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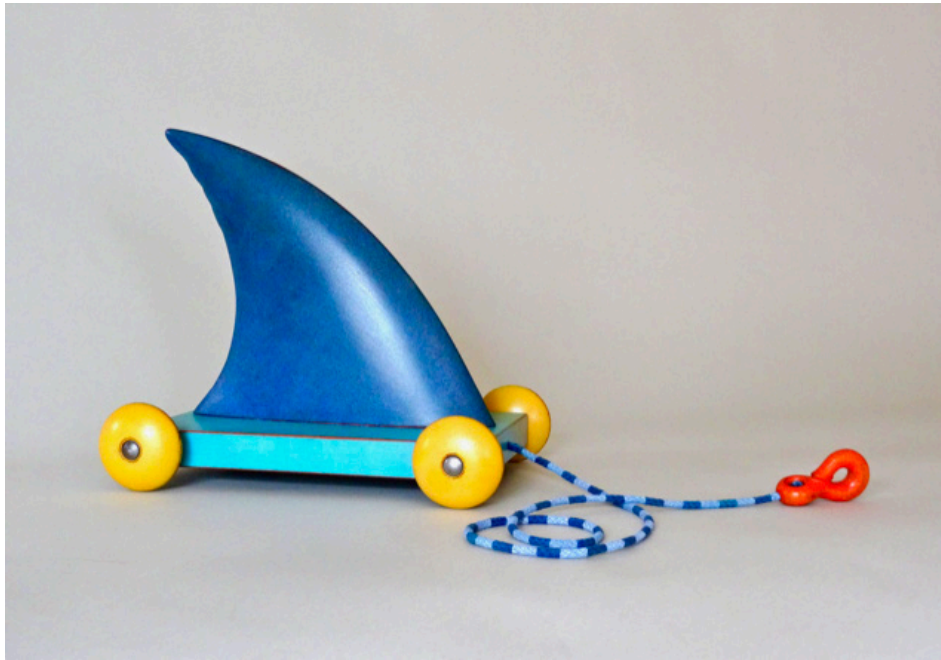
Sean O'Meallie
Head Cheese

A 25 Year Retrospective
January 21 - March 13, 2022



Sean O’Meallie, a sculptor and former toy inventor, honed his sense of whimsy while conceptualizing playthings for small children in the 1980s and 1990s. But in doing so, he began to see the possibilities of producing more mature work in place of innocent pull toys, jumping the wall of responsibility to a very young audience to explore darker alternative stories.

Shark Fin Pull Toy, 2015, painted wood, cord
Collection of Mary Berger, Colorado Springs CO



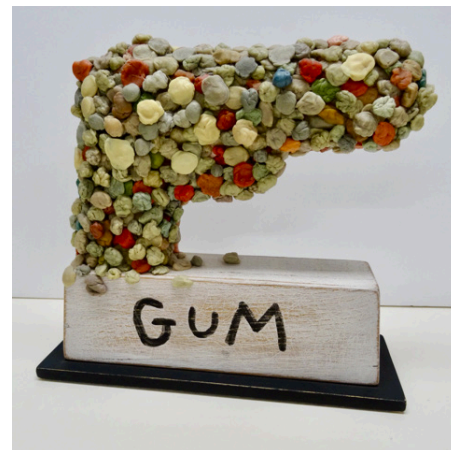
Human intentions, puns, whimsy, hidden meanings, semiotics—are all ideas found throughout O’Meallie’s retrospective, repeating themselves in different contexts. Look around the gallery to find repeating wave forms, spirals and body parts and allow yourself to find the integral stories they tell. Here are a few seminal examples from O’Meallie’s oeuvre.

When O’Meallie turned to his easy facility for wood carving to create works like “Shark Fin Pull Toy” (2015), he deftly wed toy-making and a wickedly funny realm of contemporary sculpture. The result is a slick menagerie of 3-D imagery rife with gags, puns and sly humor.

“The shark fin can have a silly narrative, but it can also be risky, too,” O’Meallie notes. “A child might be lunch for the shark they are pulling behind them,” he adds, matter-of-factly. Therein lies the joke, yet it bends the mind and provokes curiosity, just as any good toy should. O’Meallie has no expectations for how a viewer might interpret the ominous toy. He leaves it up to his audience to make their own conclusions.

“Gum” (2004), a handgun-shaped work studded and plugged up with balled-up pieces of chewed gum, perhaps shows humanity’s better side: There’s a gun in there, but it can’t function like one.

“The gun is human intention, an extension of intent,” O’Meallie explains. While he doesn’t necessarily share that fascination with guns and their powerful aura, he understands how they visually tweak the senses, with their smooth barrels and inviting hardware asking to be squeezed.



