5-2016

DollHouse

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DollHouse

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art & Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Art, with a Studio Art Concentration

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by

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May 2016

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Keywords: Installation, Interactive, Performance, Masks, Cultural Norms, Dolls

ABSTRACT

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by

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The artist discusses the work in *DollHouse,* her Master of Fine Arts exhibition on display at Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, Tennessee from January 25 to February 5, 2016. The exhibition was an installation consisting of five sets, each containing furniture - both 2D and 3D - and a mask with instructions relating to a room found within a dollhouse.

The sets and supporting thesis explore the ideas of social norms, feminism, and identity, and how submission to ideologies can create emptiness, while engagement can prompt social change. Topics include the process and evolution of the work and the artists who influenced it, ideas of identity and society, and the impacts of social norms on young women's lives. Included is a catalogue of the exhibition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In February 2016, I presented my thesis show, *DollHouse*, at Tipton Gallery in Johnson City, Tennessee. In this thesis, I investigated the effect playing with dolls has on contemporary American society. In an attempt to reconcile the nostalgia I felt for these toys with the suspicion that they had significantly impacted several aspects of my adult personality, I created a show where societal norms were undermined with humor and viewer interaction. My goal was to discover whether re-immersion into childhood play as an adult could open dialogue about how dolls influence women's lives.

Toys imprint their internalized ideas upon the children who encounter them. These toys become guides and heroes, informing your interactions in the external world, in much the same way as characters from stories do. For all of my life I have consumed movies and stories. The escapism innate in these toys and stories became hypnotizing for me. It was always incredibly important to me that a tale should have a moral. Here, the two ideas of the stage and the doll intersect.

The stage or screen makes us feel as though we are actually witnessing the real. But, it is all a front, a guise to manipulate our feelings, to make a certain judgment, and to move forward in life with a particular moral or value implanted within us. Movies and stories, just like dolls, exist to teach us about our society and values, and to entertain us along the way. This is why I felt it was necessary to reinsert the viewer into a stage of my design; there was a need for the experience of these ideas to become life-size. With experience as a thespian, I drew upon the practice of getting into character utilizing props. It is fascinating to me how these objects of play

and entertainment - which are so often cited as objects of inspiration to the imagination, things that break boundaries - are also just as often placing those boundaries and rigidly instructing us.

I became interested in the subject of dolls through nostalgic reflection upon my childhood. Often my research questions how certain aspects of pop culture influence me personally, and then I expand that question to how that aspect has influenced society in general. As I progressed through this work, I discovered that there were others with me who not only had positive feelings toward our dolls, but also felt reservation about what was communicated through those objects to us as children. Most of the reservation expressed revolved around the societal norms perpetuated in the figures, clothing, and activities the dolls took part in. Repeatedly, Mattel's Barbie was brought up; she was discussed not only in reference to her body shape, but there were also comments on the various careers she had through the decades, and a sneaking suspicion that Barbie was really Kelley's mom, instead of her big sister. In further investigation of Mattel practices I found that their influence on American culture pivoted on their ability to sell a certain lifestyle to young girls.

My research centered around the dollhouse as I created metaphors within the work to represent my lingering mixed feelings about these toys. The house itself became an analogy for both domestic roles and expectations sustained by doll accessories, as well as the sense of having no control over my space or life as a child. In fact, the only real power I felt was in controlling my dolls in their space.

One of the largest challenges I overcame in this work was how to take a subject that started as incredibly personal and create room for the viewers to insert themselves. This was accomplished in two ways: first, I converted masks that were originally intended for performers into pieces to be worn by viewers who would become the performers themselves. Next, the

objects and spaces of the interactive sets were stripped of personality in the same way toy companies reduce objects to their simplest forms, to allow the imagination of the viewer to fill in the rest.

