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JONATHAN HOBIN  |  IN THE PLAYROOM
Looking at Jonathan Hobin’s photographs, one instantly recognizes the meticulous preparation behind each of his elaborately staged images. Each scene is painstakingly planned, carefully constructed and is a masterful installation in its own right. Conceptually, Hobin creates images charged with symbolism and uses the viewer’s own preconceived notions, morals and awareness in order to manipulate their emotions. His most recent series, in the Playroom, simultaneously makes the viewer laugh and cringe. This series has become a hot topic within the national and international media because of Hobin’s use of children as subjects.

In addition to its message and obvious aesthetic appeal, the Playroom has received immense media attention due in part to its need to sensationalize. In response, the general public’s interest in contemporary art, even if it attracts negative attention at first, is ultimately positive. More discussion leads to more awareness.

Hobin’s images have an inherent self-consciousness, created explicitly by meeting the gaze of his child models. They stare at the viewer with acknowledgment, breaking the fourth wall and impinging on the viewer’s comfort zone. Each image betrays the hint of satisfaction in the child’s face. They may not know the exact details or history of the events they are portraying, but they understand enough to know that they are doing something that would normally be discouraged, or even forbidden. In some of the photographs the children seem to show a grim satisfaction in being given the opportunity to offend, in others they feign innocence, pretending not to understand while the macabre scene in captured.

In each photograph, the children do exactly what they so often do in their play: they pretend. They are asked to convey emotions and make gestures, often much to their own satisfaction. The images may appear disturbing at times, but this is a result of the context that we as adult viewers bring to the images and not because of any factual scene, nor do they encourage children to incorporate these acts into their play. More than anything these images are psychological: they manipulate our decisions and actions as well. Parents must find ways to engage their children and help them to cope with the reality that is presented to them whether or not these details are welcome.

Choosing to ignore the media is embracing a complacency that leads to an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality. Ignoring it will not make it go away. The media is part of our culture and in order for us to initiate positive change we as a society have to be proactive and evaluative.

The Playroom’s images create a unified statement about the effect that the media has on society. They are not representative of any factual scene, nor do they encourage children to incorporate these acts into their play. More than anything these images are cautionary tales compelling the audience to be more conscious of the fact that children are always listening and watching. Hobin has stated that this series is intended for adults, yet I am taking all four of my children to view this exhibition and want them to tell me what they think about this artwork. This will allow me to learn and confer with them before they become influenced by the media’s interpretation of the Playroom.

We live in an era in which the media is not only able to shape our perceptions of the world, but able to guide and manipulate our decisions and actions as well. Parents must find ways to engage their children and help them to cope with the reality that is presented to them whether or not these details are welcome. Choosing to ignore the media is embracing a complacency that leads to an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality. Ignoring it will not make it go away. The media is part of our culture and in order for us to initiate positive change we as a society have to be proactive and evaluative.

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CLAYTON WINDATT
Director, White Water Gallery
These startling pictures – carefully crafted, instantly recognizable and deeply provocative – actually spring from a long tradition of stories for and about children, re-framing the themes and motifs of these stories for an age of constantly streaming media. Just as the horrors of world events intrude into the playrooms depicted here, in the literature of legends and fairy tales a child’s world is constantly disrupted, challenged or physically threatened from without. Unknown forces align themselves against children’s wits, and children’s innocence, their guide through the severest of challenges, is forever diminished by contact with the adult complexities of good and evil.

The much-loved tales of Hans Christian Andersen, who gave us *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, are also populated with witches, wild swans, freezing winds, burning fires, night-ravens, hell-horses and death-lambs; and in a preface to his own vast anthology of stories and fairy tales, the Scots writer Andrew Lang, while admitting that “true stories are not so good as fairy tales, ” states bluntly that “many of the tales are concerned with fighting, for that is the most dramatic part of mortal business. ” In his colour-coded series of *Fairy Books* and *True Story Books* can be found scalpings, imprisonments, burnings at the stake, seven-headed serpents, fierce storms and all forms of danger, which children are expected to understand and overcome – and adults, most of the time, they do.

