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ARTIST

Morey Weinstein

If Pixar made *Toy Story* with the aid of a pinch of stimulants and a lick of LSD, in effect elevating each computer-generated image to new heights of realism and intricacy and pure, eye-popping color, the end result might resemble the artwork of Morey Weinstein. Or if the movie's figurines reverted back to pre-sixties antiquity and embraced the saturation of a jam-packed circus tent, then that might look like Morey's work. Or possibly if Disney set the lighting just so upon a carefully spaced collection of tin toys, photographed it and Photoshopped away every imperfection, yes, that just might capture some semblance of Morey's masterpieces.

Except, Morey doesn't use computers to make his art.



Morey Weinstein paints each miniscule, hyper-realistic detail with an airbrush and a tiny stick of smooth bristles. Each painting takes up, on average, three or four square feet of wall space, and takes about, on average, one month to complete. When you stand up close to a painting of Morey's, you kind of feel like Pixar has been coloring with crayons all these years.

When I stand before Morey Weinstein, I kind of feel like he scratched his shaved head, lit a cigarette in contemplation, and then decided he would concede to tell his story on a whim. And he does tell his story - not skipping over the scary parts, but not emphasizing them overdramatically or downplaying their impact on his life. He tells me his story, of how he got to Columbia, South Carolina, with his motorcycles and his Narcotics Anonymous key tags and his ailing mother whom he visits every other day and his candy-colored, hyper-realistic art. He tells me his story, and he shows me his paintings.

Enter Morey's home. To the right is a television below what appears to be a blown-up digitally-enhanced photograph detailing the front of a motorcycle. It's actually a painting. To the left are a couple of couches surrounding a coffee table featuring books on God and spirituality. Directly in front sits a shelf containing a movie buff's collection of classic films plus horror and sci-fi DVD's like *The Walking Dead*. Atop of the shelf a model Harley-Davidson is parked, and above this hangs a 30 centimeter gun beside Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry, resting two-dimensionally within a 34" by 50" frame. And then there's Morey, the artist.

"Come on in," he says with a Yankee inflection, "let me get ya something to drink. What would ya like? Water, Coke?"

The small silver hoop in his ear glints with the afternoon sunlight filtering in through the window above the couch. It matches the glint of the chain hanging from his well-worn jeans. It matches the glint of the motorcycle chrome featured in the blown-up photograph that reveals itself upon closer inspection as purely paint and canvas.

I take a water bottle. Then we tour the house.

Each room contains at least one Morey Weinstein painting. Adjacent to the living room is a mostly barren space of off-white wall and amber hardwood floor, set off by a painting of green hands sending sparks to Dorothy's red shoes. The painting is Munchkin-height, and its verisimilitude is far more convincing than Oz's wizard ever was.

Morey likes to include movie icons and references from art and popular culture in his work. "I like bringing those things back to people," he says. He watches his classic films and horror flicks in the evening, and then he sets Pandora to 60's rock and roll, plus on occasion Adele, painting late into the night and retiring when the sunrise is a few hours away. He likes creating things that people can recognize. With no specific chronology, Morey tells me about his work, and we continue to move through the house.

The spare bedroom has stacks and stacks of art, canvases bagged and in rows leaning across from the unused bed, some completed, some with white amorphous shapes interrupting scenes of detailed figures in action. One shows a sprawl of wine-stained corks; another, the aforementioned oasis of toys

"Art doesn't have to be pretty. I want



Skin Deep (detail), acrylic, 36 x 36" 2007



Chrome Won't Get You Home, acrylic, 36 x 30" 2008

people to walk away and remember.”

that would make FAO Schwarz cry tears of joy; and finally, several feature violent Lego figures.

Morey likes to paint things for himself. He likes things to sell, of course, but much of his work is therapeutic, and that purely intrinsic drive equates to a quality of unmatched, intense singularity.

