



image: Catherine Heard

OF INTIMATE KNOWING by John Marriott (June 1999)

Dolls elicit the shock of recognition, like decoys possessing the look of life. From our pasts, dolls span across the divide between childhood and adolescence. For some of us, dolls, action figures and stuffed animals were liberating vessels for our early imaginations; playing with them and identifying with them opened us to a flow of imaginary personalities, worlds and possibilities for being. But conventional wisdom has it that after dolls help us to cope with separation from our mothers, they are outgrown and no longer vital. And what of the lives that we poured into these manufactured companions (or that they drew from within us)? Are these dimensions lost in adulthood, or do we retain some deeper connection to those impulses and voices?

The Doll House is charged with the uncanny silence of dolls, a silence that pulls voices from our civilized minds to fill their waiting mouths. The dolls gathered here do not simply affect the standard doll's agreeable look of life; some are grim, some shell-shocked and others drunk with experience. Unlike the caricature of a newborn's potential seen in the prototypical baby-doll, Catherine Heard's spawn are riddled with obsessively crafted malformations, ranging from disfiguring disease to feral fur. They read like an expectant parent's worst fears manifest in alarming detail. Françoise Duvivier's figures appear like eerie peasant's dolls emerging half awake from bad dreams, with distorted faces, unkempt hair and unsettling eyes. Their disarmingly quaint garments and inviting scale are jarringly counterpointed against faces wrought with deformities and emotional contortions, drawn from elements of beauty and misfortune with a clarity that is touching. In "The Doll House" some of the dolls are presented as solitary creatures while others appear in groups, haunted by the suggestion of purpose. Dame Darcy's tiny, fairy-tale figures sit side by side staring with manic round-eyes like characters from the animated film, "The Nightmare Before Christmas." Abbreviated, cartoon-like miniatures of the human form, her dolls are both playful in their rendering and penetrating in their emotionally restrained faces and postures making for a visual pleasure laced with uncertainty. Melissa Mazar's spindly cloth automatons stand in a cluster, like derelict and dingy sleep-walkers with their stained seams exposed. A faceless communal herd, they evoke a sense of group mind or mob ethos in the raw. And Magdalen Celestino's group of black sentinels hover in a ritualistic circle, smelling of rubber. They have been lovingly wounded and bristle with decorative sutures. Refined in form and primal in iconography, they seem like beastly instruments for some passionate or occult purpose. Why are they gathered together? Is their grouping intended to have totemic influence? Is this the residue of a private rite?

Civilizations through the ages have created figures in their own image that they believed to hold symbolic meaning and supernatural influence. Human-shaped objects manifest hope and fear, and move between make-belief and belief. As religious fetishes and totems, dolls (in the form of effigies) fulfill important purposes in religious ritual and play, as conduits for supernatural intervention and as contact points to the inner and the unknown. In sympathetic magic, even the crudest representation of a body, such as a stick and a rag, is believed adequate to exert supernatural influence over a being. The voodoo doll, a proxy that resembles a living person or animal, is adorned with a lock of the unfortunate victim's hair or other physical trace, to strengthen the link between the effigy and the being it represents. The look of life is tied to having and controlling life.

Dolls – like clothes, tools, or furniture – are fundamentally tactile; we make contact with them and incorporate them like extensions of ourselves in our activities. To know them they must become a part of our doing, active in our stories as they unfold. Dolls fit within a symbolic order that says "alive." Composed of the shapes, parts and logics of bodies, they share a schema for "human being" which we have internalized. When we recognize a body, we typically sense life embodied, manifest for us to read in the cues of open eyes, expressive mouths and limbs. We recognize life through this schema even when we are presented with an incomplete representation such as a torn photograph of a person. This link allows dolls to function as keys to emotional wells containing the stories inside us; but if we deny or resist this connection, as adults are taught to do, the stories may fall silent. As adults emotionally enmeshed with making or appreciating dolls (particularly adult creations such as those in this exhibition), our connection flows logically from the roles that dolls have commonly assumed as intimates in our early years, known by touch and physical closeness, by day and night.

