
Art Play and War Toys

An Interview with Brian McCarty

Brian McCarty is a photographer, Fulbright specialist, board member for the International Toy Research Association (ITRA), and the executive director of War Toys—a nonprofit organization founded in 2019, based on a photo series about children’s experiences of war that captures the severe effects of trauma and displacement on these young survivors. He assembled a team including experts in expressive therapy, childhood development, human rights, and toy design and manufacturing that continues the advocacy begun during the photo series and that develops new programs. Before founding War Toys, McCarty spent twenty years working with some of the bigger names in the toy industry, including Mattel, Hasbro, Disney, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon. His unique photography has been exhibited by museums, acquired by prominent collectors, and reviewed in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, *Wired*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Reuters*, and other publications. He has appeared on CNN, NPR, Fox News, *PBS News Hour*, BBC World Service, and *ABC World News* and given talks at the Carter Presidential Library, New School, Sesame Workshop, Brown University, USC Keck School of Medicine, TEDx, and the American University of Beirut.

American Journal of Play: Tell us about where you grew up and how you played as a child?

Brian McCarty: I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and in true Gen-X fashion, my childhood play most often centered on Star Wars, Hot Wheels, Transformers, G.I. Joe, and especially LEGO sets and Adventure People. As much as I enjoyed playing characters from movies and cartoons, I most loved toys that were full of character but didn’t already have a predetermined set of rules or motivations. I felt freer to create my own imagined worlds without limitations—or squabbling over whether or not Han Solo would indeed ride a dinosaur in space if the opportunity presented itself (of course he would, duh).

AJP: How did your childhood play experiences influence your work as an artist?

McCarty: My childhood was challenging at times, and long before I understood anything about play therapy, I learned to use play organically as a tool to understand better the world around me. An early example involves one of the first, modern mass shootings in the United States.

In 1984 on the morning of July 19, front pages across the country were filled with photographs of eleven-year-olds David Delgado and Omarr Hernández dead, next to their BMX bikes. They had been gunned down in front of a McDonalds in San Ysidro, California, while riding to get strawberry milkshakes, killed along with nineteen others. It was a few days before my tenth birthday, and I couldn't stop looking at the photos, trying to understand not just the massacre but also who took these pictures and why. Imagining being there with a camera made the event more accessible and therefore less scary.

I saved the front page of the paper for a few days, until my mother discovered the clippings and made me throw them away, scolding me and explaining that I shouldn't be thinking about things like this. Instead, I was told to play with the Kodak 110 camera that I had just gotten for my birthday. With fresh fantasies of being a photojournalist and questions about San Ysidro still swirling in my mind, I started staging my toys and re-creating the tragedy through the camera lens. Well, through the viewfinder, anyway. I hadn't quite figured out how photography worked yet, but I had found a way to explore these taboo topics without ending up grounded or worse. To most outside observers, I was just playing with my toys. In reality, I was filtering the world around me into smaller, safer bites and using the camera to reenact and explore everyday life with a degree of separation.

Playing photojournalist with my toys, I spent hours looking through the viewfinder, living in the mirror world that I built within the frame, and trying to find more understanding for the world at large. In the years that followed, what began as a coping mechanism became a purposeful approach—using the posed pantomime of toys to explore memories and re-create actual events through a filter of play.

AJP: There is obviously a close relationship between your art and playthings. How did toys become such an important part of your work?

McCarty: As a child, toys were the perfect subjects for my early, fumbling experiments with photography. My crude snapshots of blurry action figures slowly evolved into photographs of elaborate, narrative scenes, constructed through the lens on tabletop sets. I spent countless hours in an impromptu

studio, cobbled together from found materials in a storage shed off of my mother's garage.

Eager to pursue a formal education, I skipped a year of high school and headed off to Parsons School of Design in New York City. Like all students, I dabbled in various styles and subjects, but I kept returning to toys. By the end of my sophomore year, I accepted that these seemingly silly playthings were how I connected with the world around me, and I dedicated myself to pursuing a toy-based vision with my photography. It hasn't been the easiest path to take, demanding a deep commitment to my work and to learning everything I could from each twist and turn. As validating as it was to hear French President François Hollande praise the work I did for UNICEF, I probably learned more from ISIS stealing one of my photos for an online propaganda piece. It's been an interesting ride so far.

