

Big Toys for Big Boys: The Childhood Fascinations of Niall Donaghy

By Siobhán N. Smith

*You can't go home again.*¹

–Thomas Wolfe

After surveying the sculptures that make-up *Superfortress*, it should not be surprising that Ontario-based sculptor, Niall Donaghy, spent much of his childhood in Ireland. Ireland: the land of legends and the “Giant’s Causeway”—the mythical home of the gentle giant Finn McCool. Even those who have never visited the fair green hills of Éire, Donaghy’s artworks are likely familiar, presuming you had a memorably playful and toy-filled childhood.

Donaghy works with the theme of ‘models’ whereby objects from everyday life are imitated and re-created, enlarged or miniaturized, to suit the needs of the gallery space. In *Superfortress*, the gallery floor resembles a child’s playroom, or more accurately, a *giant* child’s playroom. Donaghy’s sculptures *Superfortress* (2006), *Variations of a Circular Motion* (2005), *Bee* (2005-06), *Mosquito* (2005-06), *Earwig* (2005-06), and *Ant* (2005-06) call to mind the model toy kits of childhood. This sculptural toy series belongs among those artistic practices that engage with irony, nostalgia, political critique, and humour. In particular, his practise displays an art historical link to Pop art’s fascination with the gigantic, the multiple, and the everyday. As in the popular and consumer culture influenced works of Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol, Donaghy incorporates a fascination with the everyday into his large-scale recreations of children’s toys.

While the Pop artists of the 1960s both created and used works that were machine-made, (found objects and silkscreens immediately come to mind) Donaghy has instead opted for the handmade. *Superfortress*, *Bee*, *Mosquito*, *Earwig* and *Ant* all began as child-sized model kits.

The measurements from the original toy kits were then quadrupled in size and each piece was plotted out on a sheet of plywood. The pieces were hand-cut, sanded, and then fit into place; no glue or nails required. These works are designed and constructed to fit snugly like the dovetail joints in a skilfully crafted piece of antique furniture. Model toys offer children and adults alike the ability to create, individually, something that would ordinarily be manufactured by a team of people with machines. It is this aspect of his work—the attention to detail and artisanship—that lends itself well to nostalgia. As Susan Stewart has noted on the fascination with the model toy:

These toys are nostalgic in a fundamental sense, for they completely transform the mode of production of the original as they miniaturize it: they produce a representation of a product of alienated labour, a representation which itself is constructed by artisanal labour. The triumph of the model maker is that he or she has produced the object completely by hand, from the beginning assembly to the ‘finishing touches.’²

All political correctness aside, when I was a kid, building model airplanes was something boys did. That was one of the advantages of being a boy—they played rough and tumble sports, went fishing with their fathers, experimented with science, and collected and dissected insects. There were books like “The American Boy’s Handy Book: What to Do and How to Do It,” and “The Boy Mechanic,” and little boys everywhere were learning how to build gliders with eight-foot wing spans that they could fly off neighbourhood hills. Bolts and screws from Meccano construction sets were strewn about living room floors, and boys like Donaghy were daydreaming of growing up to be workers on construction sites.

Donaghy’s sculptures, as objects of nostalgia, temporarily move history and memory into the space of the gallery. As a child, Donaghy himself played the role of draftsman by cutting long strips of balsa wood at his father’s worktable and meticulously (as meticulous as a 10-year old could be) fashioning his very first flying machine. Attempting to prove Bernoulli’s theory of flight at the sixth-grade science fair was the moment when Donaghy’s fascination with aviation began; a fascination encouraged by his father, who is himself, an aspiring pilot. It is, perhaps, the memories of childhood that are most clearly evoked in his artwork. Sights, smells, and tastes can often create the most evocative of childhood memories—just the right combination of

stimulation to the senses can bring it all flooding back into a vivid moment of recollection. This is the same experience I had when I walked into Donaghy's studio two years ago. He was working on the sculptural toy series that would eventually form the center of his Master's thesis exhibition. There were giant wooden insects in one corner, miniature airplanes in another, and beautifully maze-like patterned wooden panels leaning against the walls. I immediately thought back to my own toys, and the hours of fun I had with pens, paper, and Spirograph gears on our living room floor's shag carpet.

*Longing is what makes art possible...longing is what gives sense to living.*³

-Laurence Lerner

Visitors to *Superfortress* may unexpectedly find themselves in a situation in which they are sharing nostalgic moments with complete strangers. One visitor might remark about their childhood memories, and this, in turn, reminds another visitor of their own. The power of these sculptural toys is their ability to draw strangers together into a nostalgic moment: the exclamation of one visitor, "I used to have one of those when I was a kid!" is sure to be followed by another echoing, "me too!" Nostalgia, a term derived from the amalgamation of two Greek words: *nostos* meaning "return home" and *algos*, meaning "pain." For at least the first century of its usage, the term was applied to those suffering from the most severe and debilitating of diseases: homesickness.⁴ It is more commonly used today to describe a sentimental longing for a time or a place that is irretrievably in the past. However you choose to define this longing, Donaghy's gigantic sculptural toys recall his own childhood memories of folk legends and tall tales of the giants that once roamed Ireland.

