

This arrangement of work by Kelley and McCarthy is accompanied by **Jeff Koons's** with his gigantic, manic wooden *Winter Bears* (1988) bringing together objects of childhood designed for play or fantasy. **Helen Chadwick's** (1953–96) *Ego Geometria Sum* (1983) draws upon functional objects from the artist's own life, from childhood up to age 30. *Ego Geometria Sum* means 'I am geometry', and Chadwick found in geometric forms 'an expression of eternal and exact truths' and a solution to the problem of finding a form of expression for ephemeral childhood moments. For this exhibition five objects associated with Chadwick's infancy and childhood have been selected: *The Incubator, Birth; The Font, aged 3 months; The Boat, aged 3 years; The Wigwam, aged 5 years* and *The Bed, aged 6 years*. Incorporating photographs of her body into the works, Chadwick re-inhabits her childhood. *The Juggler's Table* brings the original group of ten sculptures together on a tabletop as small models, and offers an omniscient perspective on the artist's life. Chadwick and Bourgeois use the scale of the miniature to different effects, but for both artists it operates as an attempt to recollect and to understand one's childhood.

In this exhibition David Hopkins brings together a select group of works that represent not only the double-edged nature of childhood, with its lightness and darkness, but also a specific group of highly intelligent and influential artists. One of the consistent threads in the exhibition is each artist's attention to the magical, and sometimes threatening essence that makes a toy or object occupy a child's imagination. The nineteenth-century French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire beautifully described this fascination in his essay 'A Philosophy of Toys':

*The overriding desire of most children is to get at and see the soul of their toys ... The child twists and turns his toy, scratches it, bumps it against the walls, throws it on the ground. (...) Its marvellous life comes to a stop. The child ... makes a supreme effort; at last he opens it up, he is the stronger. But where is the soul?*

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# Childish Things

Louise Bourgeois  
Helen Chadwick  
Robert Gober  
Susan Hiller  
Mike Kelley  
Jeff Koons  
Paul McCarthy

Curated by David Hopkins

## Exhibition

19 November 2010 – 23 January 2011

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This exhibition examines ideas about toys and play, child development and changing historic attitudes to the cultural conditioning of children. This particular group of historically significant sculptures, objects and projected work made by British and American artists over a twenty-five year period from 1983 to 2008, a relatively under-explored period of contemporary art history, has been selected by the writer and scholar David Hopkins, Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Glasgow, and curator of the 2006 Fruitmarket Gallery exhibition *Dada's Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art*.

As with *Dada's Boys*, the works exhibited in *Childish Things* share affinities with the found objects and thematic concerns of the surrealists. Some of the work is autobiographical or personal in its conception, and other pieces respond more broadly to collective attitudes to childhood and the child, toys and play. In much of the work, radical changes in scale either magnify or condense forms and ideas. All of the work in some way critically examines the darker aspects of the objects and fantasies that occupy the world of the child, both as constructs and in reality.

The exhibition begins with **Jeff Koons's** (b.1955) *Bear and Policeman* (1988), a work that consolidates a number of themes in the show. In this work, a decorative knick-knack that might be found in a child's bedroom is enlarged to life-size, and almost comes to life, resulting in a bear that is no longer confined to a shelf but instead looms over the viewer and his companion, an English bobby. The conventional role of human trainer and performing animal are reversed: the bear, with great staring eyes and bared teeth, toys with the policeman's whistle, and with the policeman himself, psychologically and metaphorically.

The sinister world of objects and entertainments designed for children is explored further in **Susan Hiller's** (b.1940) *An Entertainment* (1990). Hiller's training as an anthropologist informs her critical approach to this seminal, groundbreaking multimedia installation. Film footage from Punch and Judy shows in various locations in Britain in the 1980s is projected onto four large screens. The multiplication of imagery and sound, along with the dramatic increase in scale and volume, amplifies the narrative with its repetitive acts of violence, sharply calling into question society's rationale for characterizing such ferocious stories as children's entertainment. *An Entertainment* puts the adult viewer into the position of a child at a Punch and Judy show.

**Paul McCarthy** (b.1945) also takes as his starting point an iconic childhood story in *cisU fo dnuoS ehT / The Sound of Music* (2008), presenting the film *The Sound of Music* in reverse and upside-down. Like a child investigating the inner workings of a toy, McCarthy plays with the film's constituent elements, and overturns and subverts the film itself, as well as its well-known, uplifting narrative and songs, to render the familiar and comfortable strange and unnerving.

Upstairs, works are spread out in the gallery like toys in a playroom, punctuated on either side by two works with multiple elements. The glass vitrine contains **Louise Bourgeois's** (1911–2010) *Oedipus* (2003). Arranged in a narrative sequence from

left to right, ten doll-like figures embody critical moments in the story of *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. At the far left, *Oracle (Janus)* takes the form of a double-headed figure, the oracle who predicts the terrible fate for King Laius that his son will murder him. Laius abandons his newborn son, Oedipus on a mountainside, pinning his legs in an attempt to defy his destiny. Oedipus's early childhood is represented in two works, one featuring Jocasta nursing Oedipus and *Oedipus as a baby with pinned legs*.

The other stitched and stuffed pieces in this work portray the downfall of Oedipus. As an adult, Oedipus becomes aware of his fate (represented in the kneeling figure embracing the red glass form) and seeks to escape it but cannot, killing his father (the prone figure with the pin in its back), answering the Sphinx's riddle (in *Sphinx*) and marrying his mother (*Oedipus sleeping with mother*). His realization of the truth devastates him (*The Realization*), and he blinds himself (*The Blinding*). The sequence ends on the far right with *Oedipus being led by his daughter Antigone*, a variation of a sculpture at the bottom of a staircase at Bourgeois's school.

The sources for this work are indeed personal. Bourgeois's fascination with the sculpture at her school came from misunderstanding its meaning: 'I know that they thought it portrayed the good daughter helping her blind father. However, whenever I saw the sculpture it looked to me like the incestuous father hitting upon his daughter, and therefore an odd choice for an all girls' school.' The artist's work in fabric relates to her own childhood growing up with her family's tapestry restoration business. Bourgeois was drawn to the Oedipus story because of her interest in Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, psychoanalytic theory and because of her own family conflicts, praising it for its rich imagery and its power as a 'tale of fate and destiny and the journey for self knowledge and truth'.

Bourgeois's gathering of little figures both complements and stands in contrast to **Robert Gober's** (b.1954) *Playpen* (1986), a work re-made from an object from his own childhood. If Bourgeois's work resembles strange playthings bearing terrible meanings, Gober's work could be a ready receptacle for them. The irony is that *Playpen* contains no toys to play with and does not in itself look like an object designed for playing in. Like the Oedipus objects, *Playpen* is painstakingly handcrafted. Where Bourgeois's figures are linked to specific meanings, both literary and personal, Gober's work is mute, open to interpretation, and to viewers' projections, at once a prison and a safe haven, an historic artefact and potentially an entire world for a small person.

The outer and inner worlds of the body take shape in **Mike Kelley's** (b.1954) *Innards* (1990) and **Paul McCarthy's** *Children's Anatomical Educational Figure* (c.1990). Exhibited as a readymade in an exhibition curated by the artist Mike Kelley in 2004, *Children's Anatomical Educational Figure* spills out its gargantuan insides, detachable organs. Likewise, Mike Kelley's knitted objects strewn across a blanket allude to the scattered insides of a doll or toy. Both works speak to a child's desperate compulsion to get to the insides of a toy, impulses which when acted upon result in damage, destruction or a reconfiguration of constituent parts.