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Just Can't Get Enough:

THE DISQUIETING WORLD OF BAILEY SCIESZKA

9/10
Bailey Scieszka

by Katie Grace

"I can never get enough of it," American artist Bailey Scieszka gushes when asked how she feels about attention. She laughs maniacally, simultaneously evoking a clown and an escapee from an insane asylum. "I get off on the praise and on hearing my work live. I put things in shows that I fantasize about, then I get off on a crowd watching me do them. Like, in this last show I had a girl in a pleather puppy mask with blond hair and as a punishment in the show I cut her blond hair off and take it with me. And that feeling of cutting blond hair off and taking it with me and laughing in front of a crowd... no one can take that from me." Murderous laughter then ensues Old Put, the clown, before I can ask follow up questions.

"Yeah, I'm Old Put. I was the biggest child hand model in the biz. During the golden days we could work our little fingers until they bled. Bled all over the paper money we made that our parents wasted on massages and pool boys. And dolls that would help them lose weight and sleep. I slept with shea butter mitts. I did all the Livestrong kid's bracelet ads."

Old Put is Scieszka's clown character, a former child hand model that is obsessed with baskets. She adds, "Baskets are just about painting daily life with objects." The show the artist refers, like her overall practice, is hard to describe: part bloodbath puppet show, part live theatre mayhem.

An erudite, twenty six year old clown, she mentions an appreciation for artist Jalal Toufic, frequenting Film Forum while living in New York, and all sorts of historical and literary tidbits throughout our conversation. The learned side of the clown — her bookshelves offer Bataille and Perec — is easy to miss amongst the candy colored distractions. Her apartment, a loft in a trendy Detroit neighborhood, is adorned with orchids, tasteful furniture, art books, and wrestling action heroes. As I look around I'm aware of the attention to detail — each conventionally arty element has a gaudy, childish counterpoint. Her interest in lowbrow culture is fascinating. One could write it off as millennial irony, but that would be shortsighted here. Her confounding earnestness — whether pertaining to WWE professional wrestling or the theatrical rap

group Insane Clown Posse (ICP) — is real and terrifying. Imagine, a Memphis Milano-loving circus clown...

Scieszka earned an undergraduate degree from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City, and a high school diploma from an elite school for gifted and talented children, The Roeper School, in Detroit's moneyed suburbs. It's telling that as a child she did theater and participated in forensic league, her parents — an artist mother and attorney father — thought it was dorky. Old Put had a much more difficult childhood, she explains, "I grew up in a puppet gun factory that crumbled and broke the family. I lived alone in a boxcar as a child. I had to do a lot of things for myself as a kid. Like cook the can of beans and make the fire. My friends were the blades of grass I eventually made my baskets out of. The popped balloon animals that littered the gutter. I don't remember no faces. All I hold in my heart is a couple of masks. Inferior quality, but their craftsmanship posses a folk charm a few suits and bow ties like to auction off to summer homes. And these childhood memories turned into dreams and the past merges in my imagination with what would be, with what could be a basket."

Scieszka is an interdisciplinary artist, but her practice is increasingly shifting toward the performative. Her first puppet show was produced via the PuppetLAB program, co-curated by Carrie Morris and Igor Gozman, at PuppetART in Detroit. She learned the basics of stagecraft from Gozman, who is co-founder of PuppetART. "The show was a big turning point for me, I learned that puppets have to be entertaining. Igor gave me a crash course in stagecraft," she says. Her first show was about a clown who made a sex doll.

I am one of the last of the living artists. They say what I do isn't real; weaving, making rotis, painting my face, fighting. But I'm real. My scars are real. I'm as real as fake. Everyday I ask the universe, 'Why was I born to be a troubled troubadour?' I'm not chasing the bright lights. I'm not chasing women. I'm chasing a childhood dream."

While at university, Scieszka wrote a novel about her principal character called, Old Put and the Brown Salads — this is back when Old P. was a "he." Upon being asked about the clown's preferred gender pronoun, she reiterates that the clown has become



a "she." "I always imagined him as an old, gay man, but lately I've been thinking of it as a girl. It's fluid." She cackles. Her synopsis of the story is appropriately surreal, "Old Put has a small dog, for whom he stages elaborate fashion shows. He owns a shoe repair shop, is obsessed with feet and shoes, and owns a (local big box store called) Meijer."



Another recent body of work is a vast collection of naïve crayon drawings. "My drawing are Old Put's fantasies," she explains. Their content draws upon many of the same leitmotifs as her performances: severed feet, fetish iconography, Rush poppers, animals in bizarre costumes, and Faygo soda. She is currently working on what she describes as, "a whole string of puppet shows." Again, as throughout our conversation, pesky Put interrupts:

"I am so creative that when I look at my baskets I don't even understand them myself. I have felt so deeply. I can see the future of basketry. Chain lamps are the new basket. Wicker cages, because they're flammable. Cutting that blonde hair was a violent act of bravery. Everybody today keeps beating this drum saying, 'be free, don't be afraid to be you' but the truth is half of us are creeps underneath."

Scieszka and I discuss Real Doll's influence for the late drag goddess, Divine, and the Japanese trend of men getting anime girls screen-printed on to pillowcases and photographing them in landscapes. Her interests are broad, but often rest at the intersection of macabre humor and the desperately sad. A lot of her fascinations are things that people associate with circus culture: trashy Americana, obnoxious colors, outsider sects, but even more often her interests are the things that people who are afraid of clowns associate with them: creepiness, fetish culture, and violence. Scieszka's work has ongoing threads that stretch from project to

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sects, but even more often her interests are the things that people who are afraid of clowns associate with them: creepiness, fetish culture, and violence. Scieszka's work has ongoing threads that stretch from project to project. She is self-reflective and smart, always interested in challenging herself to the next, weirdest thing. "I've always wanted to have a nightclub act. In my next show I sing, and I'm a bad singer.... It's becoming this kind of masturbatory thing for me. I'm just trying to live all of my fantasies now."

Old Put adds, "When you make baskets you realize life is not that scary. Living life is not hard. I have a very rich inner life. All these baskets are just products of me playing around. Everybody says they love baskets but they don't love real baskets." The clown and her mistress share something beyond their extravagant taste and star power, something I dare call sincerity.

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