





Jonathan Hobin, *A Boo Grave*, from the series "In the Playroom," 2010, chromogenic print, 42 x 54 inches. All images courtesy the artist.

# Morality Play

## An interview with Jonathan Hobin

by Laurence Butet-Roch

"Offensive," "tasteless," and "vile," are some of the comments, Ottawa-based artist Jonathan Hobin, has heard over the past decades in regards to his work. Yet, he does not shy away from controversy, believing that the role of a photographer is to initiate debate on a sensitive issue. Through each series he creates, the 34-year-old photographer deepens his analysis of how personal identity and collective memory are constructed. To do so, he revisits the tales heard at bedtime, "Mother Goose" (2004), the news events seen repetitively throughout the day, "In the Playroom" (2010-2013), and some of the most common experiences we face as kids, "Cry Babies" (2013-ongoing).

**Laurence Butet-Roch: Your first series, "Mother Goose" revisits tales that have been popularized by the likes of Charles Perrault, the 17th-century French author. "Tales of Mother Goose" was in fact the subtitle of his first collection of short stories, the title being: "Tales and Stories of the Past, with Morals." The last word emphasizes the instructive value of such fables. What place do morals occupy in your work?**

Jonathan Hobin: The question of morality plays an important part. However, unlike these tales, I do not make a claim as to what is virtuous and what is not. Rather, I question what we as a society think of as being moral. For instance, I have been heavily criticized for making children act in somber scenes. Some have deemed me an "immoral character." Clearly, nowadays, there are codes on how children can be portrayed.

We also need to evaluate our ethical responsibility for the images we create and who sees and consumes them. Often, in the stories I've chosen to depict, adults behave like children. That is one of the reasons why calling on

children to act in these scenes makes sense. It forces us to rethink the values our culture promotes, in addition to our conduct. If we act like kids, and not responsible adults, is that immoral?

**The lessons imparted by old nursery rhymes, which you refer to in "Mother Goose," are no longer valid today because our values and ethics have evolved. Does highlighting the darker side of these Disneyesque tales act as a criticism of our continued infatuation with them?**

The construct and intent of those poems were about communicating morals to young children within that society. Over time, their message, which often dealt with death, sexual abuse, promiscuity, and so on, has been lost. For instance, take "Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater." The rhyme that we all know, because it is printed in contemporary books, goes:

"Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater,  
Had a wife but couldn't keep her;  
He put her in a pumpkin shell  
And there he kept her very well."

Today's illustrated books imply that Peter could not afford to buy his wife the house that she wanted. So, he built one out of a pumpkin, and she was perfectly content with that. Our modern interpretation is that he did the best he could with what he had. But in an earlier variation of the nursery rhyme, the verse goes:

"Eeper Weeper, chimney sweeper,  
Had a wife but couldn't keep her;  
Had another, didn't love her.  
Up the chimney he did shove her."

We've interpreted this rhyme to mean one thing yet ignore its entire origin, which reveals that he actually disposed of these women, at least one of which he has murdered.

**Yet, is it essential to break the myth behind these tales?**









There is a lot we can learn by looking back at these rhymes. "Mother Goose" broaches the concept of childhood. At the time of these tales, you went from a baby to a person who could work. The rhymes taught young kids of the dangers that they could face. Today, we have gone to the other end of the spectrum with *the bubble-wrap kid*. Do not let them watch television, do not tell them about the horrors of the world, let their childhood extend as long as possible so they can remain innocent for as long as possible. Such a concept is absurd. Either you foster children that are uneducated about the reality we live in, or more likely, you create taboos. It is impossible to shield a child from everything out there. Just waiting in the grocery store aisle, they can catch a glimpse of the "Enquirer" exposing sex scandals.

We have a dire need to reexamine our concept of childhood. On one hand, parents try to tell their offspring everything, hoping to protect them. And on the other, they try to show them as little as possible, because they fear that children won't be able to handle it. The balance lies somewhere in between. If you submerge kids with cautionary tales, you risk overwhelming them. But if you shield them completely, they'll be overwhelmed when forced to face the world.

**In your following series, "In the Playroom," you ask children to reenact some of the most important contemporary news stories from the tortures at Abu Ghraib, the killing of Osama bin Laden, Michaëlle Jean eating a seal's heart or the self-immolation of Tibetan monks. Are you suggesting that these are the new cautionary tales we should discuss with our children?**

It is important for kids to physically re-enact an event in order to process it. Their play has always reflected the culture of their time, from "Ring Around the Rosie," inspired by the black plague, or playing Cowboys and Indians from the early twentieth century. So now, it is only natural for them to mirror contemporary society in their play.

