

Violence and Brutality
Francis Whorrall-Campbell

Ceramic, faux leather and silk cutlery canteen.

Silver gelatin prints.

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At one institution, the director opened a desk drawer to show me a collection he was particularly proud of: some twenty knives that he had taken from the children.

“Monsieur Genet,” he said, “the rules require me to confiscate these knives. And so I do. But look at them. Do you think they’re dangerous? They’re tin. Tin! You can’t kill anyone with tin.”

Did he fail to realize that, divorced from their practical application, objects are transformed into symbols? Their very forms change, become stylized. Their work is silent, cutting deeper and deeper into the children’s souls. Buried in a straw mattress at night, or hidden in the lining of a jacket, or in pants—not for the sake of convenience but to be closer to the organ of which it is the essential symbol—they represent the murder the child will never actually carry out, even as they plant a seed in his dreams that drives him, I hope, toward the most criminal acts. Why bother to confiscate these knives? The child will choose some other, seemingly more benign object to represent murder, and if that, too, is confiscated, then he will safeguard a precious, perfectly precise image of the weapon in his mind.

Jean Genet, ‘The Criminal Child’, 1949

Sooner or later he was bound to take a crack at it, that is at stealing. He had, on several occasions, already engaged in the following game: on a show-case, among the objects on display and in the most inaccessible spot, he would place, as if inadvertently, some trifling object that had been bought and duly paid for at a distant counter. He would let it lie there for a few minutes, ignoring its existence, and examine the surrounding displays. When the object had melted sufficiently into the rest of the display, he would steal it. Twice a store detective had caught him, and twice the management had been obliged to excuse itself, since Darling had the sales’ slip.

Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, 1943