Lang gathered his stories from all over the world, and his books can be thought of as an early archive, assembled with a deliberately global reach. The universal nature of these tales and legends has been further explained by Joseph Campbell, whose concluding commentary to *The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales* claims that “myth is a picture-language … the monstrous, irrational and unnatural motifs of folk-tale and myth are derived from the reservoirs of dream and vision. … If there ever was an art on which the whole community of mankind has worked … it is this of the ageless tale. ”

Jonathan Hobin describes his own childhood as a period of fascination with fairy tales, as well as a time of intense spiritual struggle. A “typical kid … quiet and very thoughtful, ” he speaks of his upbringing as traditional, and infused with religious faith (including rituals such as Sunday School songs and Nativity plays), but also driven by the doubts that arise out of any faith system, especially in the mind of a child. He recalls his childhood anxieties...
and family challenges in vivid language, particularly “the anxiety of answering questions about what will become our fairy tales – and nothing is private now, there are cameras everywhere.” Play is how kids process information. By becoming our fairy tales – and nothing is private now, there are cameras everywhere. People can see instantly what you are trying to say; you can bridge the gap between what we imagine, and what we know to be real.

“Documentary photographs of childhood do not reflect how I remember it,” Hobin continues. “Childhood can be creepy; it is the voice of the solitary character that is always speaking to me when I make images, the voice that asks, ‘When will I have the little boy who was lost in such a confusing place. “I don’t want to forget the little boy who was lost in such a confusing place.”’ It is the voice of the solitary character that is always speaking to me when I make images, the voice that asks, “When will I have the little boy who was lost in such a confusing place.”

While these images originate in a storytelling tradition, and grow out of the artist’s own background and experience, they also claim a place in the traditions of photography itself, particularly the traditions of staged image and narrative tableau. At the end of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth, British Columbia photographer Hannah Maynard conjured departed spirits through her photographs – particularly the spirits of children – and pioneered approaches to multiple sculptural narratives, often with children or even babies as protagonists, which she then photographs. “These images, monsters lurk and dolls behave strangely; irradiated cats prowl and forage, and oversize goldfish swim through the blue night sky. Fears are hidden, dreams are disrupted, stereotypes are assailed. In these photographs, as in all fairy tales, the innocence of children, so often threatened, still stands as a bulwark against even greater disaster, or a beacon by which adults themselves may navigate.”

The staged imagery of Jeff Wall, the recreated crime documents of Stan Douglas, the disturbingly invaded bodies of Stan Douglas, the disturbingly invaded bodies of Diana Thater, or the disruptions to the canon in her group “Auditions for Eternal Youth” – all, in one way or another, explore realms parallel to those that Hobin pictures here. Current events and adult historical knowledge invade the frame or determine the choreography of participants, in many ways an index of his effectiveness at touching a shared human nerve. As Susan Sontag wrote in Regarding the Pain of Others:

“Even in the era of cybermodels, what the mind feels like is still, as the ancients imagined it, an inner space – like a theatre – in which we picture, and it is these pictures that allow us to remember...”

“Photographs do something else: they haunt us.”

These images do haunt us, as stories, as images, as expressions of our own dilemmas. We look at these children, envision the melodramas and tragedies of our time, and they look back at us watching them. As Hobin so aptly puts it: “they are kids that kids are careful is a false one. It is really children who carry the weight of the world.”
THE TWINS

The Twins, 2010
Edition 5 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival Ultra paper, 80 x 62.7 cm
Dear Leader, 2010
Edition 5 of 5
Digital C-Print on archival fiber paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
JONATHAN HOBIN | IN THE PLAYROOM

AMERICAN IDOL

American Idol, 2010
Edition 1 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival fibre paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
THE SAINTS

The Saints, 2010
Edition 1 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival elli paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
WHITE NIGHTS

White Nights, 2010
Edition 2 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival Elite paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
SEAL HEART

Seal Heart, 2010
Edition 2 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival photo paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
SPRING BREAK

Spring Break, 2010
Edition 2 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival fiber paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
BOXING DAY

Boxing Day, 2010
Edition 1 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival fiber paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
VEGAS WEDDING

Vegas Wedding, 2010
Edition 4 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival Fibra paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
Diana’s Dead

Diana’s Dead, 2010
Edition 3 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival fibre paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
39 LASHES

39 Lashes, 2010
Edition 1 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival Elite paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
A BOO GRAVE

A Boo Grave, 2010
Edition 3 of 5
Pigment based ink on archival fibre paper, 80 x 97.8 cm
Jonathan Hobin’s photographic series entitled In the Playroom serves as a metaphor for the narrative space in which children are left to their own devices. In this place, they endeavor to make sense of the world around them through performative play by acting out current events and by running through overheard conversations. This is the stuff of life that adults might wish to shield from children, but nonetheless it skulks its way into the child-centred world of make-believe. Just as children make a game of pretending to be adults as a way to prepare for and to ultimately adopt the responsibilities of later life, so too do they explore, through repetition of the things they see or hear, whether or not they completely understand the magnitude of such events or even the very implications of their own play.