DollHouse consisted of 5 sets, all decked in bright, "girly" colors: the tea room, the kitchen, the living room, the laundry, and the bedroom. The sets were comprised of both two dimensional and three-dimensional objects that were painted to match the room's decor and were meant to mimic sets found in toy dollhouses. In each room the viewer was invited to listen to audio instructions delivered through headphones. These instructions had them put on an accompanying mask and theatrically perform domestic tasks such as baking and cleaning. After the completion of the tasks the viewer was rewarded with information on how to be like a doll.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT DOLLS ARE

One of the most frequent questions I received throughout this process is: “how are dolls related to ideology?” Ideology is seen mostly as governing the socio-political landscape of our culture. It drives the tides of elections and investment, and governs the abstract concepts to which the populous cling. However, that is not the full meaning of the word. For this work, I mainly focused on a definition that is in line with Louis Althusser’s: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (109). There exists both a conscious and unconscious navigation of our individual relationship to others in the real world. And, also like Althusser, I believe that those relationships are materialized.

> ‘Ideology has a material existence.’ Althusser contends that ideology has a material existence because ‘an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices.’ Ideology always manifests itself through actions, which are ‘inserted into practices,’ for example, rituals, conventional behavior, and so on. (Felluga)

For me, dolls are an apparatus for passing down beliefs from adult to child. An adult woman who played with Barbie buys her young daughter an updated version of the blonde, busty totem; the hunk of plastic that helped her understand what it meant to be a woman will now do the same, she hopes, for her own little girl. Eliana Dockterman wrote about the release of new Barbie body shapes for TIME magazine: “Barbie is more than just a doll. The brand does $1 billion in sales . . . annually, and 92% of American girls ages 3 to 12 have owned a Barbie . . . She’s been the

global symbol of a certain kind of American beauty for generations," (Dockterman). That is what Barbie and dolls like her have become: icons of femininity.

I asked myself repeatedly, why, if Barbie has so much controversy surrounding her, do women continue to pass the tradition down to their daughters? Every woman I know is completely aware of every issue with Barbie's figure and her role as a domestic, dumb blonde. Yet, only recently have Mattel sales begun to sink. What is the allure? Women identify Barbie as a flag bearer of femininity, and despite all of the societal and political upheaval that has resulted from amazing acts of feminism, women who identify with said gender still want to be women. Women don't want to be assimilated into a man's world. Women want our gender to be part of our sensibilities and identities, and what we don't want is to give that up in order to find equality. *DollHouse* was both an exploration of the domestication that dolls represent, as well as my own celebration of self-identified feminine qualities.

One way that dolls function as ideological apparatus is through allowing a child to theatrically reenact or enact what they actually witness and what they may fantasies about. My interest in this theatrical element was embodied in the performance that takes places as a participant followed the recorded instructions found within each dollhouse set. The recordings gave voice to lurking social norms held within the dolls. One of the main influences I had in exploring this theatrical element was the work of artist Alexandre Singh and *Commedia dell'arte*. Singh's work *The Humans* is a three-hour performance where actors retell an amalgamated creation story. There are expressive masks and costumes worn through understated stage sets. JJ Charlesworth, writer for *Art Agenda*, says this of his play: "[The Humans] tells a tale of the Apollonian and Dionysian dualism at the heart of humanity, and is, to say the least, engagingly bonkers" (Charlesworth). Because of Singh's work I began to think about my

characters becoming activated in this dramatic way and about utilize the mask to transform a person into a grotesque facade.

CHAPTER 3

TIMES, THEY ARE A CHANGIN'

There is a current that guides our culture. The current links us together through what we wear, what we watch, what we learn in school, and whom we idolize, among many other things. Zeitgeist, the phrase associated with Georg Hegel, describes this phenomenon. "Who says what the spirit of the time is? Must it be bound to technology? In general it was interpreted in architecture as telling the modern architect what he could not do, which was most things. Paradoxically, it also demanded that he be original" (Saarinen). Although this notion is typically applied to how it affects the production of things as guided by changing ideologies, I argue that now it also affects the way consumers are marketed to, and the messages those products then carry. In this ever-changing tide of trends, there are a number of brands that speak to the overarching fears and desires of American culture in our current Geist. Douglas Holt, author of *How Brands Become Icons*, describes this phenomenon:

