

Visitors play with toy Colorforms in *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America*, 2019.



Playing with “Fun”

Adults and Well-being in Exhibitions

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“We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.”
– George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright¹

In all times, but especially during periods of duress – like the devastating situation we have found ourselves in with the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic – play can distract, nurture creativity, and even elevate the mind and spirit. In fact, play has been scientifically proven to lead to resilience in times of adversity in mammals, and especially in the species that plays the most: humans.²

At the Denver Art Museum (DAM), the work of the learning and engagement department is rooted in fostering creativity, local and global understanding, welcoming, and wellbeing. In the last few years, we have dedicated significant energy to exploring adults’ wellbeing in particular, which we define as an overall sense of fulfillment and health. In this article we focus on how play is important for adults’ wellbeing, and what “fun” means for them, specifically in our

temporary exhibitions. For adults, vitality and enjoyment contribute to wellbeing, as does being able to explore playfully without a preconceived plan.³ Fun can be laughter-filled and entertaining but it can also be delightful and enlightening. One of the DAM’s core audiences is adult ages 55 and older, and generally for people in that age range, there is increased curiosity, a continued process of discovery, and a desire to live life to the fullest.⁴ Arts participation has been proven to lead to improved physical and mental health for all ages, so imagine the benefits of arts participation that’s *fun*.⁵

An exhibition can create a space, even a structure, for play. This framework becomes a way for visitors to engage with art – slowing down, becoming aware, and experimenting with ideas and imaginations that can lead to deeper personal meaning and creative developments. English professor Brian Boyd explains: “A work of art acts like a playground for the mind, a swing or a slide or a merry-go-round of visual or aural or social pattern.”⁶

Fig. 1.

Visitors using the “Arrange a Room” app on a large touchscreen in *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America*, 2019.

When we cultivate play through guided frameworks or structures, we can learn and experience in more open-ended ways.

In his 1938 book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, historian Johan Huizinga – who focused on adult play – wrote that play requires a set-aside “closed space...marked out for it... hedged off from the everyday surroundings.”⁷ At the DAM, one could think of the gallery space as this “magic circle” that Huizinga describes. The galleries define the space of the game and participation is voluntary – a key component of play.⁸

Here we describe two types of situations in which we, as exhibition planners, have created conditions for adult visitors to have fun spontaneously and thoughtfully in the magic circle of our galleries (in a pre-COVID-19 world): an interactive exhibition dedicated to the concept of play, and recent shows in which we incorporated whimsical or surprising moments.

Using an Exhibition to Explore Play

Often play is ascribed to the child’s realm because it comes so naturally to young minds, while adults seem to separate its frivolity from serious work. After the bleak and all-consuming years of World War II, many American designers of all practices explored and created playful designs, trying to regain childlike curiosity about the world around them in their work.⁹ Internationally renowned designers Charles and Ray Eames, like many other post-WWII designers, understood play as an essential element in the design process. “Toys are

not really as innocent as they look. Toys and games are the preludes to serious ideas,”¹⁰ Charles Eames said. The Eameses, like their peers, found that time and space – or a framework – are needed for experimenting with ideas and finding inspiration from unexpected sources. The Denver Art Museum’s exhibition, *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America* (2019), was conceived around the idea that play can become a catalyst for creativity and innovation.

In bringing to life midcentury designers’ approaches to design in *Serious Play*, we felt it was important to incorporate playful, exploratory moments alongside the artworks on display. We developed a series of “invitations to play,” each interactive providing a framework for exploration, using prompts to provide structure while allowing for open-ended imaginings. As psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman and science writer Carolyn Gregoire assert:

Adults, too, need this type of support to dream and play. Drawing on a different set of materials – personal memories, fantasy, and emotions can be objects of play as much as physical items – many highly creative people exhibit a great deal of imaginative playfulness. For these creative minds, creating is itself an act of play.¹¹

Dotted about the exhibition were opportunities to engage in focused play. In the “American Home” section, visitors could “Arrange a Room” with midcentury-inspired furnishings on a large touchscreen, taking pleasure in customizing and designing their surroundings (fig. 1).¹² In subsequent

ARRANGE A ROOM

Postwar American designers encouraged families to have fun collecting and arranging objects in ways that expressed their personalities. Use this screen to choose and arrange midcentury-inspired furnishings in a way that suits your taste.