When we look at dolls within the realm of art, this mode of intimate knowing is erased or, more correctly, is further displaced by the histories, expectations and cultural hype that the institution of art manufactures and represents. As a benign example, larger, figurative sculpture cannot typically be experienced in the same way as dolls, not simply because dolls are wonderfully suited in scale and form to accompany us in our daily lives, but because dolls encourage (and perhaps require) touch - unlike most art. Sculpture is traditionally shielded by a taboo on touch, so the absence of intimate contact is effectively built-in and intrinsic to its valuation and meaning; but exhibiting dolls as art objects generates a sense of lack or privation around them. We can trace this aura of separateness to a prevailing norm for art and artifacts in the west: sculpture (and art in general) is created to be hands-off and is designed for exhibition in galleries with these constraints in mind. Because of our concerns for the longevity and property-value of cultural objects, we have restricted explorations of tactility within the ostensibly expansive pursuits we refer to as art. We internalize this sense of separation, this layer of institutional prohibition which is cultivated between us and art. Without touch or contact an object cannot be fully comprehended. When the object enters the pantheon of high culture it is incorporated into multiple layers of external meaning (such as the historicizing narratives of art discourse) that embellish and modify. In a museum the art remains apart, speaking first of art before it speaks of anything else. Art objects become artifacts and ambassadors of culture, operating within discourses of craftsmanship and anti-craft; in doing so they reflexively position their viewers as spectators or guests. How strange then, how melancholy, to encounter a potentially intimate item in this context. Inserting the doll-form into high culture revives caches of early loss, perhaps because the art context reenacts the regulation and discipline that we experience as children when we are weaned-away from dolls. If we could handle the dolls we encounter as art, would it deter us from viewing them as rarefied objects, or is this void vital? If we were to touch them, would dolls (as art objects) lose some substantive power or meaning that arises out of their separation from touch and removal from the common? After all, that shift in designation is what prevents us from physically imposing our own presences upon them. When a doll becomes an untouchable art object, it may echo early prohibitions around manners and physical boundaries when we learned to respect the property of others, including their bodies. Cultural treasures like art symbolize a host of entrenched values that confer legitimacy and prestige upon their cultural position. It is ironic, then, to meet dolls again in a context where touch is forbidden, contemplation is exalted and the sense of property is emphatic.

Dolls come to art from outside the traditionally defined disciplines of painting, sculpture and later inductees such as installation and performance. Is it because dolls are originally domestic and come to be seen as emotional relics that their status as art objects is conflicted? Perhaps this helps to explain

why Western art has made only sporadic accommodations for dolls alongside the traditionally sanctioned art forms. Hans Bellmer's hallucinatory dolls did not have many contemporaries, while their descendants, such as the Pink Floyd-like figures made by Sarah Lucas seem to adopt the posture of figurative sculpture rather than doll-making. Works by artists who have produced figurative work over the past forty years – such as Duane Hanson (influential yet somehow unhip), Kiki Smith, Charles Ray, Robert Gober, Katharina Fritsch, Juan Muñoz, and Jake and Dinos Chapman – are presented and received as sculpture. Mannequins and life-sized wax figures, such as those by Ray and the Chapmans, as well as Abigail Lane, Ron Mueck, Mark Quinn and Gavin Turk, have factored strongly in the touted (and much-hyped) Saatchi Collection. But dolls, even when they have attained a high profile in recent art, have been used as vehicles for mediated end-products. Laurie Simmons, for example, fabricated dolls to resemble her so that she could pose them for glossy photographs. And **Tony Oursler** created faceless stuffed dolls, and surrounded them with conspicuous video technology that projects the faces of actors rolling their eyes and crying out in fear to where the dolls own faces would otherwise be. As seductive as the results are, these dolls act as platforms that are subsumed by the artists' self-consciously distancing manipulations. "Dollhood" is used like a type of content in such work. Distrustful of allowing the dolls to be themselves, to confront us simply and directly, the artists opt to amplify the loaded space between dolls (as art) and us (as viewers).

The Doll House moves beyond reading dolls as surrogate infants to nurture or as tiny adults to animate. Like so-called difficult children, these dolls break from the prototype of the healthy, happy newborn to confront us with consequence and a lack of control. Rather than fulfilling idealized wishes these creations broach taboos around sexuality and fertility by embodying the possibilities of illness, abuse, mutation and emotional duress. They break from the standard doll's implicit covenant of unexamined optimism by depicting powerlessness, dark animus and occult suggestion. The works in **The Doll House** challenge our notions of what dolls do and how open art is. /

John Marriott is a Toronto-based artist, writer, curator and graphic designer. He compiled and edited the multi-disciplinary anthologies, **Sensoria from Censorium**, Volumes 1 and 2 (Mangajin Books, 1990 and 1993). His writing has appeared in publications including *Suggestive Poses: Artists and Critics Respond to Censorship* (Toronto Photographers Workshop and The Riverbank Press, 1997) and *Prendre Parole* (Artexte Editions, 1999). Marriott has participated in solo and group exhibitions, performances and screenings in Toronto, Halifax, New York, Glasgow, Belfast, Nurnberg, Wellen, and Vienna. In 1996 his work was featured in a solo exhibition at The Power Plant in Toronto, and most recently in a solo exhibition entitled *Soft Spots* at The Koffler Centre in Toronto | e-mail him **here**