AJP: What exactly is the Art-Toy movement?

McCarty: In a nutshell, the Art-Toy movement treats toy design and manufacturing as an artistic medium. It started in Hong Kong in the late 1990s, when designers like Michael Lau and Eric So used the same factories and manufacturing techniques as mainstream toy companies to create collectible toy lines that expressed their personal vision, blazing a trail for others to follow. Artists from around the world began self-producing their own toys, and soon after, new toy companies like STRANGEco, Critterbox, and Kidrobot actively recruited well-known Lowbrow, Pop Surrealist, and Graffiti artists to create original, experimental works that became immensely popular. The financial collapse of 2008 dramatically changed the landscape, forcing companies to close or survive by moving more mainstream, most often into licensed products. Super7 and Funko have done this very successfully, using some of the aesthetic and ironic irrelevance of art toys to bring new life to old (and new) properties. However, I still long for the golden days of the movement and more companies working with artists and toy designers as partners, not just vendors. Until then, there are still plenty of independent artists around the world working with toys, folks like Joe Ledbetter, Amanda Visell, Truck Torrance, Andrew Bell, and Brian "KAWS" Donnelly in the United States. They are carrying the torch by continuing to create art toys that capture and communicate their personal vision.

AJP: Much of your most recent work has focused on collaborating with children who have been affected by war. How did you get started?

McCarty: After graduating Parsons in 1996, I accepted a one-year grant and

residency from the creative research center Fabrica in Italy. The center was built by Benetton and helmed by photographer Oliverio Toscani in the wake of major museum exhibitions featuring his controversial work for the fashion brand. Blurring the lines between art, advertising, and activism, I split my time between collaborative commissions for clients like MTV and Greenpeace and independent work on personal projects for museum exhibitions and public installations. Through Fabrica, I was invited to participate in *KON©EPT*, a group photo exhibition in Zagreb, Croatia—the first in the aftermath of that country’s war for independence.

Given the postwar setting, I was reminded of a conversation I’d had years before with my father about his experiences serving in Vietnam. He never shared much, but once, to satisfy my childhood curiosity, he revived memories of playing with tin soldiers and toy guns as a child himself. Throughout, he remembered being fed stories about the hero dad he never knew who died in World War II. Now embittered, my father saw it all as indoctrination, fueling a belief that he was meant to fight and carry his father’s legacy. Remembering our conversation, I began to see war toys as both cultural influencers and artifacts, as well as tools to gain understanding for my father’s experiences. The study that I produced for *KON©EPT* focused on a Vietnam-era action figure narratively posed on location to re-create wartime events described by my father in letters he wrote home to my mother. The seeds of a bigger project began to take root.

The concept grew over the next fifteen years, fueled by lessons learned during recovery from my own childhood trauma. Art therapy had become an important tool, and through it, I saw a way to work safely and ethically with war-affected children—to invite them to share their stories under the guidance of a therapist. To contextualize their accounts, I would re-create them using locally sourced toys narratively placed and posed at the actual locations. It all sounded great in theory, but organizations working with these children were understandably reluctant. “Hi, you don’t know me. I’m a toy photographer. Can I work with traumatized kids under your care?” It was a tough sell.

Were it not for Paul Vester—then cochair of the Experimental Animation Department at the California Institute of the Arts—the project might have never gotten off the ground. He took it upon himself to connect me personally with the director of Spafford Children’s Center in East Jerusalem, and in 2011, they invited me to work with their team of therapists. The

resulting photographs justified the unusual approach of using art therapy to collaborate with war-affected children, and the work earned coverage from CNN and other outlets. That early validation made it possible to continue growing the project.

In the thirteen years since, I've re-created hundreds of children's accounts of war from the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, often during times of escalated conflict. The work has been the most challenging of my career, but I couldn't be prouder of the impact it's had so far.

AJP: Art and play therapy are at the center of this work. Can you tell us about the role they play with children who have been affected by war?

