

Passivity, Trust, and Empathy: How I Make Art and Would Like to Treat People Budd Dees

*He was like a tiny watchmaker, and he drew up a chair and knelt on it so that he could get directly over the work. When Berenice gave him some raisins, he did not stick them all around as any other human child would do; he used only two for the eyes; but immediately he realized they were too large – so he divided one raisin carefully and put in eyes, two specks for the nose, and a little grinning raisin mouth. When he had finished, he wiped his hands on the seat of his shorts, and there was a little biscuit man with separate fingers, and hat on, and even walking stick. John Henry had worked so hard that the dough was now gray and wet. But it was a perfect little biscuit man, and, as a matter of fact, it reminded Frankie of John Henry himself.**

My studio houses nonjudgmental play. I forgive the work, accepting the whims of the material. Acquiescence forgets ideas of right and wrong, righteous and amoral, institutional and rebellious; those rigid notions flower into more complex and plentiful possibilities. The studio permits the possibility of failure.

The process is one of loosening, trusting the work enough to not police it. I slacken intention, allowing pieces to transition into what they are, rather than bullying them with expectation. When nursing the interdependent responses of materials, forms, and colors, the pieces develop themselves. The pieces self-identify.

“How?” John Henry suddenly asked. “How did that boy change into a girl?”

Through remaking and unmaking I let go of predetermined outcomes; the work performs itself and its curiosities. Bandages and patches alter what at first seemed essential about the thing. It may break in its center because it wasn't meant to have one. Its colors may lose their vibrance because the object is shy. It may crack into many pieces because it resists singularity. In these failures, I maintain that when it breaks, it does so to reveal more of its own self than it had before.

When Berenice brought the biscuit man from the oven... it had swelled so that all the work of John Henry had been cooked out, the fingers were run together, and the walking stick resembled a sort of tail. But John Henry just looked at it through his glasses, wiped it with his napkin, and buttered the left foot.

My relationship to material reflects how I aim to treat other people, and, if I ever adopt, how I'd like to raise my child. I release control with the same patience and empathy needed in line at a coffee shop or in a traffic jam. The joy the practice brings is similar to the pleasures of passive anal sex. I must relax, trust, and remain receptive.

* All italics are pulled from *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers