

Artist Statement

The *Adventures of Pookie MaGee* tells the tales of a bon vivant, vigorous, untethered and carefree jane-of-all trades character named Pookie MaGee as she lives day to day, thriving in a fantastical world of surreal hybridity. The viewer follows Pookie on each escapade in a narrative sequence of stereograms viewed through hand held stereoscopic goggles.

I developed this character to act as a guide for the viewer to share in the active orbit of adventure, power, positivity, creativity and discovery as they enter the viewing experience. Paradoxically, upon entering, the viewer also must unyoke themselves from the contexts where they may find themselves, i.e. their adult lives, the gallery, planet earth. The viewer must disengage to engage, to be fully present inside of Pookie's world. To “activate” the images the stereo viewing device is used to experience the story, enabling a perceived three-dimensional encounter with the story. The system of delivery harkens back to a sense of discovery akin to standing on one's toes to peer through a hole in the fence, laying on the floor and spending all day inside a dollhouse, or clicking away with the reels of the beloved Viewmaster toy.

To see what is activated by the stereo viewer, the viewer must physically connect with a toy. A toy that when used, acts as metaphorical and literal blinders to the physical context of the viewer, enabling the believability of the fiction they experience. The active role the viewer must take to access this work forces the viewer to connect to the fiction, inserting their own dialogue. I think of a person on a stationary bicycle that operates a light bulb to see what is around them, or a mouse in a scientific trial hitting a button to get one more crumble of cheese, and one more, and one more. The dimmed light of a movie theater allows for a similar transport of the viewer's imagination. The ability to “relax and enjoy the show” means the inability to notice you are not in outer space, a volcano, or a bizarre animal dwelling. Another of the stereo imagery's special

talents also aids this suspension of disbelief: the depiction of flat imagery as a three-dimensional diorama. The 3-D effect is a device to disengage, as the perceived space is illusionary as well.

The viewers also pace their own read and discovery within each episode. Much like turning the pages of a picture book, the seven scenes of each of Pookie's episodes can be understood in the viewer's own comfortable pace. Each stereo view is separately framed on the gallery wall, and displayed in the sequence within its episode. For example, Pookie Goes Safari is one episode comprised of seven stereo views hung and read in order. As narratives, the pieces would be scattered and fragmented without one another to inform each Pookie story complete with a beginning, middle and end. The rationale that moves each narrative is also juvenile as Pookie must be destructive to be constructive to amuse and charm herself. She is the only human in her world, her friends and innovations concocted from her own brand of backward science. She is an adventurer and explorer that delights in the most simple of discoveries and takes exactly what she wants in order to make exactly what she "needs". Pookie MaGee is the personification of pure id.

Historically, the function of the stereogram was to amuse, entertain, educate and to provide varied virtual tourist experience to viewers.

With the advent of bourgeois dominance in the early 19th century, 'escapism' became the rage. At this point in the Industrial Revolution, which would reduce hundreds of thousands to abject poverty, the middle-class burgher wanted to flee the drabness of it all. Indulging in this desire, he dreamed of exotic paradises on South Sea Islands...Samuel Bourne, for instance, did not want to end his days in a bank in Nottingham and set out for the source of the Ganges instead. Francis Frith was so disgusted with his shopkeeper's lot in Liverpool that he dragged his darkroom fifteen hundred miles up the Nile, all the way to the Fifth Cataract. And William Henry Jackson left provincial Troy, New York, for the wilds of California. (Adam 11,12)

The first photographers to both create stereograms AND travel across the U.S. making and selling tourist views were the Langenheim brothers, who incidentally created these views as stereo cards beginning in 1854 (Getty). Stereo viewing entered the Europe's mainstream during

the exhibition at London's Crystal Palace in 1851. The viewing instruments were revolutionized, improved upon, democratized and popularized just as the adopted stereo photographing and printing methods of the calotype negative, albumen print, and commercially manufactured dual-lens cameras. "From the 1860s onward no Victorian household could be without its set of stereocards. In 1865 the London Stereoscopic Company sold half a million pictures by convincing its customers that every home required its stereoscope." (Adam 388) The middle class daydreamer could now relax in a chair and visit the Great Pyramids, the Rio Grande, and Niagara Falls via the family stereo viewer with imagery brought to you by some of photo history's biggest names; Napoleon Sarony, Francis Frith, William Henry Jackson, and Eadweard Muybridge, to name a few.