McCarty: I've worked with Beirut-based art therapist Myra Saad since 2014, and watching her conduct sessions with war-affected children is nothing short of amazing. Myra grew up internally displaced by wars in Lebanon, and as a result, she understands these kids and their unique needs in a very profound way. She became an art therapist because nonverbal communication is often the best approach to working with traumatized children and adults. Some events, some feelings are so big that they can't be expressed in words, especially by kids. Children's cognitive abilities develop faster than their communication skills, so while they may have the same memories and feelings as adults, kids simply cannot talk about them in the same way. Creative expression, guided by a specialized therapist, bridges the gap and helps trauma survivors communicate and process their experiences when words fail.

In our art therapy-based interviews, even though children are sharing unimaginable horrors, they leave the sessions with big smiles and waves. It's miraculous to witness, and it demonstrates the effectiveness of art therapy approaches when practiced by an expert. However, we are very careful to point out that we are not actually providing therapy to these children. Therapy is confidential, never intended to be shared. And more importantly, therapy takes time to make a real, lasting impact. We're lucky if we get to see these kids more than once (or are even able find them again).

Total sidebar, but I tell this story to illustrate how difficult it can be to keep track of children in war zones. In 2017 Myra and I were working in Iraq with children under the care of Terre des Hommes Italia (TdH), a nongovernmental organization dedicated to protecting children's rights and well-being. In one interview session, a young girl shared a heartbreaking

account of discovering that her entire family had been executed by ISIS while she was at her grandmother's house. She made a drawing showing the moment when she first saw them and even pointed out where each had been shot. Despite sharing this, because the sessions are so carefully designed, the girl was smiling by the end. When asked the typical question about what she wanted to be when she grows up, the girl replied that she wanted to be Myra—she wanted to be an art therapist!

When we returned to Iraq in 2018, we spent some time trying to track her down, working through the NGO and UN camp administration, but we had zero luck. We heard conflicting stories that she had returned to Mosul with her parents, but we knew that couldn't be right. Or could it? We thought that maybe she was sharing an emotional truth through a made-up story, but it felt so real to us both. After hitting dead end after dead end, we gave up looking for her. But then, she showed up to an interview session at a totally different camp many miles away! Myra had a chance to speak with her privately to gently investigate, and it turns out that the girl had been taken in by her aunt and uncle after her family was murdered. They were so afraid of losing her to the very formidable wartime bureaucracy that her aunt and uncle simply claimed she was their daughter, which foiled our searches. The girl told Myra that we are the only people who know the truth, but she saw a chance to share the story of her family with the world. She wanted them to be remembered, especially her little brother. We take this responsibility very seriously.

AJP: What role have you played during these therapy sessions?

McCarty: I am purely an observer in our group interview sessions. At the beginning, the therapist introduces me and explains that I'm there to hear the children's stories and share them with people around the world. What type of story is intentionally kept vague, and the therapist will emphasize that it can be about anything. This is to counteract the children's natural impulse to please an authority figure. If asked directly about their experiences of war, children are prone to oversharing and retraumatizing themselves to receive validation and praise from adults. By keeping the questions open-ended, we get a lot of stories that are tangential to war, like about a cat that comes to a child's tent, but those can be just as revealing and powerful as accounts of violence. We value everything that the children choose to share and let them know this.

The therapist will next show carefully selected examples of previous

work with war-affected children. She'll explain more about the process before taking the kids through warm-up exercises and onto the actual interview, followed by a cool down and chance to process feelings.

During the sessions, it's impossible to absorb everything, so I film and record all that I can. The therapist and I go through the collected drawings one by one immediately after the children leave and document every detail of what they've shared. It's not enough just to see a finished drawing. To really understand, you have to be an active observer, making note of the order in which things are drawn, and asking the right questions while the child is working. At the end of the day, the therapist and I again go through all of the drawings while reviewing video to make sure that we didn't miss anything in the moment. Almost like an inoculation, it's become normal to utterly breakdown after the first day of interviews and then be okay for the remainder of the trip, relatively speaking. These stories can be a lot to carry.