The feeling one has when walking amongst Donaghy's works is similar to that of a child in a toy store because as a child, everything seemed larger. However, anyone who has returned to their old elementary school or neighbourhood playground knows that these things were not gigantic; it was merely a matter of perception. This realisation is often a slightly painful one, as if the magic and wonder of childhood is suddenly lost the very moment we realise our hips won't fit into the small desk chairs or between the chains of the playground swing set. As Linda Hutcheson has

theorised, the pain associated with nostalgia is because of our inability to reverse time, “nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very ‘pastness’ of the past, its inaccessibility that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power.”⁵ This brings us to the problem with nostalgia: nostalgia is a longing for what is not here and not present. In remembering nostalgically, we are, in a sense, desiring to relive or return to an idealised past or place. And not just any past, but a seemingly perfect one. We yearn for moments, people, places because we know they are irretrievable. Nostalgia, by its very nature, is an unfulfilled longing, it is the impossibility of retrieving the lost time, people, and places of our (imagined) past.

*A history lesson is the best cure for nostalgic pathos.*⁶

-Fredric Jameson

The Boeing B-29 “Superfortress” was a four-engine heavy bomber propeller aircraft flown by the United States Army Air Force. It was one of the largest aeroplanes flown during World War II, and it was the US Army’s aircraft of choice in the firebombing campaign against Japan. The most infamous of the Superfortress planes were the *Enola Gay*, which dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and the *Bockscar* (Bock’s Car), which dropped another on Nagasaki. Donaghy’s choice to create and display a model of the Superfortress without the usual fibreglass casing is noteworthy. Donaghy’s skeleton of a Superfortress aircraft encourages viewers to focus on the material with which it was made: unfinished plywood. Engineered (composite) wood, both plywood and medium-density fibreboard (MDF), figure prominently in Donaghy’s artistic production. Plywood, one of the first types of engineered wood invented, is made from thin sheets of wood veneer, stacked together and bonded under heat and pressure with strong adhesives.⁷ MDF is formed by breaking down softwood into wood fibres, combining this with wax and resin, and forming panels by applying high temperature and pressure. It is flat and stiff, and unlike plywood, it has no knots or surface grain. Donaghy has said that he enjoys working with these engineered wood products for their “bastard like quality ... composite and contemporaneous nature.”⁸ Accompanying Donaghy’s wooden *Superfortress* is a miniature ‘army’ of wax planes, *Flight Pattern* (2005). Comparisons between aircraft and insects are

common, and numerous planes have been named for annoying insects and insect-related attributes including the British-built warplane, the “Mosquito” and the “S-17 Stinger.” Donaghy’s miniature planes that comprise *Flight Pattern* take-on more than their usual resemblance to insects; the dozens of wax replicas fill the gallery floor, a swarm, if you will. These miniature planes, moulded from wax, with shiny, honey coloured exteriors, look like plane-larva (if there was such a thing), recently hatched from the queen *Superfortress* and ready to go on the offensive.

A hugely popular educational toy from Donaghy’s childhood is the Spirograph set. Essentially a drawing toy, the Spirograph set contained small plastic gears and toothed rings. The interchangeable gears fit inside the larger rings in order to allow the gears to rotate around the inside or along the outside edge of the rings. When a pen was placed in a hole in the moving gear, children could whirl and swirl a maze of coloured lines for hours on end. The intricate patterns created, as if by magic (according to most children), were actually based in science and mathematics; the curves created with the Spirograph set are known officially as hypotrochoids and epitrochoids. Based on the principles of this childhood drawing device, Donaghy constructed a series of gigantic wooden gears and templates to function as router jigs. He replaced the colourful pens with a plunge router, and substituted small sheets of paper with large—7’ in diameter—sheets of MDF. The gigantic shift in scale from the original Spirograph set of childhood enables the construction of large-scale sculptural works. Donaghy has commented that for him, the “magic” of the original Spirograph set remains, and he is continually “captivated by the act of slowly moving large gears in a circular motion and seeing them trace an often incomprehensible curve...the spirographs inhabit the domain of chance discovery, an element fundamental in both artistic and scientific exploration.”⁹

*The toy world presents a projection of the world of everyday life.*¹⁰

-Susan Stewart

The Spirograph comes with its own intriguing history: invented in 1962 by British electronic engineer, Denys Fisher (1918 - 2002), whilst designing and researching new bomb detonators for

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Spirograph was first displayed at the 1965 Nuremburg International Toy Fair. The game reflects the infiltration of adult concerns of Western society and culture during the 1950s and 1960s—revolving around politics, media and science—into the world of children, thus providing a cultural stepping-stone into broader societal horizons. The scientific and militaristic origins of the Spirograph were hinted at in the TV show *The Simpsons*, a series noted for its biting political and social satire. Living up to its well-deserved reputation, in an episode from the 1990s titled “Radioactive Man,” Bart Simpson visits the abandoned Spirograph factory and meets Dr. Spirograph (a parody of the late Denys Fisher). As Dr. Spirograph plays with his Spirograph set, he comments to Bart “did you know that there’s a direct correlation between the decline of Spirograph and the rise in gang activity? Think about it.” Perhaps we’re getting a little off track, but Dr. Spirograph’s comment about the corruptibility of childhood, as obscure as it may seem, brings us back to the unfortunate side of nostalgia: there is no possibility of returning to this idealised past, because, it is just that—idealised. Donaghy’s Spirographs (*Variations of a Circular Motion*) are too large for any child to use, and his warplanes—both the oversized wooden models and miniaturized wax versions—are all incapable of reaching flight.

