

Genuinely Artificial: The Art of Randy Regier

By Matthew Brent Jackson



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Art is risky activity. Each artist must claim a self in response to past and current practitioners, and

each creator of ambition chooses to play in fields of power, risking the rewards or injuries that may ensue. With an American culture generally inclined towards the practical or the profitable, artists must attempt to justify their endeavors to the larger world, and their activity is often only seen as valid if they can find a way to make it pay. Art in America is traditionally defined by its price tag: if someone will buy it, it is real; if not, the maker is a mere hobbyist.

In Randy Regier's case, he creates artwork that immediately generates desire because he makes copies of non-existent products, thereby impersonating already desired commodities. By choosing toys specifically as his primary area of production, he strikes at the core of consumer lust, for our first longings for stuff developed from the marketing and production of playthings, and in many cases, toys make us feel our first lack. Toys, we believe as children, will redeem and fulfill us, and our culture is rife with narratives of toy longing. Even as adults, most can remember that one thing we wanted: whether we received it or not does not actually matter. If we got it, it eventually broke or bored us; if we did not, we are marked by its absence, and the loss of things that we never had can remain a life-long canker. In either case, we are made by the possession or non-possession of these objects: for absence or presence, we are framed by these lingering voids.

If Freud is right that dreams are motivated by wish-fulfillment, then Randy Regier creates dream objects, first for himself, and then for whomever chooses to participate in his particular vision. Randy's longing for toys comes from his own childhood. Growing up in a mobile home in rural Oregon, Randy lacked luxuries and amenities that many see as standard. The specific absence of a television may have pushed Randy a generation back, for his principal contact with American popular culture came through print media and the radio. While some become bitter over what they did not have, Randy instead seemed to embrace the outside world as a space of wonder: each J.C. Penney catalog served as a missive from another place; each radio broadcast literally and figuratively a transmission from far away. As the son of a father who worked for a living, Randy did not seek to ask for these foreign objects; instead Randy wanted to make them himself. Only as an adult did Randy acquire the full knowledge and skills necessary to make the objects that the boy Randy Regier wanted. With the diffusion of time and increased knowledge, the toys of Randy's current workshop are necessarily warped, but this warping becomes the source of the power behind Randy's work, and as meaning becomes distorted, his toys become art.

Randy Regier makes art that people want to buy, and though there is little doubt that Randy Regier's work sells, this desire can also create dangers. The differences between selling and selling out are minute distinctions apparently dependent on intention or presentation, and Randy Regier's work, just toys after all, may seem easy — too accessible and therefore not serious enough to be real art. Because viewers of Randy's work seem to recognize the things he makes, his work may appear simple or jokey, but to return again to Freud, much of Randy's work is actually Uncanny. The Uncanny in Freud is the familiar in some way inverted: when we look in the mirror we see our face, yet it is not our face but a backwards reflection of it. Though the Uncanny often tends towards the sinister in most representations, with Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* being perhaps the best example, Randy makes the Uncanny fun. He inverts the world he sees, and through his reflections, we see something new.

Though Randy Regier's work might not seem to be art to some, it is critical in both its stance and importance, and the way it engages or fails to engage a larger art world is revelatory. In a contemporary scene often ruled by the transgressive, Regier's work might seem tame, yet his pieces subtly and perhaps savagely break rules and dogma that have been enshrined by the art world for almost a century. Randy Regier's work is revolutionary, but it seems benign: only a deeper examination of his theory and practice reveals just how far out he's gone, and meaning in his work often hides in plain sight, meaning it might not be seen at all.



Photo by Scott Peterman

The radical act of refusal.

In *Lipstick Traces*, music critic Greil Marcus makes many intellectual leaps and longs to make connections from the most tenuous of intersections. He posits that the music of the Sex Pistols is part of a long chain of social revolution by linking them back to the Anabaptists in Germany in the 16th century. These wild, early Protestants attempted to make a heaven on earth which resulted in carnage, chaos and early modern free love. John of Leyden, the anarchistic monarch of this Münster Rebellion, is poetically linked by Marcus to John Lydon, the true name of Johnny Rotten, the Sex Pistols' lead singer. This poetic accident of history serves as a diving board of conjecture for Marcus, who hopes that the connections may be true and that they may mean something.

