON, June

*In the Wild*, The Art of Vintage, Hamilton ON, May

### **Group Exhibitions**

2021 *CODA*, Honours Exhibition, Guest Artist, Rodman Hall Gallery, St. Catharines ON, May

*distance makes the heart grow weak*, Artlab, Western University Art Gallery, London ON, January

- 2020 *i'm not ready*, 4F06 Studio Honors Exhibition, Rodman Hall Gallery, St. Catharines ON, April
- 2019 *Art Block: BAC on the Block Annual Show*, Brock Art Collective, Marilyn I Walker Fine and Performing Arts, St. Catharines ON, December
- ART Speaks*, Brock University Human Rights, Niagara Artist Centre & Brock University, St. Catharines ON, November
- Fortune Favours Juried Exhibition*, Brock Art Collective, Niagara Artist Centre, St. Catharines ON, April
- BAC at Mahtay*, Brock Art Collective, Mahtay Cafe, St. Catharines ON, March
- 2018 *BAC at Regent*, Brock Art Collective, Regent Student Living, St. Catharines ON, October
- Art Block: BAC on the Block Annual Show*, Brock Art Collective, Marilyn I Walker Fine and Performing Arts, St. Catharines ON, December
- Fortune Favours*, Annual Juried Exhibition, Niagara Artist Centre, St. Catharines, ON. April
- 2017 *BAC at Mahtay*, Brock Art Collective, Mahtay Cafe, St. Catharines ON, December
- BAC at Small Batch Co.* Small Batch Co., St. Catharines ON, November
- Niagara Falls Night of Art*, Niagara Falls ON, October
- BAC at Regent*, Brock Art Collective, Regent Student Living, St. Catharines ON, September
- The Ontario Place Canada's 150 Exhibition*, Ontario Place, Toronto ON, July
- BAC at Small Batch Co.* Small Batch Co., St. Catharines ON, March
- 2016 *Art Block: BAC on the Block Annual Show*, Brock Art Collective, Marilyn I Walker Fine and Performing Arts, St. Catharines ON, December

**Selected Commissions**

- 2020         *The Wedding*, Commissioned by: Amy McCulloch, Hamilton ON, July
- 2019         *Jungle World Mural*, Commissioned by: Mounterest Office,  
Hamilton ON, November
- First Office Memories*, Commissioned by: Optometrist Office of  
Dr. Chan, Dundas ON, August
- Digital Desk*, St. Catharines Museum & Welland Canal Centre, St. Catharines  
ON, July
- 2017         Britney, Tina. Casey, Brianne. Cope, Laura. *Miniature Worlds Collaboration*,  
England UK, New Mexico USA, Hamilton ON, May
- 2016         *Hidden Nude - Landscape Mural*. Commissioned by: Bianca Marijan,  
Hamilton ON, June
- 2015         *Custom Logo*, City Real Estate Company, Hamilton ON, November