As the popularity of the stereoscope grew, embedded were the cultural side effects of the trend.

Brochures touted the apparatus as capable of introducing glaciers and rivers, great monuments and exotic cities right into people's houses, thereby providing invaluable entertainment for young and old alike. Once lined up in pubs like pinball machines, stereoscopes generated, among other things, an epidemic of wanderlust, which only a few could satisfy. Stereographs offered escape from the boredom of everyday life into a dreamworld, however unattainable. (Adams 388)

This "virtual tourist experience" that is the heritage of stereo viewing manifests as the vital force in my body of work. Pookie leads herself on expeditions to the far reaches of resampled geography in the name of science and enlightenment, and the viewer follows.

Stereo viewing is a deeply rooted part of my own history of playing. I didn't grow up in the shadows of the Viewmaster factory, but as an only child, I had close relationships with these "single user" toys. I recall quite clearly how the scenes were constructed with doll furniture, the figures hand crafted, and the color palette candied and spring fresh. I studied the details for hours, fascinated by the Astroturf surrounding Peter Cotton Tail butting up to a painted scenic

backdrop, or the flaky fake snowglobe snow climbing up Rudolph's little legs and the awkward folding of “real life” fabric on Santa. It was a complete trip to the Hawaiian Islands, a hula girl greets 1960's white nuclear family “click” a volcano erupts “click” you are standing at a look-out point enjoying layers of 3-D hibiscus and lush flora and beyond is the Technicolor Pacific. I toured through the old standards of Disney cartoon movies, the Viewmaster version more clearly recountable than the film. The highlights of each movie came in a multi-reel pack to be viewed in sequence (or not) and (here is the kicker) the flora, fauna, furniture and figurines were all sculpted in *actual* 3-D. Walt Disney's brand of Cinderella reels, produced in 1965 by the company were not clips from the cartoon, but tiny scale models! Frame 3, reel 2, titled “...and the girl's rags into a gown complete with glass slippers” depicts an elaborate white pumpkin carriage atop the green sandpaper of model railroad scenery. In the foreground, an upside down, dried full-scale prairie grass pokes into the frame as a small-scale weeping willow tree.

In fact, it was a personal quest to unlock the repressed memories of my visual heritage that led me to begin creating *The Adventures of Pookie MaGee*. Charles Baudelaire, who wrote much on the joy of disengaging from adult life to enjoy one's senses, marveled at the child's ability to absorb visual details. Visual details from childhood are what shape the adult life (how true!). He writes,

(a child) is possessed in the highest degree the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial. Let us go back, if we can, by a retrospective effort of the imagination, towards our most youthful, our earliest impressions, and we will recognize that they had a strange kinship with those brightly colored impressions...The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always drunk. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs from color...But genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will- a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood's capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated. (Baudelaire 8)

Before I knew anything about the project that was to unfold, I was chasing a very specific image I remember from my youth, that I was sure came from a book. I had the image of a photographed Easter scene diorama, with a specific toy chick walking, fondant looking flowers on the fake green grass. The aesthetic was “vintage” and bright. I had that little ingot of remembrance and I wanted it back! I combed the children's book sections of the internet and bounced ideas off the librarians. I was looking for circa 1960's candy colored Claymation, photo illustrated children's books- the kind of imagery I grew up drooling over. Somewhere, someone finally said, “You mean like old Viewmaster reels?” Yes that was it. I want to make those. Incidentally, I did make The Adventures of Pookie MaGee into Viewmaster reels at first. But I traded the “delivery system” for a bigger, better viewing method that allowed for larger images and none of the giant pesky omnipresent dust speckles you'll notice in a Viewmaster. Image lusciousness trumped authenticity.