AJP: You've done this work with children and therapists across the world. Have you found any commonalities in children's experiences?

McCarty: Looking at children's drawn accounts of war, it's nearly impossible to tell where each drawing is from or even when they were made. The occasional flag and depictions of specific military equipment provide hints, but regardless of whether it's a jet or a biplane in the sky, the stories are essentially the same. War is universally horrible, as are its effects on children. A traumatized child easily becomes an angry adult, fueling cycles of violence that span generations and keep us stuck, endlessly repeating history.

Thinking back on my own history and the universality of children's perspectives, I'm interested in including the stories of kids like Joshua Coleman—the third BMX boy who survived San Ysidro by playing dead next to the bodies of his two best friends. In the forty years since the massacre, Josh has become less of a rarity, and many children in the United States experience levels of violence that are comparable to what other children face in recognized war zones. With enough time and resources, I intend to expand War Toys into a global survey of how all children experience armed violence. Given what I've already seen, I don't expect to find a lot of variation. From East Mosul to South Chicago, the Mediterranean Sea to the Darién Gap, children's experiences and the toys with which they play are all too similar.

AJP: Have you also found significant differences across cultures?

McCarty: When I started this work, the cultural differences seemed massive.

After all these years, I don't see them anymore. Obviously, languages and landscapes can feel worlds apart, but beneath a very thin veneer, we're all just people. The true, unmistakable differences I found are socioeconomic, exacerbated by xenophobia and racism. For example, children displaced from country X will have access to psychosocial support, schooling, clean water, health care, and housing. Whereas children from country Y will have none of that, and instead of school, they have to work farmland to keep their families fed. This disparity perpetuates itself—holding country Y back for generations, fueling more wars, and falsely confirming the xenophobic and racist beliefs that were used to deny proper aid in the first place. “Those people are just more violent,” some will say. It's a complete fallacy. The only real differences are between the haves and have nots.

AJP: Over the course of this work, what have you learned about toys and the toy market?

McCarty: Being a bona fide toy geek, one of my favorite things about War Toys is that it gives me the chance to see what the toy market is really like around the world. I feel like the Anthony Bourdain of toy shopping sometimes, prop hunting everywhere from flea markets in Kyiv to open-air bazaars in Mosul. The biggest thing I've learned is just how much inexpensive, generic toys utterly dominate the market outside of the West. Plus, there are some wonderfully terrible bootlegs out there. That is, unless Disney Consumer Products actually greenlit the *Frozen*-branded tank that I picked up in Iraq.

As unintentionally funny as the counterfeits may be, their prevalence reveals a simple, challenging truth: apart from bootlegs, mainstream brands are economically inaccessible to most children outside Western markets. Even if we could magically stop all counterfeits, it wouldn't lead to a wind-fall of sales for Mattel in Iraqi Kurdistan. Very few people there can afford even the most basic Barbie doll. I managed to find one store in the entire region that sells them, and it was inside a luxury mall in Erbil, accessible only to the most privileged locals. The average Iraqi shops in open-air bazaars are filled with some of the cheapest of the cheap toys from China, or in many places, with secondhand toys that have been collected by U.S. and European Union charities and sold by the kilo to local distributors. The market simply cannot support anything else, and it's very much the same in huge parts of the world.

AJP: Are there things the toy industry could be doing differently?

McCarty: There are so many things, but at the top of my list is addressing eco-

conomic disparity. I know that a lot of companies have experimented with lower-cost versions of their mainline products. For example, Playmates Toys made some Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles figures a few years ago with more basic articulation and simplified decoration for down-market consumers, and I thought they were brilliantly designed. I strongly encourage more of that, but it's a drop in the bucket compared to what's actually needed.

The challenge is that there just isn't that much money to be made, at least not in the short term. Toys created for the lowest levels of the market typically need very long lifespans to be profitable for manufacturers, and the margins are tiny. That's a tough sell when we're all worried about next quarter's sales and meeting those revenue projections to keep the investors happy. It's going to take a shift in thinking and reprioritizing social impact over revenue for down-market consumers. This shift is also the best path I see to actually curtailing counterfeits. For example, by rewarding factories participating in the Ethical Supply Chain Program with heavily discounted royalties on products specifically designed for this level of the market, a toymaker and intellectual property holder could undermine the bootleggers and retake control of its brand while helping disadvantaged children have access to better toys.

