

NINO MIER GALLERY

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Zak Kitnick
Paintings for Children
New York | SoHo
March 7 – April 4, 2026

An essay written by Hannah Pivo was commissioned on the occasion of the exhibition.

At 4:37am on August 12th, 2024, Zak Kitnick became a father. The baby was “healthy and cute,” according to the birth announcement, and remains so today. She was also the original intended audience for Kitnick’s *Paintings for Children*, a series that is as much a testament to his new identity as a father as it is to his longstanding preoccupation with seriality, appropriation, and the relationship between the commercial, the industrial, and the decorative.

Paintings for Children is composed of one hundred small paintings of trucks, buses, vans, and automobiles. Each painting is different, but the figures are not. Nine vehicles repeat in a seemingly endless variety of color combinations fit for a nursery school. These vehicles, though hand-painted, appear stamp-like with thick, firm edges. They seem to hover before their backgrounds—framed but not really grounded, separated from the world behind them like vivid cartoon characters layered over a hazy desert landscape. The backgrounds, in contrast, are painted with loose, expressive brushstrokes. And unlike the figures they are each unique, locating the vehicles in a variety of different scenes and settings: roads, grass, sky, stars, stripes, and polka dots, among others.

The works are composed of sign painter’s enamel on linen. The muted gray of the textile peeks through the high-gloss paint to a greater or lesser extent in each work. In some cases, this adds a sense of spatial depth. In others, it recalls the presence of paper behind a child’s crayon drawing. Indeed, the industrial enamel appears surprisingly crayon-like as applied to the backgrounds in a single, thin layer. The vehicles themselves, in comparison, look more like the glossy commercial signs for which the paint is intended. Thick and slick, one wonders if it might be possible to peel a truck off one painting and stick it on to another.

To make these one hundred paintings, Kitnick engaged in mass production on a micro- or, shall we say, kids’ size-scale. He performed a division of labor that separated the painting of backgrounds from the painting of figures. And the latter process was further sub-divided: the vehicles were traced from templates, then painted by hand in multiple separate layers. To accomplish all this, Kitnick set up a sort-of production line in reverse. Each ‘product’ (read: painting) remained stationary on one of a dozen tables lined up in a row, while the artist and his assistant moved from one to the next executing the same task on repeat. The series’ nine different vehicles and twenty-some colors functioned as a set of interchangeable parts that, like modular furniture or choose-your-own upholstery, provide the illusion of personalization within mass production. That is to say, each painting is unique, though its components are not. In enacting this process, Kitnick was, as he puts it, “playing factory” like a child plays doctor or princess. And no wonder, because he’s accustomed to play these days. He has been surprised to find out how much of parenting involves time spent on the floor stacking blocks.

The paintings’ linen supports speak to the origin of their imagery. All nine vehicles are taken directly from the artist’s childhood bedsheets, which Kitnick now knows (though of course he didn’t at the time) were designed by the Japanese designer Katsuji Wakisaka for Marimekko. The beloved Finnish fabric house began making children’s clothing and toys in 1951, but it was not until 1975 that it introduced its first textile made specifically for kids: the transportation-themed *Bo-boo* (meaning ‘honk honk’ or ‘beep beep’ in Finnish, according to advertisements). The popular design—which features rows of bright, blocky vehicles on a white background—was produced in the U.S. during the late 1970s and early 1980s by

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textile manufacturer Dan Rivers Inc. as bedclothes, sleeping bags, and wallpaper borders. Sold at department stores across the country, Bloomingdale's once marketed *Bo-Boo* as having been "designed for very special childhoods."

Did this colorful traffic jam make a lasting impression on a generation of children? Hard to say, but it definitely made one on Kitnick. The works in *Paintings for Children* recreate *Bo-Boo*'s cars, trucks, and buses at a one-to-one scale. Like in his earlier work, the appropriated imagery remains readily recognizable even as it is recontextualized and transformed. Kitnick remained faithful to the original vehicles' sizes and forms but played freely with their colors. Recognizing the work as an excavation of childhood memories prompts one to wonder if the paintings' myriad color combinations represent an effort at recollection: were the truck's wheels pink or green? Was the van yellow or blue? And the backgrounds, seen from this angle, look like the remembrances of a child who spent bedtimes imagining the cars on his sheets zooming across a field, over an ocean, or through the night sky.

In this installation, the paintings are hung at tyke-height—four feet off the ground, at most—just as they were in Andy Warhol's exhibitions for children, from which Kitnick's series also borrows. Warhol's *Toy Paintings* were commissioned by his European dealer, Bruno Bischofberger, and first displayed at his gallery in Zurich between late 1983 and early 1984. Produced with his familiar silk-screening technique, the 128 technicolored paintings mostly pictured toys—model planes, wind-up drummers, mechanical dogs, moon men, clowns, and more—as represented on their packaging. The show later travelled to the United States, where it made headlines when it was installed as *Andy Warhol's Children's Show* at the Newport Art Museum in 1985. At the time, critics writing in *Artforum* and *The New York Times* seemed eager to find a punchline but came up dry. "It's just that the show's for children," Warhol explained when pressed, "I wanted it arranged for them." Kitnick's show is also for children, and while lighthearted it's hardly unserious.

When Warhol showed his *Toy Paintings*, they were hung over wallpaper of his own design. Although printed in grayscale, its rows of fish—which recalled Japanese kites—still provided a busy background for the works. Kitnick's paintings are hung on white walls, but he has not overlooked this aspect of Warhol's installation design. Tucked away in a small back gallery, paintings made with off-the-shelf stamping rollers are hung on walls that have been decorated with the same tool. The resulting pattern, delicate vines bearing leaves and flowers, references his daughter and wife: *Cosmos 4 Daisy*, *Cosmos X Daisy*, *Cosmos W/ Daisy*, etc. Here, Kitnick's longstanding concern for mass-produced decoration encounters the explicitly autobiographical. The series serves, in a way, as an explanation for his turn to a new, younger audience with *Paintings for Children*.