ARREGLA UNA HABITACIÓN
Los diseñadores estadounidenses de la posguerra alentaban a las familias a que se divirtieran coleccionando y arreglando objetos en formas que expresaran su personalidad. Usa esta pantalla para elegir y acomodar a tu gusto el mobiliario inspirado en la época de mediados de siglo.



Fig. 3.

Free Play Zone in *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America*, 2019.



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galleries, we invited all visitors to spin toy tops, build structures with the Eameses' House of Cards (a set of interlocking slotted cards with photographic images on one side), or create a pattern with the classic Colorforms®, re-stickable vinyl playsets (intro image).

Serious Play finished with a “Free Play Zone” inviting visitors young and old to play more actively. A climbable play piece, designed by artist and designer Isamu Noguchi, anchored the room. It was surrounded by a theater with colorful masks, where visitors could choose one to create a performance from their own imagination. There were also sets of large wooden pieces, part of the Tyng Toy (a child-size playset of interlocking wooden pieces), which could be combined to build cars, rocking horses, and other imaginative structures. It was plain to see from our visitors' social media posts that all ages engaged fully in this space (fig. 3).

A key principle anchoring our “invitations to play” was inspired by instructions from one of Ray and Charles Eameses' creations, the Coloring Toy, which included crayons,

die-cut cards, and fasteners: “We do hope that the contents of this box and the clues it offers will stimulate the use of these and other materials in an ever expanding variety of ways.”¹³ In essence, and like the Eameses, we sought to guide – and not dictate – play. We also tried to balance a low threshold to participate with the ability to be more complex, offering multiple ways to engage. We also struck a balance between individual-focused, parallel play with collaborative group exploration. In short, we created an environment encouraging multigenerational play.

Through small-sample observations and by monitoring social media, we found visitors of all ages engaging with the array of inter-actives. Many older visitors expressed nostalgia and a sense of wonder, sharing experiences between generations. “Who remembers Colorforms? You get to play with them again at @denverartmuseum!”¹⁴ And, for many, the playful interactive moments were opportunities to linger and enjoy. “Mesmerizing spinning tops...there's a whole table of tops to spin at ‘Serious Play’ at the DAM. I was there for quite a while – easily amused.”¹⁵

According to experience design researchers J. Robert Rossman and Mathew Duerden, the psychology of great experiences “accomplish the following: produce positive emotions, engage attention, help develop and strengthen relationships, provide meaning through connections to something larger than ourselves, promote competence, and grant autonomy.”¹⁶ *Serious Play* proved a great experience for adults: delightful and insightful while also opening opportunities to share wonder and memories with younger generations.

Playful Engagement Strategies for Traditional Subjects

In their discussions about flow, psychologists Mihály Csikszentmihályi and Kim Hermanson talk about the importance of “being freed of anxiety, fear, and other negative mental states” in order to open oneself up to learning. “[W]hen complex information is presented in a way that is enjoyable – intrinsically rewarding – the person will be motivated to pursue further learning,” they write.¹⁷ And we know from others’ research that such low-pressure circumstances are also conducive to wellbeing.¹⁸ Two recent exhibitions that were, on the surface, traditional painting shows, provided opportunities to experiment with some playful interpretive strategies – decoding, creating mystery and discovery, and forging emotional connections. We thought these could infuse adults’ experiences with some fun, and therefore foster a heightened sense of wellbeing: *Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio* and *Claude Monet: The Truth of Nature*, which we

mounted respectively in 2015 to 2016 and 2019 to 2020.

Decoding

For centuries, artists have incorporated games in their work, imbuing painted scenes with hidden meanings, symbolism, and visual puns for viewers to puzzle over (e.g., Pieter Bruegel the Elder in 16th-century Holland, François Boucher in 18th-century France, the Surrealists of the 20th century). Museum interpretation can draw on this playful artists’ technique to foster interest and play through decoding games for visitors.