AJP: What is War Toys?

McCarty: War Toys is a fantastically stupid name for a nonprofit organization devoted to helping children and promoting peace. Or so I've been told, anyway. A lot. However, the bristling just confirms that the board and I made the right decision. I've taken a page from Benetton and am using lessons learned from my time at Fabrica while developing the early photo series. Although Benetton's famous ad of human hearts labeled, "white, black, yellow," might be just a tad inappropriate for children, there is so much to gain from acknowledging and confronting difficult truths head on. War toys exist. They've existed for as long as human civilization has. Good or bad, right or wrong, they are as ever present as war itself, leading to endless debates over whether the chicken or the egg came first. Does war play fuel war? It's an uncomfortable, likely unanswerable question that has been overly politicized in recent years, torpedoing opportunities for more serious and nuanced discussion. I get it. No one wants to find themselves in the crosshairs of a cultural war, but while actual wars are raging around the world, maybe we all should be a little more brave.

I founded War Toys to grow peace by confronting war, not just its symptoms. Meaning, it's not enough to help war-affected children, as much as that remains a cornerstone of the organization. We know that we have to help people truly understand war for peace to have a chance. As the philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam said in the sixteenth century, "War is sweet to those who haven't tasted it." By suppressing all meaningful discussion and play, war becomes a misunderstood, forbidden fruit and a seemingly easy solution to the world's problems. To counteract these notions, we are mounting exhibitions and public installations to share children's firsthand accounts of war in ways that are accessible and appropriate for most audiences. More than that, we also are giving parents and care givers better tools to educate children and, in the process, working to reshape the lowest levels of the toy industry.

AJP: Can you tell us about your photojournalist Army Men project?

McCarty: War Toys' entire toy industry program began with a seemingly simple idea: we should add a photojournalist to bags of little green army men. That tiny change can create huge ripple effects—giving kids more play options than "us versus them" while subtly promoting more peaceful ideals like freedom of the press.

I had seen the exact same toys everywhere from Beirut to Baltimore and, understanding that they come from a single source, saw an opportunity. If we just give these generic toymakers better designs, we can harness existing markets to positively influence play patterns on a global scale. Everyone wins.

A strategy developed based on research supported by Fulbright and the U.S. Department of State. First, identify extremely low-cost generic toys that are widely distributed and successful in the global market. Second, look for ways to introduce market friendly changes to these toys to enhance their inherent play patterns and promote social impact. Third, take on the costs of developing and designing those improvements. Fourth, partner with factories making these toys and give them gratis use of our designs and production tools. (To be clear, we do not accept royalties. Factories pay us nothing). Fifth, with no licensing fees or additional overhead, toymakers are able to preserve the same, extremely low-price points, making the toys accessible to the most children worldwide. Sixth, over time and with our marketing support, partnered manufacturers gain advantage over their competition, grabbing more and more market share and increasing our

impact. Seventh, rinse and repeat. With this approach, we are fostering changes that will likely stay within the global market for generations, all for incredibly little cost to us.

The photojournalist project has grown into a proof of concept for the program, and instead of one figure, there are now twelve. We've created a series of noncombatant army men—combat photojournalists, frontline rescuers, and aid workers. They are based on actual women and men known for their work on the frontlines (with their support or support from their estates). Because children aren't likely to have any understanding for this type of work, we commissioned socially conscious game designer Nashra Balagamwala to create a multilingual board game that invites children to work together as noncombatants to save civilians in a war zone, encouraging continued role play long after the game is won.

The game will be sold as a complete, stand alone set (wholesaling for around \$1.50) and as a value-added item in military play sets that include our noncombatant figures. It was designed to replace the cellophane-map play surfaces that are commonly included in these sets. Jake Sones, War Toys board member and former director of design for Warner Bros. Games, has spearheaded the development of a supporting mobile app, cutting the costs of including physical game pieces and allowing us to release the game in over thirty languages, along with additional educational content and free lesson plans for educators.

