Up like weeds

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UP LIKE WEEDS

A Thesis
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Louisiana State University and
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Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
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A child playing with matches is forgivable. Kids are curious. They want to explore adult activities through play. Does it stay innocent when that child experiments with the effects of firecrackers in frogs and gasoline on animals? What happens when they light the match? The grey area between childhood innocence and realization of wrong intrigues me and I find it fascinating how adult perspectives of such malicious deeds often vary.

_Up Like Weeds_ questions these responses using a collection of narrative prints and freestanding woodcut figures. They visually tell five tales of children in a rural environment acting out in deviant and mischievous ways not normally associated with youthful innocence. The characters developed from a particular group of children who are based on delinquents I knew, which is why I chose the rural landscape for the settings of my narratives. I speak through this landscape more naturally. The children in this exhibition should not be seen as victimized innocents for whom to place blame, but as vehicles to question this strange time and transition in everyone’s childhood and reflect on an adult tendency to alter their perspectives of these times later in life. They speak directly to and confront the viewer’s childhood memories that have since been rationalized and sugarcoated into child “norms” that project innocence onto play where it never really existed.
The characters in Up Like Weeds should not be seen as future socio-paths or miscreants, but as exaggerated personifications of our once-selves. The confrontational images call the viewer to question an adult tendency to discard certain memories in an attempt to rationalize our actions as children into innocent play. It is virtue by omission. The stories reveal the necessary, but complicated way most of us search for adulthood. This was my experience and what my prints are based on: the messy, secretive and shameful truths that make up our childhoods.
“We treasure our own childhood snapshot identities. They give testimony to an imaginary time when we were perfect and innocent, when we were, we would like to believe, our original and therefore real selves.”

-Anne Higonnet from *Pictures of Innocence*

Most children do not have to wait on their parents to tell them that Santa is not real. Children have other sources. They have older siblings that don’t quite know the importance of filtering for a younger audience. They have television with plenty of channels set up for their learning and viewing pleasure. Some have less-than-perfect adult role models to look up to and imitate. These events help children understand human interaction. They are the tales of discovery that you certainly won’t find in any children’s book. There is no moral here hidden with likable quirky animal characters. My narratives reveal the necessary, but complicated way most of us search for adulthood. This was my experience and what my prints are based on: the messy, secretive and shameful truths that make up our childhoods.

Anthropologist Donald E. Brown made the point that “storytelling is a human universal.” It is agreed by most who study children’s literature that these stories share a primary goal which is to influence the behavior of children by inciting them with the
morals of their parents, religion, and/or society.\textsuperscript{1} They are intended to plant seeds of morality. Much different from the stories aimed to deliver guidelines to morality, my exhibition is about capturing a child’s truer search for self while exploring the glimpses of the stumbles and detours we take along the way.

Up Like Weeds follows five different scenarios of children acting out. They are related in both reoccurrence of characters and in theme. The tradition of a narrative picture can be seen in each of my prints. Like children’s books illustrations the setting and the characters with their animated gestures are able to guide the viewer through the story with little need for text. They are broken into sequences of events and the books usually offer a new image that explains another part of the story with each turn of the page. Like these children’s book illustrations, each of the five scenarios in Up Like Weeds are broken into three separate prints that tell a new part of the story. The three are two color intaglio prints and a large format print that is a combination of reductive woodcut and silkscreen.

My investigation began by recalling stories that offer a dramatic contrast to storybook characters. I collected stories of childhood mischief that might be explained away as innocent questioning and imitation of adults. Most of the stories came from men who told me of their childhood misadventures. They were boys that I knew growing up and if I had played with them on the right day, I might have witnessed some of these stories first-hand. I started with the intention of depicting them as children freely and without shame acting in certain ways that we, as adults, would view shameful. The initial

\begin{footnotesize}
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thought was that I would show the innocent child in violent or sexual play and they would be showing no hint of embarrassment or guilt.

The figures in my early work kept their innocence though they were engaging in disobedient play. One day, I was explaining to a male viewer how the children did not know what they were doing and that their actions were blameless reflections of their environments. He stopped me. “Oh, we knew it was bad,” he said. He told me of how he remembered, “playing doctor” with a girl, but how the most concrete part of the memory was the utter disgrace that he held inside him then and for years to come for what he had done. My own memories of shameful childhood play came bubbling up: they were the first lies that I told and are things that to this day, I would never admit. Why do adults still feel this way about something they did as a child? Were we all not innocent then?