The technique for creating the imagery requires many steps. My inspiration begins subconsciously and then becomes purposeful. I gather and collect interesting imagery and kitsch to photograph and file in my digital database, and often that is where the birth of an episode's concept will begin. Photo illustrated science, geography and interior decorating books from the 1960's and 1970's contain the bulk of the reappropriated images now found in The Adventures of Pookie MaGee. I immediately respond to the unharmonious color combinations found in such material, and the dated feel of the color separation of the printing processes of that time. I will photograph anything that strikes me as dazzling or useful and it could be one image that shapes the direction of an episode. I then storyboard the sequence, loosely following the traditional narrative structure. Prop gathering and building come next and that process lasts until the episodes are complete. Mediums I favor for this step include screen-printed objects on paper, modeling clay, paper mâché, prefabricated toys that I drastically alter with both additive and

subtractive sculpting, and various thrift store accoutrement. Next, I photograph my model and any props in front of a white backdrop. Digital montaging comes next, where I use Photoshop to create each photographic collage and then lay the images out and adjust them, pixel by pixel, into stereo. This entire process is a synthesis of playing, serendipitous innovation and creative exploration in my home studio, where my technique actually becomes the concept behind Pookie and even an influence for the character Pookie's behavior.

In tandem with my relating the virtual tourist traditions of the stereograph to Pookie MaGee, there are similarities in the 19th century period's fine art motifs as well. “Themes that characterize the other visual arts in America during this period, including neoclassicism, romanticism, the sublime, the New Woman, the mythologizing of the American West, spiritualism, and a fascination for the exotic.” (Hack) The themes Hack lists were often told using characters and symbols to convey moral or abstract ideas in a story. The 19th century viewer had access to the literal and the symbolic meaning of pictorial narratives because they were indoctrinated to process these allegories as the major broadcasts or forms of communication that is art's purpose during that time. *In The Adventures of Pookie MaGee*, the main character, Pookie, is a symbol used to tell my stories. Although not an object with an already prescribed meaning, like a calla lily or an eagle, her character is the appropriated vessel I can animate to project my desires and delusions through storytelling.

The Adventures of Pookie MaGee is an allegory of my own life in experiences, memories, desires and fantasies. Daily I practice the generalized concept of channeling the strength and spirit of my ancestors, photographic and actual. A large portion of the character of Pookie is an amalgam of my grandmothers and me. I bring to the work my paternal grandmother's sense of child-like delight over the smallest discoveries. I remember her high pitched, free-wheeling spontaneity, constant operatic singing, her dated, embarrassing clothes, her fearlessness in public

places (also embarrassing), her stubborn devil-may-care approach to certain challenges, her “oh well who cares” approach to others. As a child I remember her days were free and often we whimsically pursued some activity with her bevy of like-minded friends. Flea markets, cafeterias, museums, day trips, overnight trips, botanical gardens, Hiesey Glass events (her favorite study), historical sites, every plantation along the James River, plays, dinner parties, luncheons, brunches and the ever so much fun **errands**.

My memories of my maternal grandma begin when we became friends as I became an adult. She took photography very seriously. She was a world traveling archeological scientist, lecturing, writing articles and writing her third book in the months before she died. *Pookie Does Archeology* follows that specific allegory. Pookie discovers a daguerreotype of her ancestor holding a red pom-pom, and sets out to find the red pom-pom. She conducts a dig, finds similar artifacts and uses a diving rod to discover the holy grail of red pom-poms, there by cracking the mystery of her ancestry and posing with the pom-pom for her own photo. *The Adventures of Pookie MaGee* is a play starring all the wonderful things I have divined from spirit of my heritage, visual and personal. What Pookie does, how she acts, what she wears, where she goes, and the discovery, invention, innovation are all nods to the influences of my grandmothers.

The concept of play is another major theme. As I channel my adult feelings into Pookie (see above), it is really the escapist purpose of the act of playing where the Pookie project serves a truly important purpose. Pookie is an adult, but Pookie plays- a contradiction? Typically yes. Adults must behave like adults. A few years ago I was the exclusive babysitter for whip-smart, tack-sharp, 5 year old man-child Charlie Dean. He knew me as “Pickles MaGee”, an Amelia Bedilia type character I put on and his biggest complaint about me was that I was too childish. He would be the waiter, chef, owner and diner of his restaurant, The Sparkling Rock (or The Spawkwing Wok, phonetically) and I would play the same roles in my restaurant, Dreadful

Place. That was a fleeting *taste* of the play I desire. My life's work is not to play with children, but to play *as* a child. It is I who plays during the making of each image, yes, but as I engage viewers in the spectacle and the story their suspension of disbelief is the ultimate playful exchange.