> Iconic brands provide extraordinary identity value because they address the collective anxieties and desires of a nation. We experience our identities—our self-understanding and aspirations—as intensely personal quests. But when scholars examine consumer identities in the aggregate, they find that desires and anxieties linked to identity are widely shared across a large fraction of a nation's citizens. These similarities result because people are constructing their identities in response to the same historical changes that influence the entire nation. (Holt)

Icons often deliver solutions to our current cultural problems. It's Clint Eastwood delivering a halftime talk for the Super Bowl to Americans during an economic slump. It's American Idol

traveling from coast to coast giving anyone their shot at being known in a time when most people don't believe their voice can be heard. Companies exploit inhibitions and our weakened sense of identity to sell their products, promising that all you need is this pair of Wranglers, and you will be just as manly and important as Brett Favre. Holt contends:

> Budweiser became the most desirable beer in the 1980s because the brand addressed one of the most acute contradictions of the day. Working men were motivated by Ronald Reagan's battle cry as he invoked America's frontier myth to restore the country's economic might. The country's economic and political meltdown in the 1970s, along with the increasing independence of women, had left them feeling emasculated. Reagan's call to arms gave these workers hope that they would soon regain their lost manhood. The same men, however, were beginning to realize that their vocations as skilled manual laborers, their primary source of masculine identity, were becoming obsolete as these jobs were replaced by technology and outsourced overseas. Budweiser targeted this acute tension between the revived American ideals of manhood and the economic realities the made these ideals nearly unattainable for many men. (Holt)

In the same way that Budweiser addressed men's fears, Barbie addresses women's. There is a lot written about how women entering the workforce affected men, but this change affected and continues to influence the products women buy. While men felt emasculated, women were dealing with being defeminated. So Barbie and dolls like her survived through filling this void of femininity. Erica Wolf, author of *The Beat Begins*, examines how Barbie fit into 1950s culture:

> Barbie was intended to be 'a model of bubbly teenage innocence.' She 'projected every little girl's dream of the future' while teaching females about independence.

> She allowed children to relate their child-sized hopes and dreams to the adult world. Barbie represented all that a woman could be and more; she was famous, wealthy, and popular. (Wolf)

The way we view gender identity in the United States is changing. We have a larger amount of freedom, albeit still not enough, to pursue the gender identities we desire. Having more freedom to explore this, I felt the need to reexamine my feminine nature. For most of my life I shunned pinks and purples, and anything that could be called "girly." With time and space from more rigid social structures, such as high school, I began to first explore my body through self-portraits. In my exploration of dolls, I pushed into this world that I had previously avoided. While *DollHouse* is critical of the sexist values these dolls can instill, it is also a celebration of "the feminine", which still holds value and merit in our world.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEMPORARY VINTAGE FANTASY

I constantly feel a need to escape. There are few who don't. Escapism has become ingrained in American culture: we love our movies, we literally rewrite our identities on social media platforms, screens are a part of our constant landscape, and we are obsessed with push notifications and news feeds which make our ever-boring present that much more connected to what's actually happening elsewhere. Escape is a trap and a release. It frees us from a never-ending cycle of day-to-day activity, while putting us into a new cycle of unending satisfaction-seeking.

Diversion has always existed in society. It maybe began with throwing together a huge fire to celebrate the return of sunlight to the world, but it doesn't end with Tweeting. My introduction to the work of Saya Woolfalk challenged my ideas of global appropriation to create a shared culture. She is interested in the way cultures and identity can be quoted out of context, which can dilute and even compromise the integrity of a society. As ART21's Jacquelyn Gleisner puts it, "The Empathics [Woolfalk's created culture] desire fulfillment through destruction" (Gleisner). One of the main devices Woolfalk uses is escape. The people she has created, the Empathics, operate through uploading and downloading new personalities and identities. They are constantly seeking a happy place in a cyber land, never finding fulfillment but for fleeting moments, continuously moving onward.

There is a conversion that happens at a certain point in this cycle of escaping. Somewhere between the mundane and "the other," there is a transformation of myth into truth. My concern is that the myths of our social norms and stereotypes have been turned into truths in our culture.

