



# Scenes of Childhood: Artists Recount "Toy Bop" Collaboration

Interview by Trish Beatty,  
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"Toy Bop" is on display in the History Center's Community Gallery through January 11, 1998.

HOLIDAYS AT THE Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center allow visitors to indulge in the nostalgia and sentimentality that are hallmarks of the season. For a second consecutive year, the main attraction for this holiday season at the History Center is a playful panoply of colorful toys from those most collectible decades, the '50s and '60s. "Toy Bop" brings back many of the 200-plus toys, games, and dolls first brought to the public's attention in 1994 when Murrysville, Pa., collector Tom Frey published his illustrated book *Toy Bop*. The exhibition by the same name premiered in 1996 at the History Center, enchanting Baby-Boomers and Gen-Xers alike.

The sheer variety of toys in Frey's collection suggested an eclectic approach in the development of display units. The History Center museum staff hoped that a collaboration with a team of artists would yield unique and imaginative settings for the toys. Frey himself was the chief curator for the exhibit.

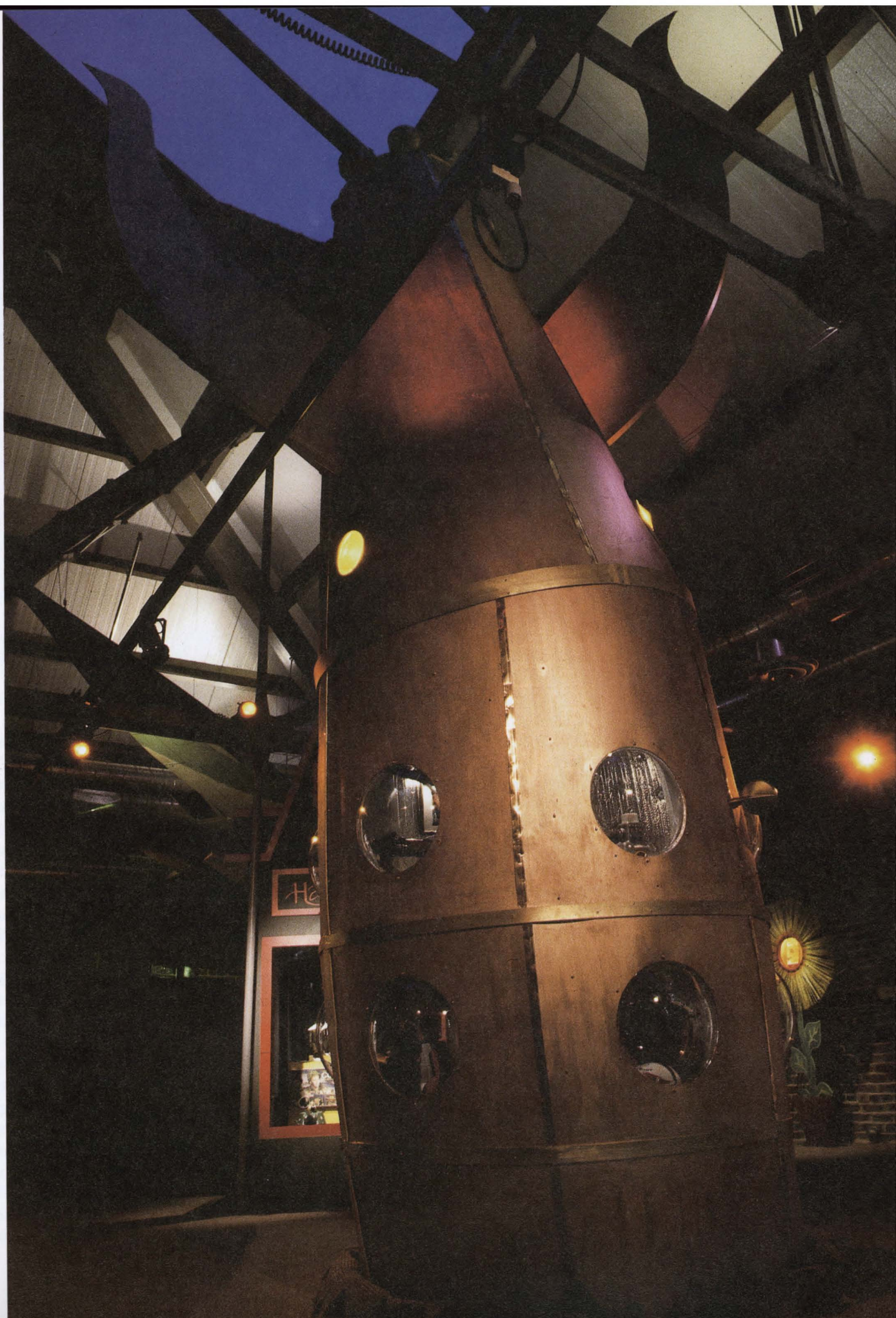


Pittsburgh artists David Goldstein and Mary Kay Morrow were recruited in September 1996 to coordinate the creation of "Toy Bop." The pair are partners in Zenith, an antique/art gallery and tea Room on the city's South Side.