In an earlier body of work entitled Mother Goose, Hobin drew inspiration from fables and other cautionary tales that are told to children as a means of socialization and initiation into the conventions of acceptable, moral behavior. Contemporary versions in picture books have sanitized these tales a fair bit, but in early versions of nursery rhymes and similar stories, wayward children frequently met with an untimely demise by strange, macabre or even supernatural means. In effect, scaring children silly with legends served as a kind of armour to protect them from the potentially devastating consequences of exploring their natural curiosity about boundaries. This approach of shielding through terror stands in sharp contradiction to the prevalent contemporary desire to keep the realities of the world at bay for as long as humanly possible.

But what happens when the inspiration for their play is an image from a news source, seen on the web or television, or the current events discussed in hushed tones by grown-ups, only to have the story dropped altogether when children come into earshot? How do children make sense of the unthinkable? How does anyone, for that matter? Moreover, if childhood is synonymous with innocence, does it symbolically end when the safe haven of the playroom’s walls has been breached?

In the photograph entitled The Twins, two little boys, surrounded by toys, sit on the floor in the corner of a sky-blue cloud-adorned room. Caught in the middle of a game, with the Stars and Stripes as a makeshift play mat, their amusement is centered on two towers of blocks. One of the towers is about to topple over, replete with falling figurines engulfed in tiny, paper flames. The other structure remains standing, but only because Hobin’s photograph operates as a moment of suspended animation. The boy on the right is flaxen haired, sporting rubber

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leaders and a firefighter's helmet. He holds the ladder of a toy fire truck aloft toward the tower and stands blandly toward the camera. His playmate, meanwhile, is barefoot, with a head of darker curls peeking out of his hoodie. His stony expression is the defiant look that is all too familiar to parents—"I am about to do something that I know is wrong. With hand held high, he clutches a toy airplane that is all too familiar to parents—"I am about to do something that I know is wrong."

Hobin's point of reference for this image is obvious to those of us who remember and witnessed the events of 9/11 through its omnipresent media coverage—the Twin Towers now function as a shibboleth for the dramatically altered skyline and through its omnipresent media coverage—the Twin Towers now function as a shibboleth for the dramatically altered skyline and political climate. The composition itself is an attempt to grasp the magnitude of being witness to a moment in the making, in which history literally transpires. It speaks to loss of innocence, to underscore the notion that Hobin has constructed a group of children operating in Hobin's composition as personifications of good and evil, and yet it is clear to the viewer that they both are only children—"how can they be so starkly cast? What are we to make of their playtime together? How different is it than endless presentations of the same film footage via the mainstream media?"

Hobin's White Nights is troubling not only in terms of subject matter, but perhaps more so within the context of the series, as we are jolted by the very proposition that a child might be compelled to act out this scene. The photograph serves to underscore the notion that Hobin has constructed a group of carefully crafted tableaux vivants whose photographs should by no means be mistaken for documentary images. In this work, a child is posed with one hand resting on a canister of antifreeze, draped behind a pair of oversized aviator sunglasses. A large glass pitcher of syrupy blood-red juice. In this instance, Hobin's photograph alludes to the event gesture ignited enormous controversy, fueled by news media frenzy. In this instance, Hobin's photograph alludes to the event gesture ignited enormous controversy, fueled by news media frenzy. Hobin's images speak to the inevitability of change. Try in vain as parents and caregivers might, the 24-hour news cycle and its accompanying commercial breaks will seep through the viewer's gaze head on. In doing so, they invite us to either join them in the playroom or to at least propose another game. As such, the Twins has a double meaning, referring at once to the Towers as well as to the boys themselves, poised in contradiction of one another, as though characters in a fairy tale. The children operate in Hobin's composition as personifications of good and evil, and yet it is clear to the viewer that they both are only children—"how can they be so starkly cast? What are we to make of their playtime together? How different is it than endless presentations of the same film footage via the mainstream media?"

Seal Heart is a rare work that refers specifically to a Canadian news event. The work references former Governor General Michaëlle Jean's participation in a community feast in 2009 in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. Offered seal heart by her hosts, Jean took part as a good guest and viceregal representative. Her gesture ignited enormous controversy, fueled by news media frenzy. In this instance, Hobin's photograph alludes to the event gesture ignited enormous controversy, fueled by news media frenzy. Hobin's images speak to the inevitability of change. Try in vain as parents and caregivers might, the 24-hour news cycle and its accompanying commercial breaks will seep through the viewer's gaze head on. In doing so, they invite us to either join them in the playroom or to at least propose another game. As such, the Twins has a double meaning, referring at once to the Towers as well as to the boys themselves, poised in contradiction of one another, as though characters in a fairy tale. The children operate in Hobin's composition as personifications of good and evil, and yet it is clear to the viewer that they both are only children—"how can they be so starkly cast? What are we to make of their playtime together? How different is it than endless presentations of the same film footage via the mainstream media?"

