

Shannon Cannings: “Trigger Happy”

By Dusti Rhodes

This artist sticks to her guns when it comes to weapons as toys

The paintings in Shannon Cannings’s show “Trigger Happy” pay homage to a forbidden fruit of her youth: toy guns. The artist says her parents wouldn’t allow anything resembling the weapon into the house, and this, you could say, triggered some rebelliousness in her adulthood. On a recent hunt for subject matter in the toy aisle (Cannings tends to paint relics of childhood), she was drawn to a pack of squirt guns in rainbow colors. “They just looked like a pack of giant Jolly Ranchers,” she says. “I was just thrilled with them.”

Cannings makes realistic paintings of the toy guns using a mix of glaze and oil to render the toy’s shiny and translucent qualities. Trigger Happy features Cannings’ tiara-crowned, cherub-faced daughter Madeline aiming a plastic pistol at the viewer, and in Friendly Fire, two squirt guns are aimed at each other.



“The names of the pieces are things that I think about being a happy veneer for something that carries a great consequence,” she says. “Like Friendly Fire, that sounds like a game you play with a hose in your backyard; it doesn’t sound as horrible as it really is.” It seems Cannings’ upbringing had lasting effects. “I didn’t tell my mother that I bought those plastic guns for a long time — I’m an adult, you know, I’m allowed to own plastic guns!” she says and laughs.

She won't let her kids play with the toy weapons either. She says she felt uneasy about letting Madeline hold the squirt gun — even for art's sake — because she's worried about sending mixed messages. "Before this, I worked a lot with some candy as well, and at one point she picked up a lollipop and said, 'Is this food or art?'"