In his book *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence* Richard Halpern describes a disassociation regarding personal shameful memories of childhood. He argues that the concept of childhood innocence is actually manufactured through a process of disavowal. Different from repression, which is a psychosomatic tool of discarding memory or experience completely, disavowal “both retains and banishes something” at the same time and is “a refusal to own up to or acknowledge what one already knows or thinks or wants.” They are the things we know to exist, but place ourselves far away from so as to keep a “conviction of personal purity.”

Repression, therefore involves, for better of worse, a genuine renunciation. In Disavowal, however, consciousness both retains and banishes something. It

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thereby allows itself to enjoy that forbidden thing on the sly while denying that it enjoys or knows it. Disavowal is not exactly a way of having your cake and eating it too. It's rather a way of eating your cake and nevertheless being able to deny to yourself, with apparent sincerity, that you ever ate it or had any intention of doing so. Indeed, it's a way of eating your cake while declaring that people who eat cake are disgusting and ought to be locked up. Disavowal is therefore a short-circuiting of ethics, insofar as it refuses to take responsibility for what one already knows or wants or does, engaging instead in childish forms of denial.

There was a murky grey area somewhere that I thought of as the transitional period in adolescence when you begin to tell right from wrong, but in actuality the murkiest area in this investigation comes from the time when you start to place your wrong so far from yourself that you are able to chock it up to innocent questioning and child play. Omitting these certain childhood memories simply aids us to romanticize our own youths.

As an example, I offer a story that I was told in early high school that exemplifies an altered adult perspective of a childhood deed. A couple of guys told the stories that didn’t seem that much at all then. Telling the story as young teenagers put the boys at a unique age to describe their childhood. They were too old to get into trouble for what they had done when they were small children, yet too young to realize the shame they were supposed to experience as adults. I believe they were still too young to replace their depraved actions with an adult perspective of childhood purity. On our car rides through the rural hills one boy in particular would take turns aiming beer bottles at street signs and telling these sordid accounts: how if you shove enough rocks down a dog’s throat and throw it in a deep enough pond, the doggie-paddle no longer applies or how the best way to get rid of a mutt is to force a bit of gasoline on it and light a match.
It may have been the look I gave during his brief yarn, but his tone shifted.

Through the chuckles of his anecdote, I can still remember catching glimpses of guilt and eventually his eyebrows would lower as his face would redden, and then he quickly changed the story. Now his bigger brother was the lead character. It changed from “we” to “him” and how “he sure was a sick sonofabitch.” For the remainder of the story he could stand in the audience instead of being involved. He became the bystander. I never thought of it then, but I may have been witnessing some sort of realization. Maybe his words spewed a little freer than he thought and hearing himself speak these tales made them real to him. Maybe he didn’t like what he heard. It could be that he just didn’t like the look I gave him.

Something has changed, though, because as a grown man he refuses to talk about this particular memory. Maybe the humor of the past has faded or maybe it has been replaced with a new ideal of his childhood purity that he prefers not to tarnish by retelling his tale. It is adult’s way of finding virtue through omission. I realize now that I had seen a real case of disavowal, exactly as described by Halpern. I decided to investigate this tendency by visually re-describing hidden stories of child play and forcing memories that had long been forgotten or swept under the rug to confront the viewer. The characters in *Up Like Weeds* should not be seen as future socio-paths or miscreants, but as exaggerated personifications of our once-selves. They speak directly to and confront memories that have since been rationalized and sugarcoated into child “norms” that project innocence onto play where it never really existed.
Violence as the Absence of Innocence

I have found authors who write that childhood innocence is a relatively new product or invention. They believe that, largely through pictures, the notion of the inherently innocent child has gradually pervaded mainstream thought. In *Pictures of Innocence* by Anne Higonnet she tells how “the age of innocence” started only two hundred years ago with British portrait painters like Sir Joshua Reynolds. (See fig. 1 for the artist’s aptly titled painting.) Before that, children’s bodies in art were “basically pictured in the same way as adult bodies.” Her book talks about images of children throughout history and how the depiction of children during the Romantic era actually started a new idealistic child. Halpern agrees that innocence manufactured: “a story we tell about ourselves-

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not something we are.” He agrees that it was an invention of the eighteenth century and that in centuries before it was widely held that children were born with original sin and quotes a seventeenth century poet and preacher John Donne, “And there in the we may be damned though we are never born.” This very vivid quote displays the assumed mindset of child morality and highlights the importance of baptism at that time. In his book, he says “childhood innocence is less a fact than a construction by adults.”

The characters in Up Like Weeds dramatically contrast this assumed and manufactured picture of innocence. I began my visual investigation with stories of childhood violence towards animals. Three of the five stories in this exhibition are, very directly, about animal abuse by children. Such early violence is a stark contradiction to

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the ideal of childhood innocence more popularly depicted. The first of the stories is about a menace dog. I was told a story about a stray dog whose presence alone violently bothered a man when he was a child. I depict this story over three prints called Scurry, Smolder, and Snicker.

He told me how the dog was a trespasser in his childhood property: a fort built from scrap wood in a dry country field. This two-plate color intaglio called Scurry (fig.1.) shows the boy shooing the dog away as the creature dazedly and slowly shuffles off. The attempts to rid the dog did not work and the dog kept showing back up. The boy, taking advice from and older cousin, decided to make use of an old gas can that he kept for writing his name and drawing into the grass with flames. The dog was just slow enough and dumb enough that he could drench it with the gas to get rid of it while feeding his growing appetite for pyrotechnics. Smolder (fig.2), which is a mix of silkscreen and reductive woodcut, depicts the boy after he rids his fort and his field of the mongrel. He beams with pride while showcasing his hard work: a smoldering animal corpse. The gas can is printed in bright red and becomes a focal point in the composition while the silhouettes of the dog fade into the background. The red can backs the figure like another character would, urging the boy on.

The larger prints in the show, like the one mentioned above, are created using a combination of print processes. The screen printed figure breaks out into the margin and activates the space traditionally left empty in prints. The characters are printed in a different medium from the background, which are reductive woodcuts, to show the
disconnect between the landscape and the actor. This reflects the tendency we have to disassociate ourselves from our surroundings in childhood memories. These prints speak to childhood memories that, though many may share, few are urgent to reminisce about because they contradict more idealized memories. A memory of a setting is much more reliable than the account taken place in one, so I chose to depict the scenery in much more vibrant color and less graphically stylized as the figures themselves.
Figure 4

Dangle
relief and silkscreen
2012

Figure 5

Down
intaglio with relief roll
2012
In the prints entitled *Dangle, Drag, and Down* a young boy acts solo. The old truck in the print is the boy’s playground, his fort and his spaceship. A truck is an adult’s possession and it is strange to see a child playing alone in the back. This brings up the idea of the missing adults whom are intentionally not present in my prints. Most everyone knows how to act right in front of his or her parents. The real play for discovery comes when there is no adult present. This is when experiments with animals can really take off. Adults are not in the scenes but can be seen reflected in what the children are doing. Novelist James Baldwin put it eloquently, “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” Youth recognizes its place. They realize that certain play of adult activities should be done out of sight. Normally children will hide away from the their parents. My narratives are acted out in the open, taking place out in a field, in a dried up lake or even in the front yard. The same boy hangs an animal from the back of the truck in the print titled *Dangle* (fig.3.) There is no threat of an adult coming across him and he knows that he is free to do as he pleases. The characters in my stories have adults in their lives, but they are used to them being absent. They have grown accustomed to running wild.

I chose landscapes that spoke directly to where the children in the stories came from, yet are universal enough to speak to any person from a rural or suburban area. There are many of the same landscapes across the country and I have kept the scenery broad enough for most viewers to be able to relate. I have, however, chosen to use a slogan sticker as reference to my childhood home. It shines through on the back window of the truck and can be seen in *Drag and Down.* (fig. 4). Bumble Bee is a very popular brand of bass boats and the logo alone incites the region from which it is most
Figure 6
Think
color Intaglio
2012

Figure 7. Plan, color intaglio, 2012
popular. The logo simply hints back to the South because I chose to tell the stories from this perspective.

Color is also used to describe my personal childhood experience. The color in my work is mostly unsaturated and muted which speak to memories whose color and certainty also fade with time. The near neutrals of the landscape colors in the intaglio pieces are muted but the figures in those prints lack color completely. This disconnect between the figure/ground is also explored with color in the large format mixed-media prints. They also reference the particular time in history where popular home decor colors were also muted and dull. This speaks to the interior spaces of my childhood memories as well.

I heard a new tale of childhood violence after another man told me how he and his stepbrother would play scientist using BB gunned cats. You can see an aim take place in the intaglio Think (fig. 5). He explained that to them they thought of the cats as inventory for their experiments. The prints in the series called Think, Plan, and Execute depict him as a boy with his older sibling guiding him through play. In this series I chose to depict only one of the scenes as intrinsically and overtly violent and allow for the references to ropes and BB guns to act as symbols for the violence in the others. The children are shown deliberating out planning in the print called Plan (fig. 5). In this case, the violence is not some accidental stumbling. It shows it as being as premeditated as a plan to build a fort or a hide and seek game.