He used to work in the ad business. In the late 80's and early 90's, Morey would pull all-nighters working on around three advertisements a week, tired and strung out but waiting for that sweet six grand at the end. At first he painted freelance for the liquor industry in New York, and then he hand-painted all of those Joe Camel cigarette advertisements in Greensboro, North Carolina when the character “with the penis-shaped nose,” he jokingly comments, came from France to the United States in 1988. Of course, this was before the Surgeon General warnings picked up and the government issued tight restrictions on tobacco advertising, he tells me, and everything “went down the toilet.”

Morey wasn't given much creative freedom in the ad industry—it was “very sterile.” An art director would give him a basic sketch, allowing him the liberty to “overemphasize

the product,” enhancing color, perfecting the natural flaws of reality. Morey made ads for cars, cigarettes and alcohol. This rigid exercise in creative restriction and strict attention to detail enhanced Morey's meticulous and perfectionist standards. “If my work is no good, I rip it up,” he says. “But that doesn't happen often; plus I can usually fix mistakes.”

Morey took from his ad-drawing days a wife (now an ex-wife) and two sons, ages 21 and 24—both artists. Advertising also left Morey with a residual interest in painting commercial products—but now he has transitioned from obedient hyper-realist painter to cleverly creative hyper-realist artist. And he's got an interesting sense of humor. One memorable painting hiding in that guest bedroom features Mr. Potato Head with a triangle of holes on his spudly body just above his shoes, his arms up in obvious distress, and a small, almost indistinguishable plastic penis on the ground in front of him (this piece is called “OOPS! ”).

Another painting features naked Barbie torsos surrounded by their blonde severed heads, with long plastic legs ending in candy-colored shoes interspersed throughout (entitled “Skin Deep”). Oh, and then there's the piece depicting Legos with



The Policeman's Banquet, acrylic, 48 x 36" 2008

guns, a *Toy Story* meets *Chuckie* story done in airbrushed acrylic.

"My goal is to cause an emotional reaction," Morey tells me.

"Art doesn't have to be pretty. I want people to walk away and remember."

Plenty of his work is pretty, though. Like the 38" by 64" explosion of Technicolored candy hanging on the wall of the room in his house that is dedicated to art-making. It's any child's Halloween dream: foot-long Reese's cup packets, Three Musketeers bars of proportions immediately demoting king-size candy packaging to mini status, all in an acid trip of vibrancy. It's not finished yet, and Morey doesn't like to show his unfinished work, but he makes an exception.

The studio also contains a plethora of unusual trinkets: a collection of old toys ordered online and displayed on a shelf in the closet; a buffalo skull given to him by an artist friend; a Grateful Dead poster, one of many framed throughout the house. Morey followed the Dead for 24 years. He saw 168 shows all over the country, and tattooed the length of his back on the day that Jerry Garcia died. "Those were fun times," he says.

Other fun times occurred during his bout in Florida at the turn of the millennium. He went to motorcycle shows in

Charlotte when he was living in Greensboro, and was "always breath-taken" with the paintjobs and patterns on the bikes—and he knew it was done with his medium, the airbrush. He met someone at a dealership who was skilled at this particular type of painting, and Morey asked the guy to paint his first Harley-Davidson. The guy instead showed Morey how to paint it himself. As the government further restricted cigarette advertising, Morey decided to move from North Carolina to Florida, the state with the highest population of bikers.

In Florida, he learned to pinstripe, using a long, retro sable brush to paint continuous lines along the metal bodies of bikes. Painting on curved steel is very different from painting on paper or canvas, he notes. Morey was pals with the Hell's Angels. He has a Harley-Davidson tattoo that curves around his bicep, his own pinstriped ink job branding his passion for motorcycles right on his sun-spotted skin.

Then Morey's mother fell ill, and he moved here to the other Carolina. Morey, one of three separately adopted brothers, is very close to his family. He tells me that his dad and his older brother Steve are the best people he knows. Both supported him artistically, despite his dropping out of three different art schools; they had known he had talent since he was twelve, upon seeing him copy comics from the

Sunday *New York Times* and paint plastic model airplanes at his home in Long Island.

