

Early Human Figures: Child Artists and the Pleasure of Mistakes

When modernists looked to rejuvenate the ways they depicted the world, they turned to the drawings of children, whose flattened perspectives and imprecise human forms captured what Roger Fry called an “immediate expressiveness.” In a cultural moment that prized the “shock of the new,” elements of child art once assumed to be errors were reinterpreted as evidence of naïve expertise, and essayists wrote treatises on modern art that reproduced and celebrated children’s “early human figures”—a phrase that registers both the immaturity of the artist and the assumed likeness between her art and that of “primitive” peoples. Decades later, twenty-first-century picture book creators returned to the child artist and the mistakes she makes, and in books such as Barney Saltzberg’s *Beautiful Oops!*, Peter Reynolds’s *Ish*, and Corinna Luyken’s *The Book of Mistakes*, botched drawings and paintings launch narratives of creative resilience. Centering on the not-quite-right masterpieces of young people, these books suggest child art naturally foregrounds the generative nature of mistakes.

This paper approaches children’s artistic mistakes, and adults’ descriptions of them, in three ways: as a means to gauge cultural constructions of childhood, as a trope that might obscure or reveal child-produced culture, and as a critical lens for those in childhood studies. First, I map the shifting ways adults have interpreted imperfections in children’s art, from errors to be corrected to models to be imitated to opportunities for creative or moral education. While doing so, I examine the drawings of children whose work was published at pivotal moments in this cultural history. How does the language of mistakes frame child art, and how do children produce art that reinforces or breaks that frame? I end by considering our critical approaches to child-produced culture and how the methodologies we use to analyze that culture are vexed or nuanced by the fear of mistakes. What ways of reading are considered “mistakes,” and why? How can we interpret child-generated texts without making the mistake of granting the adult or the child too much agency? What happens when, as a self-conscious critical practice, we embrace readings of the child commonly considered incorrect?