After years of development and months of talks, following face-to-face meetings with many, many skeptical factory owners in China, War Toys has secured our first manufacturing partner. Believe-Fly Science and Educational Co., Ltd. Shantou is adding our supported products to their catalog. Initial orders should start arriving by the first quarter of 2025, but we all know the challenges of accurately predicting timelines for production and shipping.

Even though they're not on shelves yet, the Young V&A in London has expressed an interest in acquiring a game set for its permanent collection. It's a welcoming early validation for such an unorthodox approach to positively influencing children's play.

AJP: Why do you think war toys like little green army men have remained popular for such a long time?

McCarty: People much smarter and more articulate than I am have written beautiful, heartfelt essays on why little green army men have endured across

generations, but there's an important piece that is frequently overlooked: *It's a Wonderful Life*. Yep, Frank Capra's 1946 film. People forget that the movie was actually a spectacular failure when it was released, so much so that no one even bothered to renew its copyright. In 1974 it entered the public domain, and television stations started using it around the holidays just to fill airtime and keep their broadcasting licenses. *It's a Wonderful Life* became the venerated classic we all know and love in the United States simply because it didn't cost the stations anything to air it, and so they did, a lot. Plastic soldiers are very similar. Many versions have essentially become public domain after the original copyright holders either gave up trying to reclaim stolen designs or went out of business. With no royalties to pay and extremely low production costs, factories turn a profit even while offering rock bottom, wholesale prices. Distributors and retailers reap the benefits, being able to offer consumers low-cost toys that still have good retail margins.

I don't want to get angry letters, so let me just say that I love plastic soldiers just as much as *It's a Wonderful Life*. However, it's important to understand the economic factors that have contributed to their enduring popularity. That understanding is at the core of our approach to influencing how children play.

AJP: There is a long history of children playing with war toys and researchers and parents debating their potential harms and benefits. As an artist, have you come to any conclusions about the impact of war play?

McCarty: The long and short of it is that I believe that we've thrown the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to war play. In an effort to stop glorifying war to children, we've made any realistic depictions completely taboo. However, play fighting has never been more popular or more promoted. It's just been sanitized and decoupled from the realities of war, obliterating a host of educational opportunities in the process. I present *Fortnite* as exhibit A. Brilliantly fun as the game is, it makes violence goofy and consequence free while overtly fetishizing weapons of war. To me, that is far more problematic than realistic war play, where children have to contend with more human complexity. I'm not advocating for a *Fortnite* ban, just more balance.

War exists, and evidence strongly suggests that it's something fundamental to human nature. With that in mind, shouldn't we figure out ways to educate our children, allow them to act out normal, explorative behaviors,

and provide them the understanding needed to overcome and grow past our instincts? Peace isn't just the absence of war. It's a willful rejection of it. And it takes work. Burying our heads in the sand won't make the world more peaceful. But confronting war will.

AJP: What are you working on next?

McCarty: As always, we're working on putting together more field collaborations with war-affected children. Funding and logistics are our biggest challenges, but we are currently developing programs in Central Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the United States.

With the noncombatant army men and board game entering production, we have next set our sights on improving the diversity of dollhouse families that are sold worldwide in very inexpensive playsets. I've photographed the exact same, very White, very Western-looking family everywhere that War Toys has worked. Similar to varieties of army men, the families are treated as open source and used by a number of manufacturers without limitation. We see a golden opportunity to foster changes that will be far reaching and impact millions of children. The puzzle is finding the right combination of sculpts, paint masks, and plastic tints to give manufacturers easy affordable options for increasing ethnic and cultural representation.

Obviously, dollhouse families are not war toys, so this may seem to conflict with our mission. However, this project addresses the massive disparity that is rooted in old conflicts and the legacy of colonialism. Western toymakers have made great strides in improving diversity and representation, but without the same economic incentives and resources, generic toymakers have been left far behind. The kids they serve deserve the same quality of play as their more privileged peers, and War Toys will give them the opportunity by making tiny, strategic investments—working as an ally to the industry.