Though Morey's father passed away 24 years ago, his brother Steve still supports him, selling much of Morey's work from Movie Labs, his Hollywood research consortium, located in Silicon Valley. "The majority of ones sold out here are ones that make people happy," Steve Weinstein, who is Movie Labs' President and CEO, says in a call from California. These works—the cork pieces, the candy pieces and the toy pieces—get sold to successful computer whizzes who have just made money, just realized they can become art connoisseurs; they put Morey's work in the front of their homes. "The intricacy really appeals to those Silicon Valley types," Steve says.

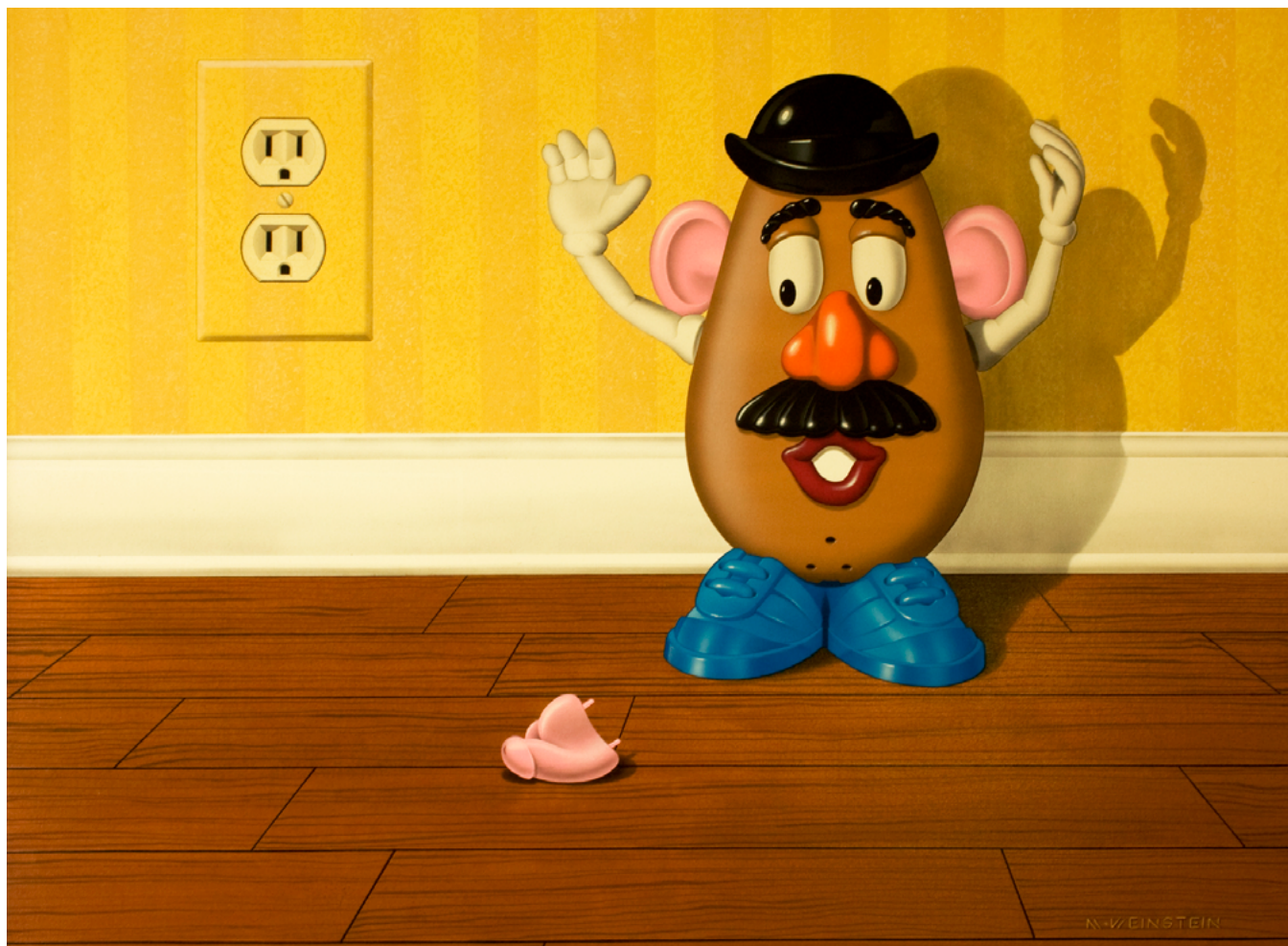
But Morey is in here in Columbia. He visits his mother, Sylvia, frequently; she is in a home for Alzheimer's. He's been in Columbia since 2009, enough time to show his work as the featured artist at a Tapp's Art Center exhibition over on Main Street. To the early rock 'n' roll sound of the five-piece South Carolina band, Say Brother, complemented by the local rockabilly group Capital City Playboys, art fans young and old walked down Tapp's 60-foot hallway to view Morey's work. Munching on fruit, cheese and little ham sandwiches, seniors

