

# TOY STORIES:

**PAINTINGS BY AARON PICKENS**  
JANUARY 11 – MARCH 30, 2019

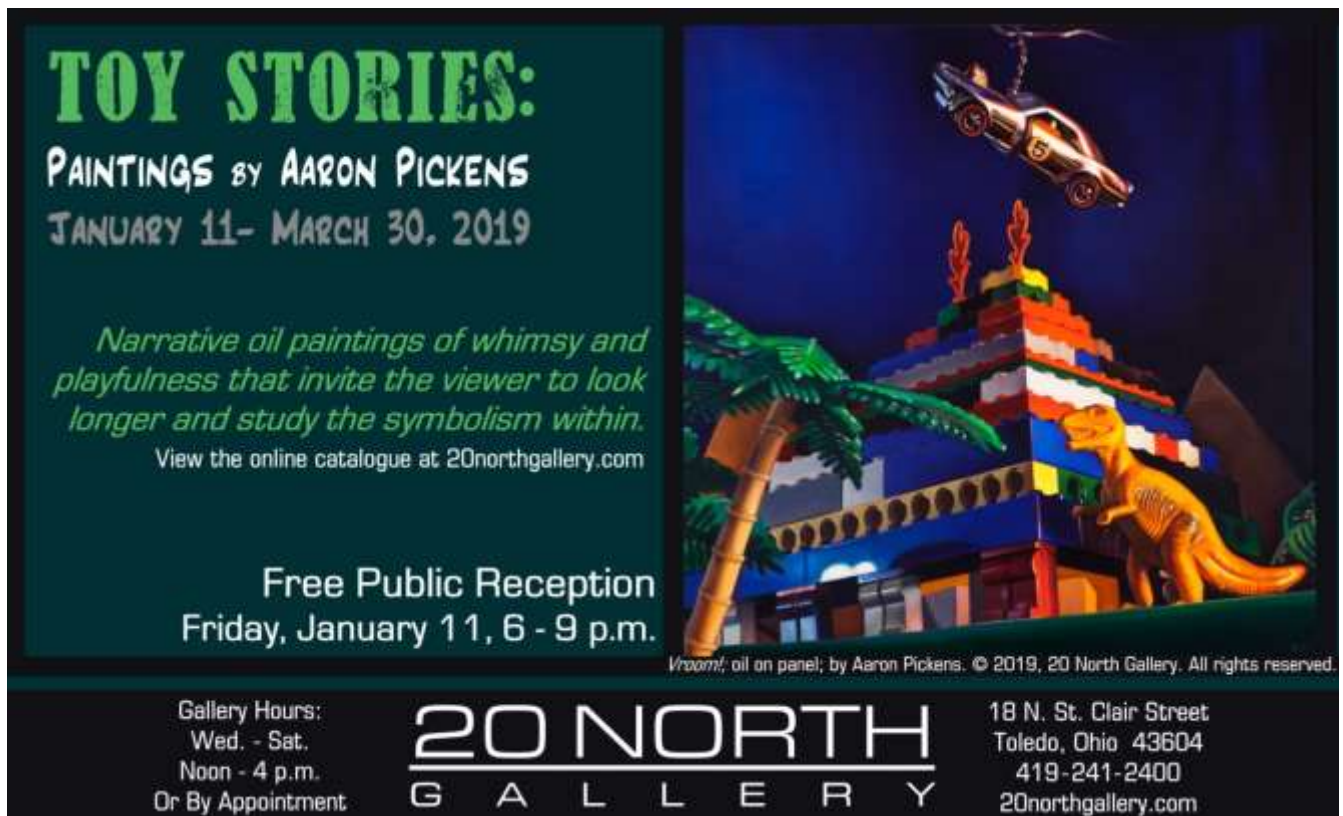
**20 NORTH**  
GALLERY

18 N. St. Clair Street, Toledo, Ohio 43604 419-241-2400  
20northgallery.com — info@20northgallery.com

*An exhibition of captivating, dual-natured oil paintings by Toledo-area artist Aaron Pickens.*

The *Toy Stories* exhibit features joyful and insouciant paintings with a whimsical sense of playfulness that belies the serious narratives they symbolize. Pickens' paintings are created through dedicated observation of toy tableaux that the artist has built. With an emphasis on light and materiality, he carefully constructs these still life compositions to captivate the viewer. Pickens weaves an additional layer of depth into these bright, bold paintings with the toys and their depicted actions symbolizing and commenting on social issues relevant to today.

