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Parallel Play

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It knows what you want. You yearn for a before! Before brainrot, before scroll, before 'is it cake' & 'chat is this real?' and certainly before 5G and the foil hats. We don't admit to ourselves enough that declinism is nostalgia's cognitive analogue, but it's hard to argue against: most Britons say life was better in the nineties and noughties, and substantially more people think this compared to five years ago, noting social media and smartphones as the unanimous culprits.<sup>1</sup> There are hats for that.

And so, nostalgia is our unreliable narrator, ready to drop 'once upon a time' whenever something goes wrong. Our collective memory is so fixed on the perceived simplicity of childhood that we try to buy back time; as late-capitalism always affords, we negate our loss and shared pathos by having a transactional relationship with our old selves – from Hello Kitty to Sonny Angels to the concept of 'Disney Adults' and the staging of a 'sweet treat'. Caring for the 'inner child' via the toy object places longing alongside commodity, and at times, these objects and their micro-aesthetics become mediums through which individuals express and enrich their personalities.

The scope for world-building offered by the toy object also provides disidentificatory powers and alternative possibilities of selfhood, enabling individuals to resist dominant narratives by reimagining the self through play. DaddyBears expands her world-building methods in her dollhouse: through shiny pink upholstery (the beautifying of the object) creating undulating scenes on the conventionally rigid frame, the dollhouse becomes liminal, its uncanny quality emerging from the familiarity of the object which is now artificial and exaggerated. Plumping up the girlish coding of the dollhouse, DaddyBears conflates the unambiguity of kitsch aesthetics with the plasticity of mutable space. 'We became rubberised and plushy, springloaded and squishable. Cute made us pliable with the promise of unknown pleasures,' proposes Amy Ireland and Maya B. Kronic in *Cute Accelerationism* (2024).<sup>2</sup>

Preserving the things that we cherished in our formative years can also be a labour of love. The bunny tucked away in the dollhouse's front garden, based on a real-life rabbit named 'Burger', anchors the work in memory – and thus, the dollhouse becomes a shrine, not only for Burger, but for a once-was.

In a perfect toy-world, all would still be loved in their forever homes. No one is going to ask you, 'who was your least favourite teddy?' and hopefully not – you don't want to think about Elmo eternally condemned to landfill, or Snoopy in a skip. Does our sentimentality have a best-before date?

Dean JF Hoy's soft sculptures – sewn, patched, and ornamented plushies – are an exercise in empathy. The Bears Who Care series sees the artist revive forgotten soft toys, at once cute and distressed, a cast of zombified rejects reaching an outstretched paw to be played with one more time. Exploring the effects of human negligence, Hoy remixes aesthetic signifiers with personal touches: tattered pink bows hint at a past life of adoration, once lovingly dressed and decorated, once just a baby. As though rescued from the tarmac ribbon of the M4, Hoy presents the plushie against the backdrop of a truck bumper – the detritus of a car crash – wherein our protagonist, gutted and torn, is a silent witness. As the truck passed through towns and motorways, it was condemned to the dispiriting performance of its displacement.

By re-staging the effects of abandonment and entropy, and through the uncanny, Hoy redirects the frayed threads of our collective memory and reconciles our relationship with those which were forgotten, imbued with the weight of lost time.

It can be difficult to imagine end-cycles when we live with a framework of urgency. Our wants are impatient, we expect to receive things quickly when we ask for it, then lament that it's all gone by so fast... When the algorithm that incessantly tells us about convenience of buying something new when the truck does run it over, perhaps our nostalgic impulse stems from an expectation that our desires in the speculative world should materialise, or at least be mass-produced to fill that void. Ted Le Swer's Not-Fresh series employs CGI to create 'happenings' of decay. On framed renderings of pristine white cottons, the future's imagined degradation begins to infect and wear the subject. Like spores in *The Last of Us*, the work's alien and uncanny qualities hint to a derelict, ecologically hostile world. The

frames are portals of parallel universes wherein our declinist fear of apocalypse comes to the surface, how we are consumed by the past is called into question; the persistence of physical objects becomes dystopian, and the speculative world is tainted.

The Island of Misfit Toys is a multiverse, caught between fantasies. Unfolding as a place of transition between reality, the speculative, and the apocalyptic, The Island draws upon the ambiguity of internal landscapes, revealing an arena where the viewer is invited to negate a paradox in which the future's imagined ruins intensify the longing for a past that, we realise, was never as immutable or timeless as we remember. The unconscious dream, the child running through eternally bright and imaginary fields, follows you to the sands.

<sup>1</sup> 'Life was better in the nineties and noughties, say most Britons', Matthew Smith, Head of Data Journalism, YouGov, April 2024

<sup>2</sup> 'Cute Accelerationism', Amy Ireland and Maya B. Kronic, 2024. (Urbanomic Publisher of Contemporary Philosophy, Falmouth)