"Toy Bop" was an unqualified hit last year, as record crowds streamed into the History Center during Novem-



**"The  
Spaceship"  
and many  
other visual  
delights in  
"Toy Bop"  
showcase the  
imaginations  
of Pittsburgh  
artist-  
designers  
Mary Kay  
Morrow and  
David  
Goldstein,  
opposite.**





ber and December. Museum visitors were captivated by the novel environments in which the toys were artfully displayed. From whimsical daisies fashioned from industrial brushes to house “perennial” toys like Frisbee and Slinky, to hanging tires and corrugated sheet metal, the exhibit units provided a lively counterpoint to the polished brightness of the toys, many in mint condition.

Eight months later, Goldstein and Morrow were working on new ideas for the exhibit’s second run at the History Center. “Toy Bop” was to feature two new elements: a collection of tin toys manufactured in Pittsburgh by the Wolverine Company and a hands-on play area for children. In Morrow’s dining room, a new display unit for the war toys section of the exhibit was under construction — a military tank, which had become a favorite perch for the household cats.

Morrow and Goldstein took time out in early September to talk with the Historical Society’s Trish Beatty about their toyland experiences of the last two holidays seasons at the History Center.

**TB:** *Why were you attracted to the project?*

**MKM:** I think *building things* attracted us, because we like doing that at the store.

**DG:** And it was a fun kind of idea, something very fantasy-oriented. And the challenge of creating these display things, making them relate to the toys inside them, was fun also. It wasn’t as if someone was asking us to make a display case and that was the end of it. It challenged us in a creative way, and in the way of executing it. We are always very attracted to doing things we’ve never done before. So, for us to be able to tackle such a large-scale production was very attractive, regardless of the money or anything else that was involved.

**MKM:** Plus, being able to hook artists up to institutional things is a real attractive idea. To make people think of that resource that

they have here. There’s a great community of really talented artists in Pittsburgh which rarely gets tapped into. People don’t even consider it a resource.

**DG:** The thing that amazed us so much was that [museum director] Bill Keyes approached us. We had no track record of doing anything like this. I mean, we couldn’t believe that he would come to us — put his trust in us like that.

**MKM:** Well, we realized at some point that it was desperation. (laughs)

*“Really, the exhibit made people have to be kids, to bend down and look in things, look around things. It put them in positions of play, as adults.”*

**TB:** *When Bill first approached you about working on “Toy Bop,” you didn’t have a long timeline, did you?*

**MKM:** No. I think by the time the contract was signed, we had less than two months.

**DG:** It was intense.

**TB:** *Were you ever worried about butting heads at some point with the museum staff, who might have different priorities than you?*

**MKM:** Bill was very encouraging to begin with and seemed to have confidence that we could do it. After we met with people and showed them the first drawings, everyone seemed very enthusiastic.

**TB:** *How was it decided to group the toys by genre, rather than, say, by manufacturer?*

**MKM:** I don’t think that we consciously tried to put that perspective on the thing. But when you look through the [Toy Bop] book and you try to make some sense out of how you want to show these toys, then you start to come up with some cultural definitions of the time frame that the toys were made in. That’s why it’s so great that this year we get to do the war toys, because that’s the biggest hunk of that toy generation.

**DG:** Culturally, it was interesting to see the connection between toys that are supposed to be for kids, and yet how very much like an indoctrination they are for children to become adults: how you’ve got war toys and Suzy Homemaker, and how they define girls, how they define boys, and how they define jobs. It’s interesting that although the toys are supposed to be fantasy-oriented, they’re based very much on realism, and so we indoctrinate our kids to go on and perpetuate established roles in our society.

**TB:** *After the groupings were decided upon — girl toys, boy toys, war and animal toys — how did you begin the process of developing your design? Did you draw upon childhood experiences?*

**MKM:** Well, being children of that generation, I think it would have been inevitable.

**DG:** But I think, just by grouping them, it became fairly obvious what the options were as far as building displays.

**MKM:** There were some transitional ideas. We did have a drawing for a robot that we thought of, for where the rocket ended up. But at some point, we decided against doing things that looked like figural things. We didn’t want any toys that were competing with the toys. We wanted them to be objects that the toys were inside of, so that you would look at the objects and then you would approach the object and see that it wasn’t the toy — the toys were all *inside* the display objects, which functioned as the exhibit cases.