While there is no evidence to support Johnny Rotten's direct link to the Münster Rebellion, there is plenty that links Randy Regier to those wild events of more than 400 years ago. For Randy Regier is the descendant of Mennonite clergy, and the Mennonites are one of many splinter groups of the German Anabaptists. With time, the apparent radicalism of the faith often has been diminished to

social conservatism, but the lingering tenet of pacifism keeps the Mennonites generally on the outside of any larger community they inhabit. Equally, the Mennonite faith resembles Judaism in that to be Mennonite is not necessarily to be one of the faithful; instead there are ties of blood, history, culture, and practice that linger regardless of church membership or attendance. Mennonite is something of an ethnicity, at least to the degree that most Mennonites share some family relationship, however distant. They also have an early awareness of being in some way marked. Mennonites know their own differences from a majority culture even if the larger culture is ambivalent, ignorant, or indifferent to these variations. A minority of any kind is always required to know the outside population, while the majority is not required to know them. That Mennonites also have a historic and theological preference for the unadorned allows them to often be unseen or unacknowledged — historically a “plain” people in a culture that tends towards the “fancy.” Because Mennonites have been persecuted in their past also has created a practice of attempting invisibility. For a persecuted group, being noticed is no advantage.

Randy Regier does not advertise his background in terms of his work, and faith or the lack of it is never specifically discussed in his creation, but some Mennonite cultural practices do seem to play into his art, intentionally or not. Mennonite pacifism is quiet. It is not presented through demonstration or signs of protest. Instead, Mennonites simply refuse to serve in the military or participate in war, and this tendency is the reason for a general Mennonite dispersal around the globe. People who refuse are seen as troublemakers and disruptors of the social order. Mennonites traditionally conscientiously object, and their historic and consistent refusals impress some and gall others. While Randy Regier’s work may not appear to be engaging in this refusal, many of his toys wrestle with American ideas of violence and conquest. While we may laugh at the humorous nature of some of his toys, we also see that much of the violence of our culture is inculcated through material consumption and that toys may not be as innocent as we hope. Whether toys reflect or create violence in our culture is a subject of debate, but our inability to remove the violent from children’s playthings remains a concern for some. Regier’s toys often play with the appeal of violence and the tendency towards the imperialistic. While his creations critique, the parody is also contrived with an apparent longing. As much as we may want the conquering spirit to go away, we also feel its attraction. In Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, a lone Mennonite appears to prophesy the pending destruction of young men hell-bent on crossing the border into Mexico. They do not heed his warning. Though Mennonites as a group continue to argue for the futility of war, their views continue to remain unpopular.

Yet the refusal in Randy Regier’s work is more than just a questioning of the values that toys teach. Rather his entire method and approach challenges the evolution of art in the last century. If we look at Andy Warhol as the principal avatar of what the art world became in the mid-20th century, we see funhouse distortions of Warhol in the work of Randy Regier. Warhol’s understanding of our own desire for objects, whether soup cans or Marilyn Monroe, recognizes that our desire for commodities is really another form of idolatry. He understood before almost anyone else how we worship objects, how we turn people into objects and make fetishes of even the mass produced and commonplace. Warhol’s subsequent moves from painting to movies, music, film and publishing demonstrates Warhol’s keen understanding of culture as a mass production business, changing the

studio metaphorically into a factory.

Randy Regier takes Warhol's process and inverts it. Randy Regier also has an appreciation for popular culture, yet the popular culture he emulates and then impersonates are his own creations rather than exact duplications of the actual. Unlike Warhol, Regier makes objects that seem mass-produced but are instead singular. These objects also appear to be made in a factory but are really painstakingly made by hand. The ways in which this approach questions other contemporary artists is noteworthy. Damien Hirst has a taxidermist who assists him in his sculptures. Jeff Koons apparently does not touch the objects he makes. Randy Regier manufactures it all, including the boxes and packages that often come with his toys. For those whom have encountered Randy's process firsthand, his attention to detail smacks almost of a mania. Regier often produces imitation collector's items, and as a mint toy must have its box, so must his. The irony becomes that Regier's toys, as art objects, do become collector's items precisely because they are one of a kind. Regier's art then engages in a heady dialogue with how we constitute value and why. The layers involved in simple toys — forged artifacts that never existed before Regier made them, resembling what might have been — becomes dizzying. It is easier to dismiss Regier's work rather than to engage it, for it poses so many questions about what art for sale means.