A motif in Pickens' artwork is to critique from a self-effacing position. Pickens states, "One of the unifying themes in my artwork has always been the desire to quietly disrupt some form of artistic convention in a highly refined manner, often using humor to do so." Activism, art criticism, gun rights and environmental issues are examples of topics addressed in these vibrant works that entice and encourage the viewer to look longer and discover the underlying commentary.



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*Narrative oil paintings of whimsy and playfulness that invite the viewer to look longer and study the symbolism within.*  
View the online catalogue at [20northgallery.com](http://20northgallery.com)

**Free Public Reception**  
Friday, January 11, 6 - 9 p.m.

Wroom!, oil on panel; by Aaron Pickens. © 2019, 20 North Gallery. All rights reserved.

Gallery Hours:  
Wed. - Sat.  
Noon - 4 p.m.  
Or By Appointment

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# Aaron Pickens

Grand Rapids, Ohio

## Artist Biography

Aaron Pickens (Toledo, Ohio) received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in digital arts from Bowling Green State University (Ohio) in 2011 and a Master of Fine Arts in painting from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 2015. Aaron currently resides in Grand Rapids (Ohio) and, in addition to his own fine art painting, works as a studio assistant for a digital installation artist. Also, as an adjunct instructor, Pickens has taught art courses at Owens Community College (Perrysburg, Ohio) and Adrian College (Michigan), as well as at Bowling Green State University. In addition to his academic instruction, Pickens offers workshops on *plein air* and popular artist talks on his toy tableaux construction. With a background in both digital and traditional media, Pickens' two main bodies of artwork comprise toy tableaux still life and *alla prima plein air* oil paintings, both of which have been accepted into juried exhibitions throughout the United States.



Photo courtesy of artist website

Pickens has won numerous exhibition awards throughout his artistic career and was awarded an Accelerator Grant from the Arts Commission of Toledo (Ohio) in 2018. A frequent contributor to the *Annual Midyear Juried Show* at the Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio), Pickens has exhibited in multiple group shows and pop-up galleries. Notable juried shows in which his work has been exhibited include the Ohio State Fair *Plein Air Competition*, the 2014 *Salon Des Refuses* and group exhibitions of surreal artwork in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Recently, Pickens was awarded best of show at both *NOWOH (The Annual Northwest Ohio Community Art Exhibition) 10* and *NOWOH 11* held at Bowling Green State University in the Willard Wankelman Gallery. He has enjoyed seven solo exhibitions over the past seven years.

Outside of the visual arts, Pickens' recently collaborated on a music project as part of the band Phantasmagoria, which has released four albums, most recently *Golden Planet* in 2014.

To learn more of Aaron Pickens' artistic career and a full exhibition history, visit his website at [aaronpickens.com](http://aaronpickens.com).



Photo courtesy of artist website

## Artist Statement

Over the past five years, I have focused on a body of work that honors the origin of my creative process: play! Toys facilitated my imagination and desire to create at an early age. The act of play was a catalyst for me to pursue the arts and instilled in me an enthusiasm that has consistently fueled my work to this day.

When designing a new painting for this body of work, I begin to assemble a still life in a child-like manner with objects associated with playtime. Each arrangement is governed by a simple interest in color and form, as well as the narrative or concept I wish to

address. Once I am satisfied with the formal arrangement and narrative of each diorama, I begin the process of building the image with paint. I always seek to create immersive paintings that emphasize light and the materiality of the depicted objects. Achieving this objective can either be explored through obsessive rendering, or a more painterly approach. Furthermore, plastic toys present a unique and fascinating technical dilemma, in which the colors of these forms are often just beyond the gamut of archival pigments. Having technical challenges such as this ensures that the process is exciting and ever-evolving.

However, aside from the technical stimulation, the paintings offer the opportunity for my own observances of the world to be subtly expressed. With toys used as symbols in the constructed narratives, I can interweave commentary on topics ranging from environmental concerns, gun rights, native activism, and even art criticism. These contemporary issues are addressed with familiar imagery in a humorous fashion. The lighthearted veneer is utilized to entice the viewer to look beyond the surface and acknowledge the concept that informed each painting.