Because *Claude Monet: The Truth of Nature* was such an enormous exhibition, with about 125 landscape paintings covering 20,000 square feet of exhibition space, we wanted to incorporate a few smaller spaces where visitors could pause and reenergize. We decided to create distinct areas – like Huizinga’s “magic circles” – throughout the exhibition with different types of experiences that would give visitors a new way of looking at the pictures. One of these areas focused on Monet’s use of color, using this quote from the artist as inspiration: “When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you, a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow.”¹⁹

We created an animation that brought those words to life by focusing on color in one of the artist’s winter scenes (“white” landscapes that, on closer examination, reveal a

spectrum of paint colors). The animation started with an image of a house and a tree that was populated with blues, then pinks, then yellows, in sync with the artist's quote, until the full landscape was revealed. Visitors delighted in this surprising experience, breaking them out of traditional ways of thinking and looking. One visitor reflected in an exit survey, "I loved the 'snow' room with NO WHITE SNOW – that was amazing" (fig. 4).²⁰

Creating Mystery and Discovery

For most adults, a museum visit is voluntary, and museum experiences are often driven by their curiosity.²¹ If we can play into that curiosity with some air of mystery and discovery, the result is rewarding and memorable. We organized *Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio* as an artistic conversation between father and son painters in which we provided insight into the artists' individual personalities and their relationship with each other. The exhibition team prioritized hanging artworks on the walls rather than family photographs, though we knew showing the latter in some way would be crucial in humanizing the artists. So we put the family photos behind small-scale doors, which staff called "fairy doors." Designed to evoke the farmhouse style of the Wyeths' East-coast homes, and placed at floor level,²² the doors – when opened by curious visitors – revealed photographs of the Wyeths that related in some visually immediate way to a nearby painting. Our visitor study revealed that 84 percent of respondents (all adults) interacted with the doors, and that 82 percent

indicated that the whimsical aspects of the exhibition, including the doors, had a "positive impact on their visitor experience by helping them look more closely at the art or connect emotionally...[and] had a positive impact of their perception of the artists through helping them understand where the artists came from, what inspired them, and what was important to them" (fig. 5).²³

Forging Emotional Connection

For flow conditions to flourish, note Csikszentmihályi and Hermanson, "the link between the museum and the visitor's life needs to be made clear. To inspire intrinsic motivation, the objects one finds and the experiences one enjoys, while possibly inspiring awe and sense of discovery, should not feel disconnected from one's own life."²⁴ The *Wyeth* doors, with their evocation of home and family, appealed to visitors' own personal experiences and tied into a universal theme, which helps visitors from a variety of backgrounds relate to the content and, therefore, make an experience enjoyable.

We played into universal themes in our interpretive strategies for *The Truth of Nature* as well. Monet is an artist who does have wide public appeal, but for a 21st-century Denver audience, 19th-century France can seem worlds away. Taking inspiration from Monet's obsession with trying to capture on canvas the passage of time, we sped up nature by showing a 24-hour time-lapse video of the waterlily pond at the Denver Botanic Gardens on a large-scale curved screen, enveloping



Fig. 4.

Color animation in
Claude Monet:
*The Truth of
Nature*, 2020.



Fig. 5.

Visitor examining
a “fairy door” in
*Wyeth: Andrew
and Jamie in the
Studio*, 2016.

visitors in the experience of watching how our perception of nature changes as time quickly passes. By using a local landscape filmed in present day, the projection unexpectedly and immediately linked visitors to Monet, his place, his time, and his experiences. They could empathize directly with Monet, who said “You have to know

how to seize just the right moment in a landscape instantaneously, because that particular moment will never come again, and you’re always wondering if the impression you got was truthful.” One visitor wanted to relive that part of the exhibition, reaching out to us after his visit to ask for the video file: “It was a delight!” (fig. 6).²⁵



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Looking Ahead

Museums have great potential to enhance visitors' wellbeing through the fundamental human activity of play. Investing in playful approaches to exhibition interpretation has been mutually beneficial for audiences and staff at the Denver Art Museum. We have found that play needs to be nurtured through stimulating environments, inviting prompts, and balancing intentional frameworks that provide structure with open-ended opportunities to explore and imagine.

In a world still struggling with the effects of COVID-19, we've been faced with redesigning aspects of our lives, so opening our minds through playful explorations can help us envision new engagement solutions. Moving forward, we'll be asking: how do we create opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and co-creation while keeping social distancing in mind? How can digital platforms play an even more meaningful role in deepening connection? How do we emerge with a renewed sense of the importance of face-to-face interactions? We may even

Fig. 6.

Visitor photograph
of the Denver
Botanic Gardens
time-lapse in *Claude
Monet: The Truth of
Nature*, 2020.

come out stronger, more resilient, and more creative. By playing ourselves, as museum professionals, we hope to inspire visitors to deepen their wells of creativity and apply it in their own lives as they reshape the world around them.

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