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FEATURED

25 YEARS OF O'MEALLIE

Toy-inventor-turned-sculptor Sean O'Meallie reflects on 25 years

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Sean O'Meallie

Bryan Oller

The year is 1973. Seventeen-year-old Sean O'Meallie is lying about his age to get a job at The Broadmoor. Because he refuses to cut his hair, they won't let him be a bellman. But there is another job available — cleaning toilets and vacuuming floors — where he is allowed to wear a wig.

"It was hard to find a men's wig in 1973 in Colorado Springs, but I found one after calling around," says Sean. "I think I paid \$21 for this wig. But it was too small. It was all that was available. So during the day, it would kind of creep up."

Sean's wig-wearing days are well behind him. He's since enjoyed marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood — and a fruitful creative career. This month, he is celebrating his 25-year retrospective at the Museum of Art in Fort Collins. It encapsulates, as he calls it, "the philosophy of Sean."

Those who are familiar with his art know it's playful, and those who know Sean will tell you he doesn't want to play alone. "I'm interested in the spread of ideas and stories," he says. "The recognition of possibility, recognition of opportunity."

Colorful assholes. A giant pencil tip. Balloon cars and hot dogs. Patterned bread. A goldfish plunging headfirst into a lightbulb. Guns, every color of the rainbow. A pudgy baby hand, middle finger to the sky.



Bryan Oller

And then there are pieces with more sexual subcurrents. A finger penetrating its own palm. A punctured slice of bread.

But most, if not all, are violations of some kind, defying the rational or the corporeal — exercises in intellectual curiosity. His art is by no means sober, but it is earnest.

Sean, who is originally from Louisiana, has always displayed some facility for art. It was something he received praise for as a child (apart from an art class when he was 9; his drawing was criticized for not looking enough like a tree). His parents weren't particularly proactive about nurturing his talent, but his aunt, Kitty O'Meallie, was consistent in supplying him with materials and encouragement.

Sean went on to study art at the University of New Orleans. While he never finished his degree, he did meet the woman who would become his wife: Mary, "the prettiest girl in class."

In 1978, Sean was back in Colorado Springs, working at a small factory that made contemporary oak furniture, where he was able to hone his woodworking craft. Later, he sculpted for Michael Garman. At some point, Sean asked for a raise; the manager said no; Sean moved on.

Afterwards, Sean did freelance work for Current, a local gift catalog company, translating their two-dimensional art into 3D objects, and assisting on a toy invention project. He had two children at the time and was seeking a steady paycheck. He asked Current if they'd offer him a staff job; they said no; Sean moved on.

He had taken note of their toy business connection, though, and reached out. For the next decade, Sean worked on toy concept storyboards in his basement, traveling to New York once a year for Toy Fair, the multimillion-dollar industry extravaganza.

"A lot of my job back then was carrying suitcases of these storyboards up and down stairs and elevators and things," he says. "And we would just try to get some



Sean O'Meallie

interest in our projects.” Only a few of their projects reached the marketplace, and a handful were patented. (“The toy business is no place for kids,” he says.) Sean still has stacks of old storyboards in his home studio.

His first art show after college, a group show, was in 1994. He hadn't done art for around 17 years, but a friend encouraged him to participate. Sean showed four or five pieces, and even sold one. “That's when I discovered that my voice elicited a response,” he says.

Innovation and novelty are elements Sean's borrowed from toy conception, ones that he continues to employ in his sculptural work today. “I would say that I'm still making toys,” he says. “I'm trying to make art toys.” He approaches color, pattern, form and texture in a similar manner. Granted, now he's playing with more adult concepts.

And there are unexpected parallels between toy design and art making: “That molded plastic thing [toy] had to communicate to a child in the room that it existed, that it occupied space, that you can interact with it. And it will respond to you if you go to it, engage with it. And I think those are just genuine, necessary things ... You just need this kind of tactile awareness and engagement.”

“I like being tied to the physical,” he adds. “I need it still.”

And ultimately, it's a process he finds joy in. “What if I interrupted my own expectations with this other thing, something I hadn't thought of until I was in the act of making?” says Sean.

“And that just thoroughly delights me. Sometimes I think I'm just after delight.”

While Sean never returned to university to finish his art degree, he did go back to teach. (The chair of the art department at UCCS invited him to join as an instructor, and Sean went on to work there for nine years.) At this time, Sean was balancing



Sean O'Meallie

several roles: art instructor, artist and parent.

"I would say I'm still making toys."

— *Sean O'Meallie, former toy inventor*

No, he didn't have a formal arts education, but he did have real-world expertise: "I think I'm a natural teacher. I think, you know, not having to regurgitate the pantheon of higher education ... I didn't learn those things. I've come to art independently of academic dialogue."

In fact, Sean learned alongside his students. "I had never learned to think in a linear, rational way about art making, but [teaching] sort of forced me to do that," he says. "To be able to speak about what I was doing, why I was doing it."



Sean O'Meallie

Sean's art form of choice — painted wood sculpture — relies heavily on physical engineering and spatial awareness. "One of the things driving me is the idea of taking something and displacing space and forcing other people to have to walk around it and confront it," says Sean. "It's placing something in the way of others that induces them to have a new thought." It's something he believes has redeeming social value.

Above all else, accessibility is his greatest priority. "I like the idea of pedestrian-level access to these things," says Sean. "I like the personal scale of small objects. Many times, I make things that just fit in the palm of the hand. And I think about the weight of it. I think about the contact, the graspability. I've burnished the surface.

I've traveled every square millimeter hundreds of times just making it. And my DNA is in there, and there's this intimate experience that happens for me."

While Sean's done large-scale public art commissions, he prefers creating smaller works for this reason. The public art sphere also requires more administrative management (budgets, timelines, subcontracting) components that, unfortunately, become just as important as the art itself.

As an artist, success is notoriously difficult to define. The value assigned to the art by the public — the attention it receives, whether it sells, how much it sells for — doesn't neatly translate to "successful" or "unsuccessful" for Sean.

"It's not that I'm successful every time," he says. "There are pieces that I go, 'Yeah, maybe I got to rethink that.' Sometimes I'm having that internal conversation even after the piece is sold."

On the other hand, there are works he's very satisfied with. One sculpture, called *The Last Piece*, consists of two pieces of wood. One acts as the breadboard; the other is the thin end slice of a loaf of bread, standing upright. "There's all this negative space," he says. "But there's such narrative richness and possibility." Bread makes a recurring appearance in Sean's art. It's a cultural symbol of nourishment; a reference to community and the ritual of sharing food; a nod at the struggle over diminishing resources.

In *Head Cheese: A 25 Year Retrospective*, viewers can see this piece for themselves, and make their way through decades of his art. (Even storyboards from his days as a toy inventor are included.) The earlier years are bleaker, admits Sean, but his work has evolved into something more colorful and optimistic.

Delightful, even.

"I think when I can achieve delight, I've [really] achieved something," he says.

And he's not done yet. "I think there's a lot left for me to create. And until every house in America has a Sean O'Meallie, why should I stop, right?"



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