The prints whose main characters are boys were still easy for me to depict because I could keep disconnected from their cruelty. I could feel a personal disavowal towards my own childhood like Halpern had described it. I never killed for fun as a child.
so I was still able to keep my pure childhood portrait. If violent play was being recalled to reveal hidden tales for boys then what was the female’s perspective and what did presumed innocence mean for her? Other artists bring up similar questions and skew the romantic image of a child by stripping innocence, not by showing them in violent acts, but with ambiguously sexual themes.

**The Child Body as Absence of Innocence**

**Figure 8.** Sally Mann, *Jessie at 5*, 1987

Sally Mann’s photography brought some serious debate in the late eighties because of their inherent, though never directly embraced, sexualized childhood. The portraits of children in her “Immediate Family” series showed many shots of nude children that could be interpreted as very suggestive. The children were hers, which brought up questions of the mother’s role to protect. It made critics outraged that she was so blatantly failing to do so. In her photograph called *Jessie at 5* (fig.5), Mann’s
portrait offers the contrast between a sexualized child, pictured centrally and in focus, with the idealized ones faded and blurred into the background.

The two other girls have traditional garb that epitomize innocence. Mann says that the photographs are not explicably about child sexuality, but about “the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty.” She has also said, “If it doesn’t have ambiguity then don’t bother to take it. I love that.” Mann embraces the ambiguity in her photography partly to alleviate an overt message of childhood sexuality. I would agree that calling something about love and death is easier to explain to critics than what they seem so overtly to really depict.

Another artist whose work raises questions about this presumed innocence is Eric Fischl. A couple of his paintings have a sense of ambiguity to them, but only that you do not know for sure in just which way the child is being bad, since there are many. Take for example, the painting _Bad Boy_ by Fischl. The audience is left to interpret whether the boy is “bad” because he is watching the woman, presumably his mother, a bit to intently while she picks at a toe, or gesturing into an open purse to suggest he is stealing from her. The overtly Freudian image asks which is worse in this case. Another great example by Fischl is _Sleepwalker_. This painting (fig. 6) shows an adolescent boy masturbating in a child’s pool. The figure is front and center in the painting’s composition, confronting the viewer with the subject of child sexuality that is

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usually only hinted at and tiptoed around. Halpern puts it this way: “Fischl delights in making his viewer uncomfortably aware of his or her illicit desires.”

Figure 9. Eric Fischl, *Sleepwalker*, 1979

The girl's perspective and tales of hidden childhood memories are acted by the same female character and we watch her grow over two separate stories. The age difference is only a couple of years but show her in two different situations. *Startle*, *Simper and Grin* show her as a younger child and is based primarily on the reaction a child makes if caught doing something naughty. The scene is indoors and the first image shows her in her bedroom. The dolls are sprawled in strange positions on the floor and her reaction is startled and angry. The viewer becomes the person who has caught her and sees the reaction change from anger to a smiling innocence. This shows a spectrum of interaction between the character and viewer: the child and adult. Each story has an instance where the characters react to being caught during their misdeeds. Adults are never shown catching the children and it places the viewer in the

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role of parent. Though each child reacts differently, the moment offers a glimpse of when the child acknowledges the wrong that I now believe even very young children comprehend at some level. We are quick to forget the scowl by the time we make it to her glowing and innocent smile and is again very easy to accept her as just that.

Figure 10. *Startle*, relief and silkscreen, 2011

Figure 11. *Simper*  
Color intaglio  
2012
The same girl is shown a bit older in *Bare, Awkward, and Private*. *Bare* (fig. 8) is set in a dried lakebed. The dock serves as a backdrop to a scene that needs little explanation. The girl glances back in fear of being caught during what she knows is a forbidden show and tell. There is no real need for worry, however, because in this case the parents are also nowhere to be found.

To reinforce the absence of parents, I have chosen summertime as the season for the children to play. You will notice most of the children in *Up Like Weeds* are scantily clad in summer garments of cut off denim or bathing suits. They often roam outdoors barefoot or in flip-flops. In the summer children are off from school, but their parents are less likely to enjoy the same break. They must go about their daily routines, leaving the children mostly to themselves.

