

Jousting, brulée torching and Easter – what do all three of these items have in common? The answer: they are all activities linked to Peeps, that ubiquitous marshmallow candy that lines the aisles of American drugstores and supermarkets every year upon the arrival of spring. Pressed into the shapes of fluorescently colored baby chicks and bunnies, Peeps have captured imaginations nationwide since their introduction in 1953.¹ With powerful visual appeal and recognizable symbolism, Peeps have become the top-selling non-chocolate Easter candy. The fascination with Peeps has taken on a life of its own, and the Peeps meme has gained traction particularly on the internet, much to the puzzlement of detractors who insist that the cloyingly sweet confection does not actually taste good. In the meantime though, there are over 200 websites dedicated to exploring the realm of Peeps possibilities, from Peep solubility in sulfuric acid, to an award-winning documentary titled “The Power of the Peep,” to the sport of “Peep Jousting.”² (In the latter, dueling peeps are each armed with a toothpick and nuked in a microwave. As the heated Peeps balloon in size, the first Peep to pierce the other combatant is declared victor.)

The versatility of Peeps has led to the rise of a new cultural phenomenon: Peeps dioramas. In recent years, a number of newspapers have begun sponsoring competitions to create the best diorama using Peeps. Though the first such contest was held in 2003 by the Twin Cities Pioneer Press, the most prominent Peeps diorama competition is that sponsored by the Washington Post. Currently on its fourth iteration, the Washington Post Peeps Diorama contest has exploded in popularity since its inception, attracting over 1,100 entries this year. Contestants draw upon their artistic talents and generate a myriad of scenes depicting Peeps at famous landmarks, historical events, and occasionally, in compromising positions. More importantly though, the Peeps dioramas provide insight on the pulse of American pop culture, an instant reflection of what’s hot, what’s not, and what’s on our minds.

The top 38 finalists and semifinalists can be seen in the Washington Post gallery “Peep Show IV,” with this year’s winner titled “Eep,” a parody of the 2009 Pixar animated film “Up.”³ The diorama features an intricate miniature Victorian house balanced on box springs to create the illusion of floating, topped by a kaleidoscopic air balloon of Peeps (Figure 1). The artists carefully snipped hundreds of popsicle sticks to create the latticed roof and siding of the house. This model duplicates the momentous lift-off scene in “Up,” just as the house takes flight.



Figure 1: Eep

¹ Peeps Official Website. <http://www.marshmallowpeeps.com/> Retrieved July 12, 2010.

² Cohen, A. (2009, April 2). Marshmallow peeps on the internet – a study. Message posted to <http://www.unlikelywords.com>.

³ Peeps Show IV. (2010, April 4). *Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/gallery/2010/03/29/GA2010032903934.html?sid=ST2010032904380> Retrieved July 12, 2010.

Other semifinalists for this year depicted topics ranging from “Super Peepio Brothers,” a parody of the Super Mario Brothers video games, to “Peep Side Story,” a riff on Leonard Bernstein’s musical “West Side Story,” complete with Peeps gang members facing off in a fight. Some dioramas veered toward historic events, like “Tsar Nicholas Peepanov in his Coronation Robes, May 1896,” but the vast majority focused on current events and contemporary pop culture.

In fact, closer scrutiny of this year’s winners reveals that current events provided inspiration for the bulk of the entries. With dioramas grouped by topic, it is quite evident that current events were the most frequent subject used, at 29% of the semifinalists, followed by dioramas based on works of literature, art, film and historical events (Figure 2). Some of the current events highlighted include the notorious Balloon Boy hoax and the party crashers at last year’s White House state dinner for the prime minister of India.⁴⁵ However, by far the most popular current events topic was “Snowpocalypse,” referring to a series of blizzards that hit the Eastern seaboard in February of 2010. In Washington D.C., government offices were forced to shut down as snow removal crews struggled to clear 2.5 feet of snow. Meanwhile, a snowball fight organized through Facebook resulted in over 5,000 participants at Dupont Circle.⁶ These activities were memorialized in a number of dioramas, titled “Peepocalypse 2010,” “DC Snow Bunny,” and “Snowpeepalypse” (Figure 3). Though Peeps are traditionally regarded as a harbinger of spring and warm weather, clearly the heavy winter was still weighing on the minds of Peeps diorama makers.