However, I believe we are coming out of a period that was obsessed with truth: from TV screens in every building turned to a news channel, to the surge in scientific study, and an obscene number of conversations disputing "the facts." Where earlier generations have sat down after work to watch hours of *CNN*, younger generations seem more interested in binge watching a fanciful Netflix series. This re-emersion into stories could open up pathways for discussing social norms that no longer need to hold merit in our society. I personally take issue with anything that proposes to give cold, hard truth, indisputable facts, or law. However, I also take issue with anything that proposes to be above truth, facts, or law. For example, I despise the argument that a movie shouldn't be read in a social context because it's "just a story." Everything has a larger historical and social context, yet individuals also bring their own personal experiences as well. This is the root of my issue with truth: it is difficult to discern, and the moment you think you know a truth is probably the moment you are disregarding the perspective of someone else.

"Truth" and escape seem perpetually intertwined. There are many theorized reasons for why we humans are so in need of escape. I focused on one reason in particular for this work: we escape when we need autonomy. Holley Hodgins was part of a research team investigating the effects on motivation and emotion through autonomy in participants' surroundings. The team found the following:

> Three experimental studies tested whether a priming procedure intended to activate an autonomy orientation would lead to non defensiveness and enhanced performance, whether activated control orientation would lead to higher defense and impaired performance, and whether activated impersonal orientation would lead to the greatest defense and worst performance. Study 1 showed that

> autonomy-primed participants report lower desire for escape compared to controlprimed, and that impersonally-primed showed most desire to escape. (Hodgins)

In this study they came to the same conclusions I had about autonomy, focusing on how autonomy levels affected performance and a desire to escape. When we are confronted with the unchangeable, we often resort to fantasy. This is the main reason my installation needed vintage-inspired elements presented in a contemporary moment. I wanted to evoke both a sense of the work being grounded in the now as well as in escape: creating a confusing mixture of subjective and objective reality. It can be difficult to categorize certain elements of the show as vintage or contemporary. The hesitance I observed in viewers in proclaiming any object or set of instructions as one or the other justifies my thoughts on this. To say that any part of the show is definitely vintage is to proclaim that it is not a part or issue of contemporary society, while also being unable to claim that anything is completely in the now.

Straddling the line between retro and contemporary really became a metaphor of how the issues revolving around girls toys are both vintage and contemporary: they have the allure of nostalgia that is so common with vintage material, while also commenting on how this particular aspect of our society is not up to date. Toy companies are dragging their feet in the past while trying to look shiny and new. Girls' toys present a glorified image of contemporary society while resisting change and action. The dollhouse is stagnant; while there may be new appliances and fresh colors, it is still a stationary, unchanging environment since its invention. Boys toys aren't much better, but at least GI Joe is fighting to change things - to demolish the bad in the world - even if that means a whole new set of psychological issues passed down to little boys. Despite Barbie's careers, she is still mostly rearranging her furniture, going to the beach, and upgrading

her wardrobe. Girls' toys don't teach girls to act. Regardless, these unchanging objects are still presented as contemporary in our culture, giving rise to the tension between the old and new in my show.

CHAPTER 5

WE NEED MORE

GI Joe defeats his nation's enemies, while Barbie sits at home waiting for him to come back. Often times in our media women are sidelined to the plots and actions of men. While my escapist nature drew together the realms of dolls and drama, there is one vital aspect of storytelling that has itself escaped doll producers and American media: giving females a story of their own. This continues as an important topic today. The Bechdel Test came into existence as a joke in a comic strip by Alison Bechdel, but its popularity serves as testament to the weight of these issues that it has become a feminist standard by which films are tested. The parameters of the test are simple and frighteningly easy: there must be two female characters; those characters must converse; that conversation must be about something other than a man. Dockterman again describes the issues with Barbie as related to American media:

> Meanwhile, American beauty ideals have evolved . . . fueling a movement that promotes body acceptance. In this environment, a new generation of mothers favor what they perceive as more-empowering toys for their daughters. Elsa might be just as blond and waif-thin as Barbie, but she comes with a backstory of strength and sisterhood. (Dockterman 46)

This movement in American culture opens up pathways for girls and women to come into their identity as women with honor. Having a story puts a woman into a societal context instead of leaving them as an accessory to a man's world. A story also gives consumers material to play around with, an instrument of change and progress that activates the imagination. Karen

Wohlwend studied this very concept by allowing kindergarten girls to bring in their favorite Disney princesses into class and play as they wrote.