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Jonathan Hobin is an award-winning and internationally noted photo-based artist and art director. His work draws on iconic literary, cinematic and historical references and popular culture to explore the darker - or at the very least, the more troubling - aspects of childhood, imagination and storytelling. Coverage of Hobin's photographic work has been extensive and has inspired passionate responses from audiences, creating a dialogue on parenting, media and the use of child models in art. Hobin's art direction credits include films for Bravo!, CBC Television, and the Lifetime Channel. Hobin was also the Canadian production designer for the first Slovenian/Canadian film co-production, The Maiden Danced to Death (2010), a collaboration with Academy Award-winning cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond.

Born in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, in 1979, Clayton Windatt has lived in the Northern Ontario region for most of his life. He is an arts administrator currently working as director of the White Water Gallery in North Bay, Ontario. Windatt holds a BA in Fine Arts from Nipissing University and received his graphic design certification from Canadore College. He works actively in many roles with the Métis Nation, Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, CARFAC Ontario and www.gallerypollution.com. Windatt also retains a contracted position at Canadore College aiding with the REP21 theatre program. He contributes actively as a writer, designer, curator and theatre technician, and is an active visual and media artist. His current body of work explores unclear personal origins focusing on peer pressure within adolescent male bonding and gang violence. When not hard at work, he spends his time with his wife Tara and his children Trenton, Ember, Jonathan and Clara.
Johanna Mizgala is a curator, educator and art critic who has published extensively and lectured widely on contemporary and photo-based art. Through her long-standing relationship with programming and exhibition committees for artist-run centres and galleries as well as in her practice as a professional and freelance curator, she has engaged in the presentation and interpretation of art, heritage and material culture to diverse audiences. A PhD candidate at the University of St Andrews, her dissertation explores humour in early photographic portraiture and how such acts of wit and transgression can be traced into contemporary practice.

Don Snyder has an extensive background in photographic history and curation. Before joining the Ryerson faculty, he held an appointment as Curator of Photography at the Addison Gallery of American Art, where he originated the museum’s photography exhibition program. At Ryerson, he established the Image Arts (IMA) Gallery at 80 Spadina Avenue, and was instrumental in the founding of Function, the School of Image Arts’ annual publication of student work, essays and interviews. He has taught in the York-Ryerson Communication and Culture program, in Ryerson’s graduate programs in Photographic Preservation and Collections Management as well as in the Documentary Media MFA program. Particular interests are critical directions in photography and documentary practice during the past decade.
“Jonathan Hobin has produced an extraordinary suite of images that show a maturity and aesthetic beyond his years. I truly believe this is just the beginning of a remarkable career.”

“My tax dollars had better NOT be a part of this ‘artist’s’ funding for this project. Sick sick sick. Although I’m sure the liberals will just love it. Oh wait... maybe not... it seems they may call it racist.”

“I would put Jonathan Hobin right up there with Gaga and Trump in PR abilities.”

“I want to say I really like your work. Your pictures are beautiful and intriguing.”

“dumbfounded. this is really tasteless”

“...It’s kind of like a more extreme version of when kids used to play cops and robbers back in the day or even cowboys and indians, which you know, in retrospect, was completely not appropriate.”

“Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I love “The Twins”. It says so much about children and about our culture.”

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“Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I love “The Twins”. It says so much about children and about our culture. We created this world of atrocities and horror, and they have inherited the cost of it. For me, that’s what these photos are about.”

“I definitely would let my children pose for these.”
- Laura, Blog post. “Questionable Images In The Playroom”. embracethechaos.ca. 4 Oct. 2010. Internet

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The White Water Gallery would like to thank the following for making this possible. Without their contributions and support we would not be able to make these contributions to the art world and continue to disseminate ideas. Thank you.

To the White Water Gallery, Don, Johanna, Dale, Angelina, my friends and family: thank you.

JONATHAN HOBIN
This catalogue represents an advancement in the White Water Gallery’s ongoing effort to give a critical voice to Canadian artists. Through programming and publishing we disseminate ideas and raise awareness of contemporary art practices. We intend to continue this facilitation and increase our boundaries beyond Canada toward North American and international audiences. We hope you enjoy In the Playroom and are engaged by its message.