**TB:** *Certainly, one thing we try to do at the History Center is to display artifacts within a context, as you did, for example, in the “boys clubhouse.” Looking inside, it is easy to imagine a boy sitting there, surrounded by all his “stuff.”*

**MKM:** Yeah, I think that was one of the reasons why, in thinking about the design, once we had gone down and seen the building, that we wanted the stuff to be *rough*. The building’s so beautifully finished — everything looks very professional. And the toys themselves are sort of sleek. And that’s how those toys got played with back then — they got played with in treehouses that got slapped together.

**TB:** *You used a lot of “found” materials in the construction of the objects.*



# A Leap Of Faith

by William Keyes, Museum Division Director

IN ANY creative endeavor, there is a point when a leap of faith is the only means to get from the safe ground of ideas to the riskier ledge of commitment. To spring forward with eyes open is the only way across. We made that leap with “Toy Bop” and found that the rewards far surpassed our expectations.

Once the initial concept for the exhibit was formed — to present Tom Frey’s spectacular collection of toys from the ’50s and ’60s in a child’s fantasy setting — we had to find artists capable of creating it. Mary Kay Morrow and David Goldstein were our first choice. Their South Side store and gallery, Zenith, embodies many characteristics that make “Toy Bop” such a visual success. Both of them have a keen visual sense of form, color, and — what would be essential for the smiles of recognition on visitors to the

exhibit — a subtle sense of playfulness. Their ingenious structures and settings set the perfect tone for the exhibit and sparked the creativity of our staff who installed the toys and created the vignettes inside the structures.

This collaboration helped us to engage the visitors in a way that a simpler arrangement could not have done. We see it as an experiment that can help our exhibits team explore a broader range of possibilities in exhibit presentation and for us to get a better sense of what excites the public about the museum experience.

At the heart of it always is the way a museum — unlike television, a film or a CD — brings you into contact with real things, the authentic article. Objects, whether they are toys or tools, do not just mirror the human experience: they are an integral part of it. ☼

**MKM:** Well, that goes back to the beginning of the process, because before we came up with any specific ideas, when we began to look at the toys, we talked about the plastic, and primary colors, and what a different childhood that childhood was — how different the world looked from the way the world looks now. And we wanted there to be a little bit of ruin in the way we showed these toys, with old scrap fences and...

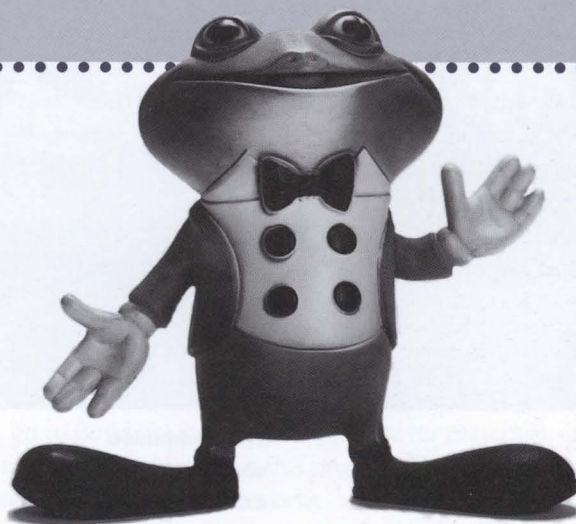
**DG:** Quite honestly, it was a lot of fun. We would go up to a junkyard and we’d just roam around looking for interesting objects. And then we’d find something and say, *whoa*, what can we do with this? It was like we were being challenged with the materials, and we would just pick them out because we thought they were interesting, and then it was up to us to figure out how we were going to use them.

**MKM:** You could build *any* kind of boxes, but you think about how you wanted the room to look, and how the boxes were going to be disguised so that they *weren’t* boxes. Like the flowers, you know. They were just boxes that had those little toys in them.

**TB:** It’s interesting, though, that some of the ultimate outcome was driven by the materials you were able to find and use. It was an evolving process.

**DG:** It made it a little more interesting for us.

**MKM:** It does go back to that question you asked about going back to childhood. Really, that’s how we were acquiring materials



**“Froggy the Gremlin,” a rubber frog from the 1950s, is one of hundreds of toys featured in “Toy Bop.”**



The clubhouse section of the exhibition reveals the designing duo's flair for mixing found objects, new materials, and moody lighting.



— the way children play. We were going in and looking at things, just picking them up because they were interesting — playing with them....

