

Childproof: Marc Kokopeli
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Pampertaarten are maternity gifts for expectant parents that are popular in and around the Netherlands. These folksy, handmade objects are crafted primarily from disposable diapers and embellished with various newborn-related items like milk bottles, cuddly toys, and novelty bibs. Marc Kokopeli first came across them in Belgium (later discovering US variants in the Midwest) and felt compelled to make his own versions as part of a recent body of work dealing with child development. *Taart* is Dutch for “cake,” and *Pampertaarten* mainly take this form but sometimes other, more inventive variations such as cars, airplanes, and guitars. Kokopeli’s *Die Pampertaarten* (all 2021) are vehicular in design, structurally resembling big-wheeled bikes and all-terrain vehicles, which the artist has pimped out with cheap souvenirs and cutesy knickknacks.

Each work in the *Die Pampertaarten* series is unique, but all visually invoke baby care and tropes around having children. Some also reference popular culture. The shell and cuffs of *Bowser* refer to the reptilian nemesis in *Super Mario Bros.*, and *Babe* refers to the titular pig from the eponymous film and specifically the sequel, *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998), in which Babe wears a spiked choker—no doubt a scene that imprinted when the artist was a kid. Others represent a particular idiosyncrasy, for instance *Pink Gun*’s politically misaligned mom, or ironic stereotypes. *Student* is adorned with a prescription bottle with an anti-drug slogan printed on it, as well as stencils, rulers, and key rings, suggesting the type who used to bring an apple to school for teacher. Kokopeli first exhibited *Die Pampertaarten* in the 2021 group show *The Holding Environment* at Bonner Kunstverein, as a motorcade, particularly the kind of self-styled procession that regularly takes place across the United States—think *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) as remade by Pampers. In a sense, this type of public display represents a bastardized expression of values synonymous with the fallacy of the American dream—independence and materialism meet pageantry. *Barrister*, complete with black gown and jabot, held up the back of the charge—an advocate for Kokopeli’s motley crew. Given their obvious association with the infantile, *Die Pampertaarten* also sit in the shadow of Donald J. Trump’s presidency—years when Trump was often caricatured as a baby, whiny and demanding. The giant inflatable Trump Baby that appeared during protests portrayed him in a diaper, bloated and orange, while the online circulation of the hashtag #DiaperDon and purported claims of Trump’s incontinence further made him out as a petulant child. “Scatological imagery abounds in caricature and other forms of satire,” wrote Mike Kelley in “Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature” (1989).¹ Fittingly, Kokopeli turns the diaper into objects of exaggeration. Where *Die Pampertaarten* infantilizes subjects, some of Kokopeli’s other works concern the formation of identities constructed in childhood. His black-and-white photographs *Untitled* (2016–19) were taken by the artist’s mother in the early 1990s, when Kokopeli was around four years old. Made for the Seattle-based social-emotional learning organization Committee for Children, the images were originally intended as educational tools for use in school

classrooms. They depict various scenarios often staged in his family home and involved the artist, his sister and friends performing different psychological states and/or social interactions with one another, reenacting emotions such as empathy, generosity, or jealousy. By appropriating his mother’s handiwork, Kokopeli muddles his own parental relationship within the framework of an artistic discourse that has been historically defined as a commentary on originality and commerce.

Untitled are typically hung on miniature felt-padded walls about the height of a toddler. And appropriately, the documentation of his and Adam Martin’s 2019 exhibition *How to Start a High School Underground* at Établissement d’en face in Brussels was filmed from the perspective of the gallerist’s young child, who wore a GoPro camera while tottering around the installation. Soft furnishings also appeared in Kokopeli’s 2017 solo show *Tales of the Veil* at Édouard Montassut, Paris; the artist upholstered the pedestals upon which he showed the *Die Pampertaarten*, effectively childproofing his artwork.

Kokopeli’s use of supple materials continues Kelley’s thinking on the dichotomy of softness with its opposite, and the gender associations thereof, throughout art history. As Kelley put it: “Many modern artworks underline the equation of the soft and the decorative with the feminine as a negative, distortional device—a tactic of caricature.” Citing examples of “male artists using supposedly feminine softness to attack and destabilize rigid patriarchal order,” Kelley made clear that the soft/hard distinction was already on a list of polarities that have contributed to the hierarchical ordering of Modernism, and ultimately, “the aesthetics of morality.”² If softness has been considered a form of denigration, then Kokopeli’s attention to subjugated themes in art, such as ornamentation, craft, and the psychology of childhood, is entirely intentional. And as his latest work indicates, in doing so he scratches the surface of a cultural psyche to revel in such distinctions.

- 1 Mike Kelley, “Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature,” in *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 26.
- 2 Kelley, “Foul Perfection,” 32, 33.

227 Marc Kokopeli, *Student*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist

228–229 Marc Kokopeli, *die Pampertaarten* installation view at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York / Los Angeles. Photo: Joerg Lohse

230 Marc Kokopeli, *Demon*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York / Los Angeles

231 Marc Kokopeli, *Bassinet*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York / Los Angeles





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