Gum, 2004, chewed chicle, wood

Front Cover: Ear Table with 3D Face Map, 2020-2021, painted wood, acrylic sheet, netting
Collection of Lauren Ciborowski and Benjamin Harvey, Colorado Springs CO

Study in Black, 2020, painted wood, steel



O’Meallie’s later gun-themed works, such as “Study in Black” (2020)—a mosaic-like arrangement of black gun shapes backed by an orange and yellow checked background—are both more sophisticated and more inherently negative about what guns have come to symbolize.

“I’m perplexed by our occupation with self-gain,” he adds. “There’s no thinking about global solutions. Why aren’t we using tools to help one another, rather than hurt each other for the glory of our own defense?”

Another work with a history of repeating itself, “Balloon Man Running,” made its first appearance as a twelve-inch-tall sculpture in 2008, depicting a less terrible, but more repressed side of humankind. O’Meallie toyed with other balloon metaphors, as well, but this one was later resurrected in 2015 as a 32-foot-tall public artwork at RTD’s Central Park Station Denver, CO. There, the balloon man appears to be running to catch his train, one life’s most minor crises.

“Balloons, for me, represent humans,” he says. “We see what they are on the outside, but the inside is constrained by a little tight knot. It’s full of potential—all these thoughts inside a malleable exterior. But it could pop at any moment, or be as elastic as you can possibly be.”



Balloon Man Running, 2008, painted wood
Collection of Reba and Stephen Savageau, Walsenburg CO

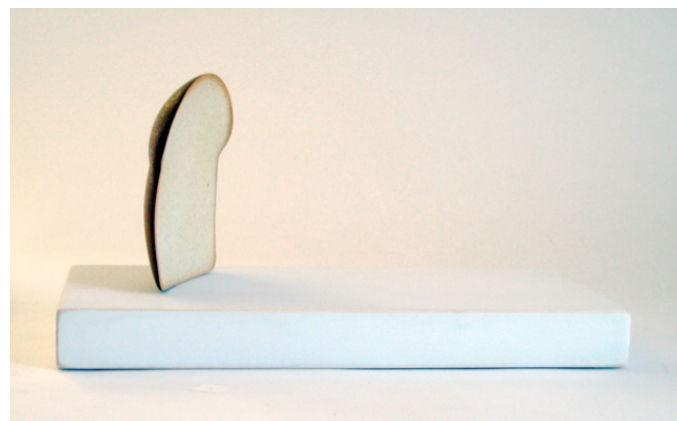
Balloon Man Running Image (RTD Central Park Station Park & Ride), 2015





I Feel Strange, 2010, painted wood
Collection of Paige Webster and Richard Van Sickle

“Even though I walk to the beat of my own drummer, I think of every art piece I come up with as being a collaboration between me and the materials I use, the object and the audience,” he concludes. “Now when I’m making a sculpture, organizing and composing something that might engage the viewer, it’s got to engage me first.”



The Last Piece, 2009, painted wood
Collection of The Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College, Colorado Springs CO

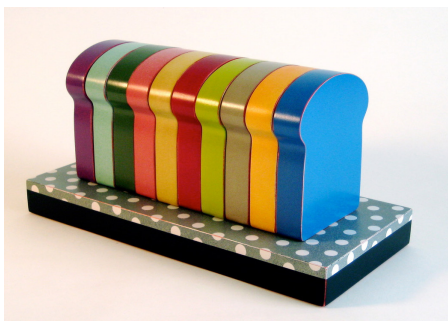
O’Meallie is also obsessed with bread: sliced, pornographic, leaning, as a rainbow (the pun: it’s titled “Rainbow Bread”), a hoop to jump through, or a pair of pale human silhouettes, all in commiseration with the human condition. “The Last Piece” (2009) stands out pitifully, though, a nod to society’s last chance. A loaf of bread’s final slice—a thin, stale-looking heel that teeters upright on a wood block, alone—seesaws between the promise of feast or the threat of famine.

That’s a lot of responsibility for one sad slice of bread, but O’Meallie endows it with singular meaning: “When I make a singular object, I think I’m making my own Pikes Peak. Pikes Peak is the pinnacle of a giant vast geologic event, the crest of a wave. It’s become iconic, but it doesn’t exist on its own. It rests on a patch of earth that spreads out far and wide.” The slice of bread is also iconic, a symbol of bread’s way of bringing people together at the table or, in its absence, tears them apart.

One last work, “I Feel Strange” (2010), seems to highlight the challenges of person-to-person communication. A sculpted and painted hand with its middle finger piercing its own palm. “I like that piece because it’s like a sculpture of a dream or a real notion of self-exploration,” O’Meallie says.

“I think the issue of the self violating some given, assumed norm stretches the boundaries of expectation,” he continues. “It says this is allowable, I claim that this is allowable. When I think of the artists who’ve been most impactful on me, who gave me freedom, I think of Paul Klee and Alexander Calder. They claimed permission and by doing so gave other humans permission to explore ideas and notions freely.”

Author: Susan Froyd



Rainbow Bread, 2008, painted wood
Collection of Mary Berger, Colorado Springs CO