

HYPERALLERGIC

Boyz 2 Men: A Detroit Artist's Sonic Youth

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Matt Zacharias, "Rock Star Plan" (2012), mixed media, 60 x 240 inches (all images courtesy the artist)

I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection. —Sigmund Freud
So much iconic American literature portrays, often humorously, neglected or badly treated boys doggedly tracking down adventure (Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, Nick Adams). For these protagonists, play is not a luxury but a lifeline.

Matt Zacharias' episodic, mixed-media exhibition *Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth* is just such a journey. The show starts off with a search for dad, or at least for things solid and male, but winds up somewhere else.

Zacharias explores television, toys, the military and music with a kineticism that rivals the wanderings of Huck, Tom and Nick across the rivers, forests and fields of the American wilderness. The show's title recalls Tolstoy's coming-of-age collection, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, which contrasts the young narrator's innocence with his development of social consciousness, articulating a mixture of naive emotions as well as a growing, gnawing awareness of class difference. Tolstoy referred to the work as "an awkward mixture" but, as with much youthful expression, its ungainliness is its charm. The writing communicates an authentic vulnerability.

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In a blend of autobiography and fabrication, Zacharias offers up a nimble mix of yearning, action and confusion through various stages of a young male's formative years. The show taps into thorny, youthful discomfort in ways that are raw, funny and sad.

Throughout three of the four works (all 2012) is a silhouette of a running, trench-coated man named Conscientious Objector. The figure is a reference to the artist's experience in the Navy, which he left after fulfilling three years of a six-year contract. In his own mind he left as a Conscientious Objector, but not according to the Navy, which discharged him as "Other Than Honorable."



Matt Zacharias, "Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth" (2012), mixed media, 84 x 80 inches

The four works in the show provide the viewer with the artist's evolving narrative, starting with the triptych, "Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth." This deftly balanced collage includes: pages from TV Guide; buff-looking GI Joes in dynamic combat poses, along with items from their accessory kits (masks, vests, flippers); carefully groomed TV characters (Starsky and Hutch, and James T. West from *The Wild, Wild West*, which was billed by its network as "James Bond on horseback"); images of actual soldiers, including the artist's Navy ID photo and his former company commander.

The collage conveys a genuine, if desperate, aspiration to connect with these figures and activities, despite their prospect of emptiness. The disconnect is underscored by the friction between the objects (bike, car, guns), which point toward the right, and the ever-present Conscientious Objector in the

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lower section of each panel, who heads left. His presence and direction function as a visual and thematic resistance to dead and/or bad ends.



Matt Zacharias, "Flipbook, Volume II (pages 60-95)" (2012), mixed media, 86 x 132 inches

In the third work, "C.O. Accessory Kit," the artist homes in on something specific and meticulously, obsessively, focuses on it. Zacharias constructs an exact replica of a GI Joe kit but six times the original size. Under the GI Joe logo ("America's *movable* fighting man"), the box reads "Conscientious Objector® G-Man Disguise Kit" and includes a fake passport, replica pistol and C.O. application form. The GI Joe has been transformed into a G-Man (FBI agent) who wears a C.O. disguise instead of a uniform: pressed pants, fedora and overcoat.

The fourth and largest piece, "Rock Star Plan," takes the young protagonist into his own imperfect but private, laid-back space: the teenage bedroom, that intensely individual place used to search for and try on a variety of identities, where big and small things brew/happen. Dreams of sex, rock stardom, adventure, perhaps even true love. Posters of singers and bands (The Who, The Clash, Joni Mitchell, The Weasels, Spahn Ranch [Detroit]), images from TV shows (Star Trek, The Partridge Family),

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faded photographs of the artist and his friends, and sheets of band playlists adorn faded wallpaper. While there is no “dad” or “protection,” there are people, places and music with which to connect and prosper. For Zacharias, memory and play function as sharp therapeutic tools for disentangling the past, for pushing ahead, and for allowing a torn-up heart to mend if not completely heal.

[Matt Zacharias: Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth](#) ran from June 9 to July 7, 2012, at *Re:View Contemporary* (444 W. Willis, #112, Detroit, Michigan).



Matt Zacharias, “C.O. Accessory Kit” (2012), mixed media, 78 x 66 x 6.5 inches

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