The next print in this story’s series shows the awkward moment of going back to normal play after these take place. She reacts with an unexpected giggle and the boy is shown a bit embarrassed and ashamed. The boy’s reaction is also highlighted in the next print when the girl whispers to another. The print’s title is *Private*, giving a double meaning of sorts, referring both to the secretive nature and of the act of revealing. In this large-scale print the figures once again break out into the margin becoming close to life size in confrontation with the viewer. They seem to start to come off of the paper and occupy a space beyond the printed page.

I chose to use a variety of media to depict the characters in *Up Like Weeds* to showcase the relationship of the figure to the background and landscape. They figures start out in the intaglio prints highlighted only by their lack of color. The larger prints are
Figure 12.
Bare, color intaglio, 2012

Figure 13.
Awkward
Color intaglio, 2012
much more disconnected from the background because of the difference in mediums. The figures are printed using the silkscreen process and the backgrounds are reductive woodcuts as (see in the fig14).

Figure 14. Private, relief and silkscreen, 2012

Figure 15. Private, detail
There are also characters in *Up Like Weeds* that exist completely separate from the paper and stand out in space in exaggerated life-size scale. I chose five children to serve as my focused cast of characters. They were pulled from the five stories of the exhibition. The figures now occupy the same physical space of the viewer. The children are as tall as average adults measuring between 65 and 75 inches. I intend them to be confrontational and menacing and the shift in scale puts the figures eye to eye with viewers. The memory now exists in the audience’s space and makes the lack of innocence more real as it invades that space. The figures are depicted with woodcuts that are double-sided with both the matrix of the woodblock and the printed image. This speaks directly back to the process of making the images and highlights printmaking as a medium. Printmaking is an important part of my work because it relates back to the illustrative quality of pictures in children’s stories. It was with these traditional printmaking processes, that early book illustrations were possible.

Printmaking is also extremely important for me in terms of its versatility. The installation in *Up Like Weeds* included a wall that served as a backdrop to the freestanding figures. Woodcut tires that sprawled across a gesture of a hillside (see fig. 16) had been previously printed miles away, but were able to exist as an entire wall for the installation. With the short installation window it would have been implausible to finish a painting for the entire mural: printmaking allowed for this.
Figure 16. *Up Like Weeds*, Installation view, 2012

Figure 17
Up Like Weeds
Installation View
2012
Figure 18

*Up Like Weeds*

Installation View

2012
CONCLUSION

“All things truly wicked start from an innocence.”

-Ernest Hemingway

I have found it remarkable that there are two distinct reactions people have when viewing my work. They either place themselves or their children in the scenes. Both are reflecting on themselves in the narrative, but the parents do it more indirectly. The people without children do it in a direct sense and start to relate through their own similar personal narrative. I am not a parent but assume that children act a lot like little mirrors to their parents. I think children are the reflections of our culture and ourselves, but more than mere reflections they are *us*. My work’s underlying content has grown as organically in my mind as a weed might. I have found myself at times uncomfortable exploring the themes and wanting to place blame for the children’s actions. It was only when I could accept that the children were acting on their own, that the work grew and expanded. The aim of *Up Like Weeds* is not to divulge completely the concept of innocence. Its aim, rather, is to call into light this need to mask our dirty memories and play to the notion of personal purity. The shifts in perspectives intrigue me: the shift in an adolescence perspective of right and wrong and the shift in adult interpretation of childhood memories. My characters might be seen as deviants, but are really interpreting their personal surroundings. There is no norm that they are deviating from. This is their norm.

John Paul Richter said at the end of the 19th Century “the conscience of children is formed by the influences that surround them” and that “their notions of good and evil
are the result of the moral atmosphere they breathe.”  Sure, they were products of their surroundings, but are we not and will we not always be just that? Are we not all products of experience and what is the point of masking away these experiences from ourselves? The idea of personal disavowal is remarkable because it does that: hides these experiences and makes the more undesirable parts that make up the whole of a personal identity disappear. With these confrontations I would hope to make the viewer of *Up Like Weeds* a bit more comfortable with their truer identity: it is an initial discomfort to spark self-contentment.
Figure 19. Up Like Weeds, installation view


Danielle Burns was born in Brooklyn, New York, but at age one was moved south to be raised by a clan of Yankees in a the small southern town of Tullahoma, Tennessee. She attended Middle Tennessee Sate University where she was awarded Bachelor degrees in Fine Arts in Painting and Art Education. In 2009, she moved even deeper south after being accepted into the graduate printmaking program at Louisiana State University. She will receive her Master of Fine Arts degree in the summer of 2012.