Recently, the focus of the series has shifted towards developing a series of perceptually-based paintings that would lightheartedly reflect upon current trends in contemporary art. The first painting in the series entitled, *In Da Club*, specifically poses questions about acquiring acceptance with one's artwork by infusing the composition with popular painting motifs.



Photo courtesy of artist website

## Artwork

All work available for purchase, unless otherwise specified. Measurements reflect image size, without framing. Artwork commentary provided by artist.



**Won't You Be My Neighbor**  
Oil on panel; 24"H x 24"W; 2018

*"Given the recent immigration crisis, both domestically, and abroad, I wanted to generate a work that touched upon the topic. Despite unsurmountable evidence of being in peril, a figure of authority is skeptical of those immediately in need of help; either preventing or delaying access to stability."*

*"Painted from life over the course of two years, this work is a Frankenstein-combination of various contemporary painting motifs that have been cobbled together for the tongue-in-cheek purpose of acquiring praise. The painting is a subversive critique of the art world, presented with a palpable lightheartedness."*

*However, not to take anything too seriously, the work also includes a self-deprecating, self-portrait that pokes fun at my own niche as a painter."*

**In Da Club**  
Oil on panel; 42"H x 42"W; 2018





**Tall Tales Study 1**  
Oil on panel; 12"H x 12"W; 2018



**Tall Tales Study 2**  
Oil on panel; 12"H x 12"W; 2018



**Tall Tales Study 3**  
Oil on panel; 12"H x 12"W; 2018



**Tall Tales Study 4**  
Oil on panel; 12"H x 12"W; 2018



**Tall Tales Study 5**  
Oil on panel; 12"H x 12"W; 2018



**Diorama for Plein Air Play**  
Mixed media in corrugated housing;  
14"H x 10.5"W x 12"D; 2018;  
Not for sale

Photo by 20 North Gallery



**Plein Air Play**  
Oil on panel; 10"H x 10"W; 2019



*"I received an advertisement in the mail for a local internet provider that contained numerous photographs of cell towers as their strategic marketing plan. This combined with a dose of skepticism on the health effects of wireless communication, I decided to make a playful depiction of a cell phone tower and the surrounding environment."*

***iFry WhyFi***

Oil on panel; 24"H x 18"W; 2017

*"I have come to the realization that one of the unifying themes throughout my artwork has always been the desire to quietly disrupt some form of artistic convention in a highly refined manner, often using humor to do so. In this particular work, I was predominantly focused on generating a composition that embodied the movement present in baroque paintings."*

*However, the addition of the goofy, pink dinosaur completely disrupts the painting from having any elegance and seemed entirely absurd. Therefore, I knew it was the perfect solution and immediately embraced the idea."*



***Da Debacle***

Oil on panel; 24"H x 24"W; 2015



***This Means Something***

Oil on panel; 24"H x 18"W; 2014

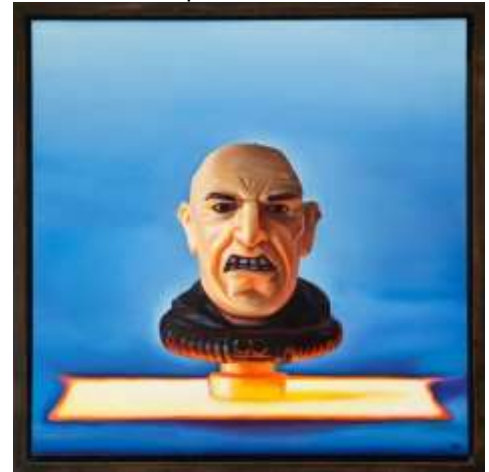
*"I was fascinated by the visual qualities of aluminum foil and decided to use it as a focal element within the painting as a technical challenge. The tinfoil was undecipherable and had an alien like quality to it. This became the catalyst for me to reference Close Encounters of the Third Kind as the narrative for the composition."*