> Drawing upon theories that reconceptualize toys and artifacts as identity texts, this study employs mediated discourse analysis to examine children's videotaped writing and play interactions with princess dolls and stories in one kindergarten classroom. . . . The specific focus here is on young girls who are avid Disney Princess fans and how they address the gendered identities and discourses attached to the popular films and franchised toys. . . . The commercially given gendered princess identities of the dolls, consumer expectations about the dolls, the author identities in books and storyboards associated with the dolls, and expectations related to writing production influenced how the girls upheld, challenged, or transformed the meanings they negotiated for princess story lines and their gender expectations, which influenced who participated in play scenarios and who assumed leadership roles in peer and classroom cultures. When the girls played with Disney Princess dolls during writing workshop, they animated identities sedimented into toys and texts. Regular opportunities to play with toys during writing workshop allowed children to improvise and revise character actions, layering new story meanings and identities onto old. . . . The notion of productive consumption explains how girls enthusiastically took up familiar media narratives, encountered social limitations in princess identities, improvised character actions, and revised story lines to produce counternarratives of their own. (Wohlwend)

This study proves that girls will not necessarily be held back by a lack of equality. We are all capable of visualizing our abilities and a place in the world if given the space to do so. However, when a figure only has the ability of fulfilling societal norms, that figure's options are restricted for rewriting their story. Dockterman explains how Barbie has become locked into her issues instead of blazing new paths: "As much as Mattel has tried to market her as a feminist, Barbie's famous figure has always overshadowed her business outfits. At her core, she's just a body, not a character . . ." (Dockterman 48). The lack of story to work with and the emphasis on her looks make Barbie and dolls like her instructional in a negative way for young girls.

With all of this said, it should be noted that there is a real lack of story or narrative within *DollHouse*. At a certain point, I had plans to incorporate grand narratives and heroes within the landscape of the doll's lives. These stories came out of a place of me wanting to fix the issue of this lack of women characters having backstories. However, fixing the issue myself only does just that: I empower myself with the creation of the stories, while skipping over the issues that prompted them in our society. So, instead, I decided to leave my dolls story-less and sterile: unable to create or change their own environment, unable to question that which has been handed down to them. I instead exemplified the emptiness that exclusion from narrative has created in women's lives.

CHAPTER 6

LET'S PLAY AROUND

One of the reasons so much discussion here revolves around Mattel's Barbie is that the techniques they used to market her and the social fears they exploited wrote the book for how many other iconic brands have functioned since. A large focus I had in creating *DollHouse* was the way Barbie teaches young girls to become consumers in our society. Besides simply walking through aisles and observing the endless accessories and objects that Barbie can own, it turns out that there is hard evidence of Mattel specifically aiming to both reflect and reinforce our consumerist society.

> Mattel marketers capitalized on the current trends of American society. They developed a team to study cultural patterns, especially among suburban teenagers. This was a technique used in order to present Barbie as a role model. . . . Suburban lifestyles involved consumption of numerous goods and luxury items. Barbie emulated these ideals by always having the newest cars, clothes, and accessories. Mattel has been able to 'correctly assess what it means to a little girl to be a grown-up'. (Wolf)

But the question being asked here is: has Mattel actually addressed what it means to a little girl to be grown-up, or are they pandering to the inhibitions of mothers and social trends? Even the concept of rebelling against this system has been turned into a marketable asset for companies. In an informal survey taken by John Fiske, author of *Understanding Popular Culture*, he discovered that all 125 of his students were wearing or owned jeans. Those students then mostly described jeans' meaning in culture as freedom to be oneself. "There was one cluster of

meanings that were essentially community integrative that denied social differences. Jeans were seen as informal, classless, unisex, and appropriate to city or country; wearing them was a sign of freedom from the constraints on behavior and identity that social categories impose," (Fiske). Even in Fiske's chosen wording of the first phrase he sets up problems in his conclusions. The fact that he says jeans deny social differences instead of overcoming or bridging them means that covering up or masking dissimilarity is more important to Fiske than actually addressing the issues differentiation bring to light. This is also why I agree with the psychologist he rejects. Fiske continues:

> An article in the New York Times (20 March 1988) quotes a psychologist who suggests that jeans' lack of differentiation results not in a freedom to be oneself, but the freedom to hide oneself. Jeans provide a facade of ordinariness that enables the wearer to avoid any expression of mood or personal emotion—they are, psychologically at least, repressive. This flip side of 'freedom' was not evident among my students, and it appears to be a typical psychoanalyst's explanation in that it emphasizes the individual over the social and the pathological over the normal. Clothes are more normally used to convey social meanings than to express personal emotion or mood. (Fiske)

I believe this anonymous psychologist had a point. We believe jeans mean freedom because that is what is communicated to us through advertising. Fiske also makes a claim that jean popularity was initiated by their efficiency. While this certainly explains their popularity for the laborers of America, how would that come to mean "freedom?" This answer, as both articles from Cochrane and Smallwood agree, does not account for acceptance by the mainstream, and instead can be attributed to movies that romanticized the wearing of these garments, such as

Rebel Without A Cause (1955) and *The Wild One* (1953). Mass produced objects never translate into individuality. Instead, they can only ever lead to assimilation. Only the consumerist culture could create a marketing scheme that produces millions of identical objects that are passed off as unique. Doll markets also utilize a false sense of unique identity. They market their products as being tailored to any girl's individual desires, while the market as a whole has very little diversity.

Artists take on these issues time and time again. How do we un-box ourselves? This is especially true for women: how do we escape the box and hold onto an identity that is distinctly our own? At first when I was introduced to Judy Chicago I was unimpressed by how little she sublimated or symbolized what she was discussing: it was just kind of there, laid out on the table. Literally, I am referencing her monumental work *The Dinner Party*, where Chicago set a table for thirty-nine historical women. But what was lost on me was how large and loud this work was, how much room it took up in a gallery. She took on the task of confronting an art world that was still openly dismissive to women. In an interview with *The Guardian*'s Rachel Cooke, Chicago makes a statement that both speaks to me and upsets me: "*The Dinner Party* marks the moment when history changed, and we reclaimed the right to deal with our own subject matter, in our own way – and young people take all that for granted," (Cooke).

Chicago doesn't understand how subterranean all of these issues became. The problem of women artists is no longer to make big, bold statements that demand room and attention, because according to society women now have a voice and don't need to shout. But women are still fed this constant diet of how to be well behaved people who silently appreciate their positions, as evidenced by women only holding 33% of the speaking roles in the top 100 grossing films of 2015 (Lauzen). We need to learn to speak in a way that makes sense now - it's not that we don't

understand how difficult it was for our mothers and grandmothers; there is a simply a new media language for all to learn. In *DollHouse*, I attempted to navigate these tempestuous waters. The messages of my work were not blasted for all to hear on speakers - viewers had to submit themselves to listening; they had to break down their own boundaries of comfort to take part. One area of media that attempts to champion the cause of giving women a voice is that of film. But it is not yet the liberating, equality-based medium it pretends to be. After Dockterman's article in TIME there was a viewpoint written by Jill Filipovic called "Barbie's Problem Is Far Beyond Skin Deep":

> Even as the toy industry loses market share to screens, girl-centric movies may not be as girl-friendly as they appear: according to a new study, the females in *Frozen* get only 41% of the speaking time in their own story. When girls are trapped in the pink box - or minimized in dialogue - their interests are reined in, their physical and psychological development stymied. Yet girls are fed a steady diet of princesses, makeup and homemaking (Toys 'R' Us suggests the Just Like Home Dyson Ball vacuum cleaner as a 'toy' for girls ages 5 to 7). (Filipovic)

Looking forward, this is one of the biggest issues I would like to address in my work. In *DollHouse*, my voice is manipulated in the recorded instructions. I interchange between a calm voice without personality and high-pitched and delusional. I always fall victim to the allure of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl character trope, a woman in film who helps her man accomplish his dreams while being incapable of growing into adulthood (Welker). In part, this vocal aspect of the show was acknowledging the appeal of such a character, which, while attractive, also pigeonholes women. This restriction and contortion of my own voice symbolizes the same happening in our media.

