Paul McCarthy’s exhibition at Hauser & Wirth’s gigantic 18th Street space included sculpture carved out of blocks of walnut that were pieced together from dark and lighter segments of wood. From these composite blocks, McCarthy produced medium-size to colossal tchotchkes (a genre that is dear to him), thereby entering the arena in which Jeff Koons has been working for more than 30 years. Koons, the come-back kid who has been getting a huge amount of attention recently, is the man to both paraphrase and beat. His sensibility, though, is very different from McCarthy’s—aiming for immaculacy and perfection. McCarthy’s carved imagery was drawn from Walt Disney’s 1937 animated film version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs—funny, sentimental, sexual, and at times frightening children’s stuff, and Koonsian territory, par excellence. However, McCarthy—like his friend Mike Kelley, with whom he occasionally collaborated—takes us from childhood longings back to the darkest recesses of infantile behavior.
As we age, some of us hold on to imagery that transports us back to a time when we believe we were happier, even if only momentarily, inside the movie theater or in front of a TV screen. We have all seen the embarrassing, age-inappropriate objects flickering certain interiors (Hello, kitsch). McCarthy's work is always about taste and decorum: What is appropriate? What is acceptable? What are we repulsed by? What are we secretly drawn to? Who draws up the rules? Can you spell hypocrisy? What about inhibition? Where do these primal urges come from? What are we repressing? McCarthy's project is important because he constantly pushes the envelope, forcing us to rethink the very nature of art.

A performance artist steeped in process, one who uses liquid or malleable food-stuffs to allude to other viscous materials, McCarthy directed the virtuoso carving of the walnut so that it achieves the roundness and softness of wet clay—thereby reminding us of the Baroque exuberance of late Bernini, grandfather of kitsch in the opinion of some critics. Significantly, in light of McCarthy's project is important because he urges come from? What are we repressing? McCarthy's project is important because he constantly pushes the envelope, forcing us to rethink the very nature of art.

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across the garden, with gestures and expressions borrowed from Masaccio’s Expulsion from the Garden of Eden in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence. Or, witness WP on his knees approaching WS, the archetypal mother figure, who lies nude on a couch in the superb video-diptych WS Olympia (shown in a room off the drill hall), suffering from a splitting headache: “What did you do your homework? Did you do your homework Walt? Are you lying to me Walt?” She then proceeds to pull at Walt’s ear and wash out his mouth with a bar of soap. Disney’s relationship to his hysterical, abusive, and incestuous mother was, if I follow McCarthy correctly, a sly manipulator—Mr. Wholesome U.S.A.—who delivers artist Llyn Foulkes), is a sly manipulator—Mr. McCarthy (and other critics, including the artist Lynn Foulkes), is a sly manipulator—Mr. McCarthy, however, has little patience for ethical lessons, wherever they come from, and proceeds to turn the whole thing on its head. The corruption of youth is one of his preferred subjects. Who can forget the tawdry tableau of The Garden (1991–92) in which a father initiates his son in the joys of his preferred subjects. Who can forget the tawdry tableau of The Garden (1991–92) in which a father initiates his son in the joys of sex? The deliberately ugly rendering of the landscape, the enormous amount of violence, Disney’s relationship to his hysterical, abusive, and incestuous mother was, if I follow McCarthy correctly, a sly manipulator—Mr. McCarthy (and other critics, including the artist Lynn Foulkes), is a sly manipulator—Mr. McCarthy, however, has little patience for ethical lessons, wherever they come from, and proceeds to turn the whole thing on its head. The corruption of youth is one of his preferred subjects. Who can forget the tawdry tableau of The Garden (1991–92) in which a father initiates his son in the joys of sex? The deliberately ugly rendering of the landscape, the enormous amount of violence, and the few, however, get to fulfill. In the film WS, there was the humor, scatological or otherwise, which enabled us to make some sort of sense out of it all, just as it allows us to make sense out of life. We would not be able to survive without it.

In “WS,” McCarthy takes a well-known and highly structured narrative and sees how far he can stretch it, load it with tangents and digressions, and layer it with meanings both explicit and subliminal, so that the whole, with its endless repetitions, spins like a carousel, seemingly woolly beyond all control, though not quite McCarthy is a grand master at making the familiar look terribly unsettling. The story of Snow White, as pure as snow, is about innocence and penance in the face of ill fortune, the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and the rewards such victory brings along with it. It belongs to the genius of the fairy tale, which aims to instil good habits and strong morals in young children. McCarthy, however, has little patience for ethical lessons, wherever they come from, and proceeds to turn the whole thing on its head. The corruption of youth is one of his preferred subjects. Who can forget the tawdry tableau of The Garden (1991–92) in which a father initiates his son in the joys of sex? The deliberately ugly rendering of the landscape, the enormous amount of violence, and the few, however, get to fulfill. In the film WS, there was the humor, scatological or otherwise, which enabled us to make some sort of sense out of it all, just as it allows us to make sense out of life. We would not be able to survive without it.

“WS” is insane, but no more so than much of what we see, hear, or read about, reaching from the reality of our bedrooms and backyards to the highest levels of government. As McCarthy’s previous critiques of idealized fantasy demonstrate, his is clearly not an optimistic worldview. The American way—which Walt Disney championed—is corrupt and corrupting. Despite our pretensions, we are all rotten to the core. We embrace what is base—just look at our entertainment industry. McCarthy declares. We purport to love God, family, and country, but are driven by lust, and greed. We are frauds—as fake and ugly as those preposterous noses. There is a huge amount of food for thought in “WS,” which—interestingly—remains a work in progress.

Michael Amy is a professor of the history of art at the Rochester Institute of Technology.