Speaking of major events in local history, the influence of the contest’s base location was evident in the frequent portrayal of D.C. area activities and political commentary. Contest entrants do not have to be from the D.C. metro area, however to be eligible for a top 5 finalist position, the diorama must be physically brought to the Washington Post headquarters. This

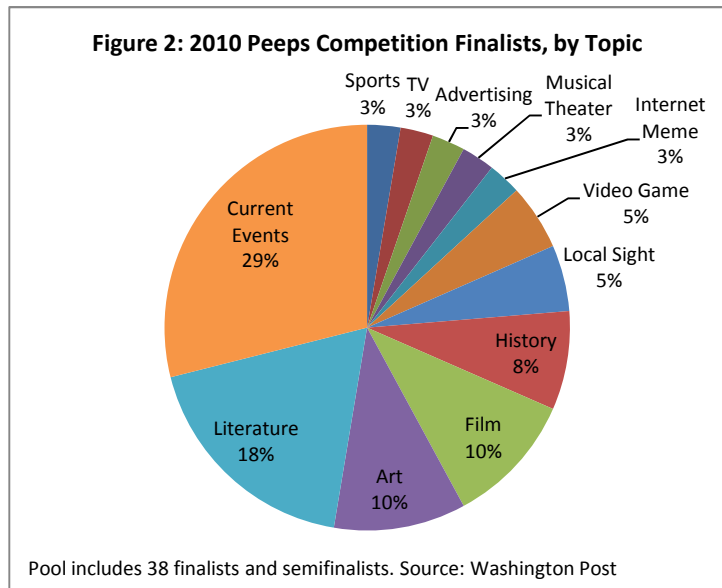


Figure 3: DC Snow Bunny - The Blizzard of 2010

⁴ Gehart, A. (2009, October 16). A Mystery Aloft, a Nation Riveted -- And One Grounded Balloon Boy. *Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/15/AR2009101502275.html>. Retrieved July 12, 2010.

⁵ Argetsinger, A. and Roberts, R. (2009, November 26). Reliable Source: Tareq and Michael Salahi crash Obamas' state dinner for India. *Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/25/AR2009112504113.html>. Retrieved July 12, 2010.

⁶ Judd, A. (2010, February 6). Dupont Circle Snowball Fight a Success in the Blizzard of 2010. Message posted to <http://www.nowpublic.com>.

effectively precludes winners outside the MD, VA and DC areas. Of the pool of semifinalists, 31.6% were themed after a local facet of Washington. These included depictions of nearby attractions, such as the National Cathedral seen in “Easter at the National Peep-thedral,” “Little Bo Beep” to commemorate the Obama family’s new dog, and local events like the annual High Heel race, shown in “Sevenpeepth St. High Heel Race.” (Figure 4)



Figure 4: Easter at the National Peep-thedral

Although the majority of diorama entries centered around pop culture phenomena, several did make attempts at more high-brow expression. Though not included in the pool of semifinalists, there were a number of metaphysical entries that depicted Peeps viewing a group of Peeps dioramas, and a diorama of a pair of Peeps making a Peeps diorama. Two other entries eulogized the recent death of literary giant J.D. Salinger.

Perhaps even more interesting than the winning dioramas are the dioramas that are deemed too controversial for public display. In 2009, one of the semifinalists depicted a waterboarding scene at Guantanamo Bay, which sparked some backlash from readers (Figure 5). In response to criticism that the



Figure 5: Peeptanamo Bay

selection “celebrated” the use of torture, Washington Post journalist and judge Dan Zak commented, “I don’t think the diorama is celebrating Guantanamo Bay. It is depicting it using an absurd medium. It’s low-grade satire. A Peeps diorama of Guantanamo Bay makes us chuckle, but there’s a dose of bitter shame behind it. When first viewed by the staff here, it elicited laughs that turned quickly to groans. And we’ve had Abu Ghraib submissions. We’ve had an execution of Saddam Hussein Peep diorama. Crucifixion dioramas. And so on. But this Guantanamo one was edgy, amusing, topical and groan-inducing. And it got the OK from editors.”⁷

The inherent humor of the Peeps medium has made

the parody of a politically sensitive subject socially acceptable.

Zak went on to describe a well-constructed entry that was thought to be too controversial for inclusion as a semifinalist, a diorama on the “Georgetown Cuddler,” a sexual assailant linked to several assaults around Georgetown University’s campus. At the last minute, the entry was cut by editors who were exercising “an abundance of caution,” perhaps due to the as-of-yet unsolved nature of the case and proximity of the victims.

⁷ Zak, D. (2009, April 13). Peeps show III. *Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2009/04/09/CI2009040902738.html>. Retrieved July 12, 2010.

In the end, one may still be left wondering why such serious time and effort is invested in what is ultimately a very flippant idea. The answer may lie in the Peeps themselves. Although Peeps are nostalgically tied to childhood Easter baskets, they are also a heavily artificial and processed food, colorful to view but literally full of empty air. Here, they have been elevated to a canvass, incorporated as a building block for the creation of masterpieces. It is ironically fitting that the silly, saccharine Peep is used in juxtaposition with serious topics, and that America has embraced and seized the concept by storm. Perhaps there is nothing that can fully explain the hullabaloo, but as Peeps documentarian Matthew Beale puts it, "What could be more American than something that's mass-produced and covered in sugar?"⁸ Indeed, this is the communication of pop culture through a most American lens.

⁸ Vinciguerra, T. (2006, April 16). Soft, chewy and taking over the world. *New York Times*, p. WK2.