Photo by Lawrence Trinkhaus Photography

Authentic forgeries of unreal things.

In *Caveat Emptor*, master art forger Ken Perenyi tells truths that some may find uncomfortable. Perhaps his central revelation is not that surprising: the making, selling and buying of art is not necessarily a clean enterprise. What gets sold is not neutrally construed, and what gets made is often an imitation of what got sold previously. In other words, the art world is made up of copies

— slight variations that fit within the confines of a movement or a period. Perenyi, as a forger, tried to make copies of paintings that did not actually exist but apparently were made by historic artists. He then created situations where the false provenance of his own work might be perceived to be real. He would study an artist, take apart an existing piece according to its composition, and then alter that composition to make a duplicate of his own that never existed historically. Because his own execution was so compelling, added with a sped-up aging process that Perenyi also perfected, he was able to profit from these creations. After dodging indictment and incarceration, Perenyi now paints copies for decorators and collectors. Often he makes a copy of an original work for a collector who keeps the “real” painting in a vault, raising questions about what an art object really means, if a copy is equally satisfactory. Is it the object that is desired, or is it the perceived value behind the object that matters? Perenyi’s copies echo the Platonic complaint that painters are just “fakers” and a third remove from the truth, yet the fact that the “real” paintings remain hidden also seems Platonic, but in a way that Socrates would most likely reject. The “real” object becomes a hidden form, but its value is determined by a market instead of the purity of its intrinsic nature. Once art becomes an investment, it potentially becomes the same as corn futures or pork bellies. The high culture veneer just softens this feeling, but it does not alter the reality of art for sale. Perenyi’s book tells tales that some would prefer not be told, and “forgery,” however the term is defined, may be more essential to the world of art than it may at first appear.

Though Randy Regier’s work is not illegal, his process remarkably resembles forgery as an activity. The created backstory associated with his pieces becomes almost excessive: Regier is so desirous that his works stand up as potential artifacts that he attempts to erase all elements that might render his pieces as impostors from the present. When scholar and curator Bill North saw Randy Regier place rusty screws in the back of one of his pieces where no one but museum staff would see, he commented that Regier’s attention to detail was the equivalent “to counterfeiting pennies.” Yet Regier’s obsessiveness is another aspect that separates him from many contemporary artists. The art world is run and supported by a population that sees itself as a cognoscenti, an elect who know the joke and can laugh at it, while the rubes scratch their heads or protest in anger. Regier’s work is apparently accessible to a wide audience because of its assumed familiarity or simply its beauty of execution. If there is irony, it is in the idea, not in the making of the object itself: the process is always and almost painfully sincere. If Regier confuses anyone, it might be the art world at large, for his replications are so well done that his making lacks the appropriate cynical distance. This is truly where Randy Regier challenges. He has the working-class value of doing a job right, no doubt derived from his days in auto body repair when to do a job poorly was to result in no pay, or a need to do it again. It is Regier’s obvious talent that might make his work seem trivial because sincerity apparently lacks seriousness.

Art in the 20th century and into the 21st has little problem with charlatanism, but Regier’s pranks come backwards: the con is in the artificial authenticity of the object itself rather than the ideas behind what is created. This inversion is what makes Randy Regier’s work difficult to place, but it also points a way for a new approach to creation, if individuals are willing to study the actual complexity of what he does. Most artists could not replicate Regier because few have his technical skills, yet the seriousness with which he approaches “toys” can teach both audience and fellow

artists. As an artist he resembles a Method actor: the narratives behind his playing are as real as he can possibly make them; the dreams and memories that are fabricated are no less genuine simply because they are self-constructed. Plato tells us that art is fakery, but we have never been able to let art go despite a variety of protests and a variety of reports of art's general demise. Call it mimesis or fooling, art is somehow required, and with Randy Regier, the impersonation is so compelling that those who are willing, believe. If others see nothing present in his work but sound craftsmanship or canny impersonation, then they fail to recognize the possibility of a Duchampian joke for a new century: Randy Regier presents readymades that he actually made himself.



Photo by Scott Peterman

www.randyregier.com

Randy Regier will be speaking on Nov. 15 at the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence, Kan. from 5 to 6 p.m. His work *Impending Future Bus* was selected as the KU Common Work of Art for 2012-2013 along with *Notes From No Man's Land* by Eula Biss.

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