



DANGER! FOR KIDS

ARTIST JULIA JACQUETTE CELEBRATES CONCRETE AND RISK IN BRUTALIST PLAYGROUNDS.

BY TOM STOELKER

An illustration in the artist Julia Jacquette's new book, *Playground of My Mind* (DelMonico Books/Wellin Museum of Art, 2017), depicts two children perched high atop concrete columns made from a series of stacked squares. Their teetering, from the ground perspective, makes one want to yell "Get down from there, kid! You're gonna get hurt!" The image depicts Columbus Park Towers playground in New York, designed by M. Paul Friedberg, FASLA, in the mid-1960s, an early example of an adventure playground, now demolished.

Riffing on the graphic novel, Jacquette's artworks depict the adventure playground designs commissioned by New York City in the 1960s, and feature the work of Friedberg, the architect Richard Dattner, and Jacquette's father, the architect William Jacquette.

The artworks that comprise the book are gouache on paper and intentionally mimic early 20th century illustration using a limited palette,

usually a middle tone and a dark tone. Jacquette's source materials were a combination of contemporary and archival photos from the 1970s. Today, Jacquette is an assistant professor of fine arts at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where she teaches painting, drawing, and two-dimensional design.

Jacquette views the brutalist playgrounds depicted in the book as integral not just to her aesthetic, but her view of life. "These playgrounds were about prompting play; they were not dictating play," she says. Through concrete aggregate formed into right angular squares, circles, and dangerous perches, Jacquette says that the playgrounds taught her and her playmates to take risks, albeit surrounded by a soft "sea of sand" on which to land.

The playgrounds mimicked the cityscape around them, with park circulation replicating the street grid, water features acting as rivers, small bridges becoming highways, and the square columns acting as buildings. Their palette, too, was decidedly accepting of the urban landscape.

"There's this assumption that kids want bright colors, but keeping the

natural color of the materials lets imagination play a bit more. The underlying theme is undictated play that has an element of risk, and the kid is driving it."

With so many brutalist plazas slated to be redesigned or scrapped entirely, Jacquette says she is concerned that many of the playgrounds of her youth will suffer the same fate, prompted by poor maintenance of the crumbling concrete. The playground at Columbus Park Towers by Friedberg is long gone. The Adventure Playground by Dattner in Central Park has been greatly altered. But Discovery Play Park, also in Central Park, retains many of her father's designs, like a concrete "volcano" with slides. Kids still jump from the volcano, though Americans with Disabilities Act compliance dictates that they now fall on rubber matting instead of sand, a change Jacquette applauds.

"I remember responding to that idea of this field of anchored structures that I could jump through, over, and on, and thinking, 'Oh, I gotta go home for dinner now, but it'll be here when I come back.'" ●

TOM STOELKER WRITES ABOUT ART, URBANISM, AND ACADEMIA IN NEW YORK CITY.

ABOVE
The Columbus Park Towers playground by M. Paul Friedberg, FASLA, loomed large in Julia Jacquette's imagination.

BELOW
Photos from the 1970s like this one of Discovery Play Park served as the book's source material.