**DG:** We'd figure out what to do with them later. "Right now," we thought, "let's just get the stuff."

**TB:** *Under the terms of the contract, there were specific issues regarding the use of artifacts — that the display units be stable, secure, and clean. What sort of a challenge did that present in constructing these components?*

**MKM:** Other than the "jungle" area, which was open and protected by a fence, the other things were pretty much closed boxes. Security was very much on our minds, and certainly on the curator's, I'm sure. Not only had we not done something like this before, but the History Center had never done [a collaboration with artists] before either.

**DG:** I think when we tackled that problem of security, we were always thinking "container, container, container," but then it was the question of how you make the container interesting? How do you make it an object and still be a secure container? And I don't think that was so tough for us to do.

**TB:** *But for people who want to create exhibits that invite the visitor to approach, to get them inside and around the artifacts, to give them complete access except for touching them, and yet to make it secure, you've got to use materials that aren't going to fall apart or be easily penetrated.*

**DG:** One good thing is that when we had the initial meetings with Bill and the staff, they really mapped out pretty clearly for us what our objectives were, so they helped us quite a bit, telling us what we needed to do to make it successful as a display unit: high visibility, maybe all the way around; and then the security aspects, and so on. That was good. Everything was kind of laid out for us, what was expected of us.

**MKM:** Some things that worked that weren't consciously decided were evident in seeing people look at the show. Part of the reasons that a lot of things worked is that you weren't just looking at things at eye level, in one place. Really the exhibit made people have to be kids, to bend down and look in things, look around things. It put them in positions of play, as adults. It made them approach the toys in the same way they would have approached the toys if they were actually playing with them. People were having personal experiences with those toys.

**DG:** And I think scale was a big thing. Having things in a large-scale presentation is always interesting to people, particularly if you're doing it in an indoor area. That's why I think the rocket was very successful, it had such an amazing presence in the room. And other things, like the castle — even Connie [Merriman]'s airplane, I thought — were very effective because they were so large.

**TB:** *I've seen your cruddy old garage. It's not a space in which you can stand back and get the big picture easily. Did you have doubts until you saw the cases in the gallery?*

**DG:** We didn't have time for that.

**MKM:** We're very good at that. David and I are both very visual people, and I think we really have a good grasp of how we want

things to look. That's probably a problem in negotiating with people because I always feel very confident that I know how things are going to come together. People are always scared about even little things, and I always say everything's fine.

**DG:** But another factor was that we were under such a deadline that you really couldn't doubt too much. I mean, right after one section was done, we had to move on to another one.

**MKM:** Oh, I remember a conversation with Bill Keyes when he called and said, "How are things going?" and I said, "It's pretty scary, it's getting pretty scary." Well, fear is good. Fear is a good motivator.

**TB:** *Well, from the initial sketches at the beginning, to the moment when you walked into the gallery after the exhibit had been installed and the lighting was perfect, it sounds as if you were not surprised that it was a gorgeous exhibit.*

**MKM:** No, it was how I visualized it, pretty much.

**DG:** Well, when you go from the first step, just talking about an idea, and then move on and actually put it down on paper — drawings and things — and then leap all the way to the end and see it, of course I was impressed by the way everything came together; how what we did came together, and then the people who helped us; and the way the staff had their contributions, you know, it was great. I mean, I think definitely I didn't know what to expect when we first started this project. To me, it was like a theatre production. You go to opening night and everything has come together and it's great. I thought it really worked.

**MKM:** We all ended up spending enormous amounts of hours working on this — Rick Wisinski and Frank Bisceglia, too. We all had never worked on anything like it. We were working for nearly two months, all day, every day, 12, 14 or more hours.

**TB:** *What did that work out to, maybe 35 cents per hour?*

**DG:** Yeah, something like that.

**MKM:** No, we don't want to think about that.

**TB:** *Please don't.*

**DG:** But in the end, it was a very unique experience.

**MKM:** Well, rarely in life do you do something to the exclusion of practically everything else. And we didn't do anything else.

**DG:** Our daily routine was to wake up in the morning, have coffee, go to Builders' Square to buy whatever materials, and go down to our store to work on this project. We must have eaten pizza every day for about six weeks.

**MKM:** We didn't do our antiques store — we handed that over to someone else. We didn't do our daily life. We didn't do laundry. I mean we bought our clothes at Goodwill [a block from their store] and came back. We didn't buy any groceries.

**MKM:** Yeah, and we don't eat pizza anymore.

**TB:** *So, this year, you're building a new war toy unit in the form of a military tank and a new factory setting for some tin toys from the Historical Society collection.*

**DG:** What we based our drawing on was an older factory.

**MKM:** The drawings are of a 1929 distillery, and you might say that toys are a distillation of childhood. And this is a great way to connect these older tin toys, which is where these '50s and '60s toys came from. The source material. ☼