and college kids alike found they could connect to at least one or two of the twenty pieces showcased, says Tapp's Assistant Director, Billy Guess. The exhibition included Morey's toy pieces, his motorcycle and cork paintings, and his haunting self-portrait.

This last piece hangs by Morey's bed and it shocks me. It shocked Morey's therapist too. It is brilliantly constructed, marrying the mediums of canvas and clay, staring down at you from the wall with a clear, stark message.

A large green eye gazes out of this painting. It's so zoomed in that you can see individual skin cells, individual eyelash hairs, and the tiny emerald rivets of the iris. The pupil is an actual hole, and just behind the hole, a black skull juts out like an unnamable force is sucking it from a sea of tar. To the left of the hole, you see a semi-transparent image of Morey, a gun in his mouth. Translucent blood spatters behind his head; the trigger has been pulled.

Morey once contemplated suicide. He partied a lot in his early adulthood in New York. He hung out with tough crowds, developed new hobbies. He always thought guns were interesting; he started going to go to target ranges in the 90's, though he wasn't even allowed to play with toy



OOPS!, acrylic, 48 x 36" 2005



untitled, acrylic, 64 x 38" 2012



Dirty Harry, acrylic, 50 x 34" 2005

guns as a kid. He started collecting his own. Time slipped by; he grew disenchanted, sunk deep in the quicksand of cocaine. Trapped in that white powdery hourglass, he fell from the top, and feeling like his time had run out, found himself face to face with a dark, circular abyss: the muzzle of his gun; the Grim Reaper's pupil.

But he had two sons. He had a family, and he had his God-given artistic talent. This talent he used to paint his self-portrait suicide. This painting, he tells me, freed him from needing to extend hyper-realism to reality. By airbrushing his death, he saved his life.

Now Morey lives in Columbia, South Carolina, caring for his sick mother, reading the spiritual books on his coffee table. He does not do anything purely on his own; God plays a part in everything. He says he cares about how people treat people. He got rid of all of his guns twelve years ago; he has been clean from drugs for seventeen. He does not drink. He goes to a gym, rides around with his motorcycle buddies in South Carolina, smokes his cigarettes and paints. He makes new pieces. He buys old tin toys off the Internet.

"Just because I ride a Harley—and it's a badass Harley—doesn't mean I'm some kind of 'badass biker.' I'm just a motorcycle enthusiast," Morey says. And standing in front of Morey, with his shaved head, silver hoop earring, and Harley Davidson tattoo, silhouetted against the massive backdrop of his fluorescent candy masterpiece, more fantastic than anything Pixar could ever hope to create, all done by Morey's hand and by Morey's creative spirit—with this badass biker exterior that produced the sugary artwork on the wall behind— I believe him. 🍷

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