

Sonic manhood: How Artist Matthew Zacharias talks GI Joes and coming of age

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Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth opens Saturday, June 9th at the Re:View Gallery, 444 W. Willis, Detroit; 313-833-9000, and runs through Saturday, July 7.

In the early 1990s, Matthew Zacharias was one-third of the arts collective known as AWOL, a Detroit collaborative arts collective of three visual artists, Zacharias, Greg Fadell and Pete Wardowski. AWOL was best known for making "action figure art," an impulse that was most fully realized in their short war film entitled *Max*, a six-minute masterpiece where the games of war were played out through the dramatic manipulation of GI Joe dolls.

It's no secret that the most sublime impulses of the contemporary artist are to be found in any number of backyard sandboxes scattered throughout the world. Detroit-born Zacharias is, like a child in a sandbox, reaching back into his own fractured backyard past. He's digging a hole at the base of his family tree to recast and uproot what it means to be a man, a father, a woman, a mother, a boy, a son.

In *Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth*, Zacharias uses the remembered objects from his own familial treasure chest, along with classic images appropriated from texts and music of the mid-1970s and early '80s, to tell his story in a way that only he is able to do. Zacharias' one-man show, his first, opens on Saturday, June 9, at the Re:View Gallery.

Metro Times: You work with found scraps of language, images already made, you solicit other artists and friends to paint on canvas panels that you then form/deform into your own objects. Begin by taking us through this process of appropriation and if you can address the reasons why this is your chosen method of art making?

Matthew Zacharias: In the end, I'm a collaborator. When I was in AWOL, I worked with two other artists, Greg Fadell and Peter Wardowski. This current show consists of input from over a dozen artists, engineers, and builders. I equate this collaborating process to making a film or being in a band. For the *Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth* show, Scott Allen is my chief collaborator. Allen's had his hand in all aspects of these current works. He jams.

Each of these new works is a mini-production and required different materials and areas of expertise. So, my process begins with a raw idea. From here I figure out what it will take to create-build-construct for the best end-result regardless of how minimal or over the top. So, the ideas dictate the materials, and then it's all about doing whatever it takes to get the job done. Like father & son, we do it all.

MT: Each of your works stands alone, though at the same time I can't help but get the sense that each piece is a chapter or a scene in a much bigger story? If this is true, talk of the narrative impulses in your work and why you've chosen these sets of visual objects to tell this story.

Zacharias: At University of Michigan, I studied film, so you are correct, I'm old-fashioned in a sense. I'm into a good story and appreciate the importance of narrative structure. As much as I enjoy a good story, I also appreciate not being beaten over the head with it. *Tree of Life* is a great example of a movie that tells a "story," but leaves ample room for interpretation. That's the ideal balance that I'm trying to create with these 2D-pieces. Stories are "set-up," and my hope is for the viewer to complete them with whatever baggage they bring to the table.

MT: Would it be misguided of me to say that what you're building with these images is a sort of visual memoir, a *Fight Club* for the heart of the eye?

Zacharias: Not my exact intention, but I suppose they could be seen in this way. Someone was quick to point out that I was using "pop figures" in these latest works, but this is not about pop shit, these characters are like old friends or family members. They are not random. I have an emotional connection to them all. So maybe you are right about the visual memoir deal. I like that.

MT: This work seems very personal to me. Statements such as "Mom Is Single" along with several other vignettes from the narrator's childhood. What are some of the risks taken when you place your own history at the center of the work?

Zacharias: First, everything to my eyes-ears is autobiographical. And art needs to be personal if you want it to breathe on its own. And if it's not breathing on its own, no viewer will ever respond to it. And — good or bad — I want viewers to respond. But if the works are not "real" or personal to me, how can I expect anyone else to feel it? As far as taking risks is concerned — I'd like to think that I don't have anything to lose.

MT: Describe the reaction of your ideal gallery gawker who really gets what you're doing.

Zacharias: Well, no one would know anything about what I'm doing without the opportunity to occupy a space. Simone's [DeSousa] gallery [Re:View Contemporary] is a perfect space and it's a privilege to be a part of what she has going on. She's making shit happen in Detroit. As far as the gawkers go, my hope is that people will have their own reaction to the pieces versus any kind of agenda that I'm trying to say-create-construct. My hope is that they will create their own meaning and stories based on what's riffing off of the wall.

MT: You started out as a filmmaker? Why the shift to the canvas: the silent text, the still image?

Zacharias: Still, moving, static, or whatever: it's all one big movie in my eyes. The canvases are biggie-sized storyboards for a large bowl of visual-soup. I'm a visual freak. Scott Allen is the same way. He and I will flip through magazines [for collage work] all day in the studio getting drunk off of imagery. Then we do the same with the silkscreens: playing, riffing with pictures. ... Then we play until it "works."

MT: If this show had a six-song soundtrack, what would it be?

Zacharias:

1 "Punk" Gorillaz

2 "Dumb" Nirvana

3 "Jackie Blue" Ozark Mountain Daredevils

4 "When Yer Twenty Two" Flaming Lips

5 "Open My Eyes" Nazz

6 "Let Forever Be" Chemical Brothers

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MT: *Childhood, Boyhood, Sonic Youth*: a sort of where I've been, what I've done, what I wished I'd done. What part of the bigger picture do you see yourself entering at this point of your life?

Zacharias: Hopefully, some form of "Sonic-Manhood." There is always a kind of closure, or cathartic chapter-closing that happens after a body of work is produced. The content of this show, as the title overstates, has a "coming-of-age" theme. My maturity level is a work-in-progress, but I need to keep moving forward. I can't play with GI Joe forever.

Peter Markus is an author and senior writer of the InsideOut Literary Arts Project. His most recent book of stories is *We Make Mud*. Send comments to letters@metrotimes.com.