Just as I imagine some psych therapies that use dolls to act “as if” and Kelli Connell's photographs of a model playing characters are portraits of her, I use a character and a platform I've created for similar purposes- to play (“Double Life”). Jean Piaget (1896- 1980) was a psychologist who pioneered numerous fields in modern psychology, most notably cognitive development in children. He structured the intellectual development of children into a complex and much studied chronological system of four stages of which I can identify *The Adventures of Pookie MaGee* with one. The Preoperational Period contains stages and sub-stages, but includes the age span from 2 to 7 years old. During this period, children learn through imitation and playing with objects intuition and symbolic structuring. Piaget observed children in the early years of this stage constantly exercise concepts of “animism” and “magical thinking”. Piaget urges these activities are integral in the brain's development. Animism is the belief that inanimate objects are alive. Magical thinking, to simplify, is living based on one's own superstitious beliefs. Karma and OCD doorknob touching are examples of mature magical thinking modes. Both of these terms are the adult assignment to what Piaget observed happening naturally in the Preoperational Period- playing. (Piaget) The element of play in *The Adventures of Pookie MaGee* can be deconstructed into both of these marks of childhood discovery. Pookie's world is filled with *only* inanimate objects. Even the trees and mountains are halftone reproductions she frolics in front of. Her friends are all toys. In the series *Pookie Is A Practitioner Of Science*, she spots an actual kitty-cat by the river and promptly snatches a sample of it's DNA to begin her lengthy magic transformation creating her idealized version of the pet- one with two paper mache heads

on a plush frog body wearing a pink polka dotted neck tie. In the story, her vision is complete, and they happily run through the fields holding hands.

If I psychoanalyze myself, Sigmund Freud would suggest this would be his very own trademarked phenomenon, “transference”. (Hall) The phenomenon is defined as “the redirection of feelings and desires and especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood toward a new object.” Perhaps Freud was observing in adults what Piaget observed in children, the animating of things, giving them “life”. An early inspiration of mine, Wayne Thiebaud, cites the phenomenon of “transference” as the basis of his act of painting desirous objects. (Thiebaud, 46) Pink layer cakes and gumballs are the child-like objects of desire that he sculpts from gooey textural paint, playfully subverting the tradition of his medium to get the yummy treat food he wants. Similarly, I “subvert” this photographic medium to achieve the most vivid translation of my acting out the need for limitless adventure in a safe, controlled Candyland. There is no “decisive moment” or record of a slice of real time as the medium once dictated- these scenes are fabrications of times that never existed. The once holy photographic print surface is illusionistically without surface in 3-D, but becomes a holographic shadow box.

J.R.R. Tolkien was an early academic cheerleader of escapism, fantasy and play. He staunchly believed in the importance of fairy tales as a freeing societal necessity! A review of Tolkien's manifesto, *Tree and Leaf* can summarize:

The subject matter of fairy-stories – Faerie - is an expression of our hopes and desires. The folk of Faerie ‘put on the pride and beauty that we would fain wear ourselves,’ the magic of Faerie satisfies ‘certain primordial human desires’ - to ‘survey the depths of space and time,’ to ‘hold communion with other living things.’ Such stories ‘open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself.’ (Yolton, 566)

Tolkien describes his own “transference” into his fairy allegories. Tolkien used his Faeries much like I use Pookie- in fact when I insert Pookie instead of Faerie in the passage, the exchange is seamless.

The act of *playing* out stories, ideas, emotions, the permission to be irrational or fantastical and animating non-human things (toys) or human things (actors) is a completely transgressive experience. Pookie is a vessel to animate the living spirit of my childhood, and tell hybrid tales of my fantasy, desire and history. Bye-Bye adult realities! Pookie MaGee is taking us (me) back to (my) childhood to the age of untethered innovation, discovery, expedition and invention!

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