I have created images that make it more literal than reality in order to connect the dots in people's minds. When kids are playing with toy guns and pretending to kill someone, they draw from what they hear and see everyday. They might not create Jenga towers and blow them up, but they have integrated the idea that a bomb could explode. So, yes, in a sense, news stories are replacing Mother Goose rhymes, and as such communicate a certain set of morals.

**The negative and at times violent reactions that both these series have elicited, and in particular "In the Playroom," demonstrate people's sensitivity when it comes to children and real**

Pages 44-45: From the series "Cry Babies," unreleased work in progress, video still. Pages 46-47: *GOT HIM!* from the series "In the Playroom," 2013, chromogenic print, 42 x 54 inches.















Peter Pumpkin Eater, from the series "Mother Goose," 2004, chromogenic print, 11.5 x 11.5 inches.

#### news events.

I brought up an aspect of society that people don't have a clear understanding or answer to. Some people act as if I have done the worst thing in the world, from trivializing horrific events, to exploiting children. I have had critics say that I could have achieved the same message using teenagers. If that were true, then it would have prompted the same response. I wanted to get people's attention, to bring up the sensitive and the uncomfortable in order to challenge this belief in the "innocent" childhood.

I feel like artists are being held accountable more so than any other forms of entertainment. Television shows such as "Law and Order: SVU," often features stories of children being raped. In it, the child actor has to re-enact the victim's role, crying, weeping for extended hours, expected to channel the character. Yet, it is considered entertainment, so it's acceptable. I have asked far less of the children that pose in my photographs, and collected far more criticism.

#### Is it because you are dealing with real facts, and not fiction?

The same people who do not like to turn on the news at night, do not want to see these images either, such as the overprotective parent. They dislike the fact that I am pointing out that as hard as you try, you cannot completely shield a child.

I believe that we all survived childhood, with some joyous and some dark times. As we grow into adults, we romanticize childhood and construct that no child faces trauma.

#### Why choose certain events over others?

I picked stories for which I had experienced the process of watching them unfold. The first was 9/11. At the time, you just kept seeing the images of the plane crashing into the second tower over and over again. I wondered how a child would interpret them and what impact it would have on them.

And, I consider their longevity as well as their broader context. A new one is "Acid Wash," the ongoing trend of attacking women. It is of interest because it speaks of violence against women and the value of a woman's beauty. Those have a longer reach than some news event, such as the miners trapped in Chile, that we, as a society, are very quick to move on. So many of the photos I had planned I did not follow through on because I noticed that the story had been forgotten. Stories pass by without us learning any lessons. The series "In the Playroom" makes us stop and think.

#### It is also a statement about the power media has in directing our attention.

I have been reprimanded for putting the Siegfried and Roy picture next to the 9/11 image because it implies that they are equally important. But I am not the one curating the content that we are forced to see. Someone

in the newsroom deemed both to be as noteworthy. The tiger mauling had all the elements of a Hollywood-esque story. In fact, most news stories follow the nursery rhyme scheme: a good person, a bad person, a tragedy and ultimately a lesson.

#### And those who decide what is newsworthy are primarily American, hence why so many of the historical narratives you revisit relate to the United States.

We are still dominated by the canon of American culture. Our southern neighbours influence both the style and content of our media landscape. They promote a sensationalized type of news.

#### Recently, you have moved from working on collective historical memories to talking about shared personal experiences in the series "Cry Babies." Seen together, the three series question how we create our identity.

Reflecting on all these elements hint at how we construct who we are, as individuals and as a society. "Cry Babies" is based on locket portraiture, where intimate pictures are kept close to the heart. It's very romantic, beautiful and precious. With this new series, I want to remind people of some of the difficult experiences that children go through, such as sexual abuse, physical illness, disabilities, racial identity or menstruation. For instance, regarding menstruation, a young woman can be upset because she is the first person to get it, or the last, in some societies you are put in a woodshed, while in others it is a reason to celebrate.

Since a locket is made of two halves, there are two photographs, and therefore, two different kids. It allows us to compare narratives and interpretations of a similar theme.

#### With "Cry Babies," you are also introducing video, creating further discomfort.

A lot of people believed that "Mother Goose" and "In the Playroom" could have achieved the same goals had they been paintings. However, what people are responding to is the fact that essentially a real child confronts them. Video adds another level of reality and discomfort. It is important that my work elicits a reaction, any reaction. If it does not, then I am not doing my job. **BF**

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