**Western Faux**  
Oil on panel; 24"H x 24"W; 2015

*"A painting motif that recently resurfaced, consists of a figure in profile, posing with a draped Native American blanket in front of a majestic southwestern landscape. Although strikingly beautiful, some of these works felt disingenuous through the commodification of indigenous cultures. My painting is a subtle critique of this imagery and practice."*

**Committee Head**  
Oil on panel; 24"H x 24"W; 2015



*"The omniscient committee head. Due to the power structures in academia, I wanted to poke fun at the imposing authoritative figure through a dramatically lit plastic portrait."*



**Old Yella**  
Oil on panel; 24"H x 70"W; 2015

*"Insecurities and fear can be debilitating. As I reached closer to the completion of my education, I was increasingly concerned with whether or not I could succeed as an artist. The considerable financial investment, time and emotional commitment towards the pursuit compounded my anxiety."*

*However, I felt that the best way to address this fear was to embark on my most ambitious painting to date. The scene depicted within the composition, seeks to represent the confrontation of various internal fears/obstacles. Furthermore, the color yellow acts as both a visual thread throughout the painting, as well as a reference to being cowardice."*



**God Damn Duck Pond**

Digital print on wood, triptych; 14.5"H x 87"W; 2014

*"During my undergraduate career, I primarily focused on digital painting and illustration. For my senior project, I created a triptych that fused all of my technical know-how into a single work with a non-sensical, pseudo-political premise."*



**God Damn Duck Pond (Detail 1)**

*"The narrative depicts a mallard duck and a rubber duck at war over who can occupy the duck pond based upon their creation myth. Ironically, the composition for this work subconsciously resurfaced during the development of Old Yella."*

**God Damn Duck Pond (Detail 2)**







*“A simple interest in color, form and imagery lead to the creation of this diptych. My objective was focused solely on the process of depicting the still life to the best of my abilities, with the hope of achieving a tromp l’oeil effect. Ultimately, this painting became a significant turning point for me and my confidence as a painter. The title stems from the year I was able to travel the United States and study geology/fossils in our national parks.”*

**2008**  
Oil on panel; diptych; 7"H x 5"W; 2014

*“With this tiny painting from life, I wanted to express the fragility of human existence by making a connection to the fate of the dinosaurs. The subjects are positioned on a tower of cards that is both delicate and in danger of collapse. To add to their vulnerability, there is a foreseeable threat in the distance. Fun!”*



**Da Doom**  
Oil on panel; 7"H x 5"W;  
2016



**Road Trip Robot**  
Oil on panel; 8"H x 6"W; 2018



**Study of Play 1**  
Oil on panel; 4"H x 4"W;  
2017



**Study of Play 2**  
Oil on panel; 5"H x 5"W;  
2017



*"Nothing more than a lobster raising its claws in proclamation towards the sky!"*

**Yes!**

Oil on panel; 10"H x 10"W; 2017

*"Ian J. Welch, a Toledo based print maker and educator, received an accelerator grant from The Arts Commission to collaborate with artists from other disciplines to create an edition. For my contribution to the project, I designed a print that questions the current agricultural practices in Northwest Ohio with a play on words."*

**How**

Lino cut; 10"H x 8"W; 2017



**Coffee Time**

Oil on panel; 12"H x 36"W; 2014

*"During graduate school, I was conflicted between my interest in strict observational painting, and a humorous sensibility rooted in animation. I generated numerous works that attempted to fuse these characteristics together in a cohesive way. Although this work has less of a narrative component than my later works, it helped solidify the direction I am current pursuing."*



**Vroom!**

Oil on panel; 24"H x 24"W; 2015

*"I loosely structured the premise of this painting around our reverence for oil. The temple for this nearly holy substance, is being appropriately honored by a muscle car flying overhead with gratuitous flames. The imposing pyramid is supported by the people, both literally and figuratively. Furthermore, the plastic temple is made out of a material that is derived from decaying matter, such as a dinosaur!"*

**Dawn of the Donut**

Oil on panel; 24"H x 24"W; 2015



*"This painting fused my love for donuts and my all-time favorite film, 2001: A Space Odyssey. In addition, this painting was a response towards artwork that I felt was either too serious or too academic during graduate school. I believe that play should be as valid of an investigation as other, more traditionally accepted topics."*

*Toy Stories: Paintings by Aaron Pickens*

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