These unusable toys covering the gallery floor speak to the impossibility of recreating childhood, or at least not one that is more than mere imitation. Toys are wrapped up in the ideals of childhood and their associations with innocence, play, comfort and incorruptibility. Nostalgia can also be a key element in the tendency to disregard conflict—a way of remembering without considering the messiness of politics and a way to legitimise ignoring historical reality.

However, Donaghy’s childhood visions are presented in an art gallery, and to primarily an adult audience, so the expectation is that visitors will think critically about what he has created. This is not unlike many Pop art works of the 1960s. Despite the bubble-gum connotations of its name, the Pop art movement managed to produce some of America’s most recognizable works of political protest. Oldenburg’s *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*, (1969-74) and James Rosenquist’s enormous *F-111* (1964-65) immediately come to mind. Likewise, Donaghy’s enormous toys engage as much in social and political critique as they do in the more light-hearted nostalgia.

The *Superfortress* of Donaghy's creation draws a link between the history of American warfare and Canada's battles in the west coast forest industry. The harvesting of giant spruce trees for the construction of military airplanes is a not-so-well-known aspect of Canada's logging history. It was initially during WWI that the spruce trees logged on Vancouver Island became known as 'airplane spruce.' Beginning in 1917, tens of thousands of American soldiers, along with thousands of Canadian loggers, went to British Columbia's coastal forests to cut and mill trees for the war effort.¹¹ Even aviator/industrialist Howard Hughes nicknamed his H-4 Hercules the "Spruce Goose."¹² Contemporary conflicts, at times violent, between environmental activists, loggers, and government officials are a significant part of British Columbia's history. Perhaps the most publicised was the 1993 dispute over the "Clayoquot Land Use Decision." It was only a few years later that Donaghy would find himself in BC working as a tree planter. Tree planters in BC must endure swarms of bugs, the all-too occasional black bear, the often-inclement weather of the west coast, and the sometimes-dangerous conditions of working in remote clear-cut tracts of land. Donaghy's work in the forests was difficult, and involved numerous silvicultural tasks such as brushing, spacing, and conducting Pine Beetle probes. The latter is a new threat that has emerged in BC's forests. The unprecedented infestation of the Mountain Pine Beetle, possibly fuelled by global warming, is turning vast areas of BC's forest into a carpet of dead trees. Infested areas of forest have been steadily increasing in size for the last five years. Ironically, as if decades of clear-cutting motivated by greed were not bad enough, many in the forestry sector today believe that the only solution to the Pine Beetle problem is to clear-cut even faster.¹³

We look to the past, nostalgically, to escape and hide from our current reality that is often harsh and inexorable. Donaghy, in particular, looks to childhood nostalgically: it appears better than the present in which we dwell because we idealize childhood. His Spirographs, insects, and airplanes denote childhood play, but also connote a slightly more sinister past, one of war and environmental destruction. Donaghy's works will draw you in with their immediate ability to evoke memories of childhood fun. However, the un-playable nature of the works—they are *art*, after all—speaks to the impossibility of reliving, or recreating, our past.

¹ Wolfe, Thomas. *You Can't Go Home Again*. New York; London: Harper & Bros., 1940.

² Stewart, Susan. On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection. Durham: Duke UP, 1993: 58.

³ Lerner, Laurence, The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry. London: Chatto & Windus, 1972: 52.

⁴ Hofer, Johannes. "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia." Trans. Carolyn Kiser Anspach. Bulletin of the History of Medicine 2 (1934): 376-391.

⁵ Hutcheon, Linda. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern." University of Toronto English Language (UTEL) Main Collection. 1998 <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>>: 3.

⁶ Jameson, Fredric. Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke UP, 1991: 156.

⁷ O'Halloran, M.R. "Plywood." Concise Encyclopaedia of Wood and Wood-based Materials, ed. Arno Schniewind. Oxford: Pergamon, 1989: 221-226.

⁸ Donaghy, 2005: 15.

⁹ Donaghy, Niall. Variations of a Circular Motion. Thesis, Master of Fine Arts. York University, 2005: 11-12.

¹⁰ Stewart, 1993: 57.

¹¹ Vaillant, John. The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness and Greed. Toronto: Random House, 2005: 112.

¹² Vaillant, 2005: 113.

¹³ Kavanagh, Jean "Widespread clearcutting not best solution for BC Mountain Pine Beetle outbreak." July 10, 2001. <<http://www.davidsuzuki.org>>.