CHAPTER 7

PROCESS AND EVOLUTION OF WORK

I came into this program working with nostalgia inspired from reading Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, as well as my time spent driving to and through National Parks out West. Most of my work depicted displaced and detached individuals and showed how shared mythology, like The American Dream, could unite people, despite space or time, through their beliefs. In my early work I played with scale, often distorting the size of an individual in their landscape. I also produced a series of Disney princesses under the premise of their wedding night sex with their princes. This was largely a reaction to something that had always bothered me about the Disney princess movies: they would often end with the woman finally marrying her love. As I got older, I began to understand what sort of implications marriage had, such as an expectation of sex, and that life typically continued on after nuptials. In my second semester I bought a coloring book with several of the princess' stories and collaged together different scenes to create what I imagined as the consummation of their marriage to show the perversion that had occurred in my mind of these stories. I used text taken directly from these pages to add a touch of humor.

(Fig. 1) This Is the Happiest Day of Ariel's Life

The princess series was my first step toward asking the questions that lead me to my show. Disney is a highly influential franchise in people's' lives. They often are the first impression we get of how to interact with others. They bring imagination and adventure into our young lives: talking animals, long expeditions, and magical transformations. But they also teach us what it means to have purpose in life and that we should be true to ourselves, while not-so-subtly providing information about who that "self" should be. How does this mentoring by distant, unknowable storytellers change our relationship to the stories themselves? What if what I really needed as a child was not a story about how dissatisfaction can lead to disaster that can be overcome by truth, but instead a story about how to be myself without provoking disaster? The reliance on these big-name companies to teach children creates a distance not only between individuals and the collective, but also between the individual's different aspects of themselves.

In my next semester I began creating doll clothing and paper dolls. I initially began by trying to again reconcile the adult with the child world: I wanted to recreate a doll-sized version

of a dress from Joe Wright's movie adaptation of *Anna Karenina* (2012). I was interested in how as a child I had several toys that made me predisposed to like or appreciate certain characters or ideas. In this case I wanted to use this story about a woman who had fallen from society's graces by following her heart and forsaking her husband. The adaptation tells the classic story in a wonderfully romanticized way, making her misery and eventual suicide admirable because she was breaking from society's expectations. This is admittedly heavy material for a child, but, once dissected, most children's toys convey very meaningful and ideologically driven information.

(Fig. 2) Fibers Articulated Doll Exploration

This work was conceived in conjunction with an articulated paper doll I made after finding a vintage photograph of women secretly learning to box on a rooftop. This also moves toward the direction of my show in that this doll was able to be manipulated by the viewer, but only in the very specific way, dictated by me. This was one of the first times I used fabric and pattern as a communicator for an individual's identity, as I do in *DollHouse* with the masks. A

major influence for the paper dolls was the work of Brooklyn based artist, Claire Oswalt. Viola of *Beauty Will Save* writes:

> In essence she's created life size paper dolls able to be moved about and interact with each other. The message is striking, her hollowed 2D creations portray a flat life of despondency, strife and struggle. They wrestle with each other, fighting for love or attention, a planed reflection of our own static puppeteen lives. (Viola)

The work that resonated with me most was a group of identical women all standing with their arms in the same position, clothed in the same striped, button-down dresses. The articulated dolls seem to be performing some kind of ritual, linking them all together in one identity.

Then I began an investigation into headdresses and masks. I became fascinated with headdresses that served to identify someone as a character or as fulfilling a certain role. I was enamored with South American festival masks after my anthropology professor, Dr. Carolyn King, showed me a mask from Ecuador called a Diablo Umo, pictured below. I worked with three-dimensional structures at first, constructing frames from wire and then building those into forms. I was mostly interested in the headdress' ability to transform a person; in this case I was focused on that ability in a spiritual manner, like how a performer in a ritual would be transformed into a deity by donning a mask or headdress.

(Fig. 3) Diablo Umo Mask from Ecuador

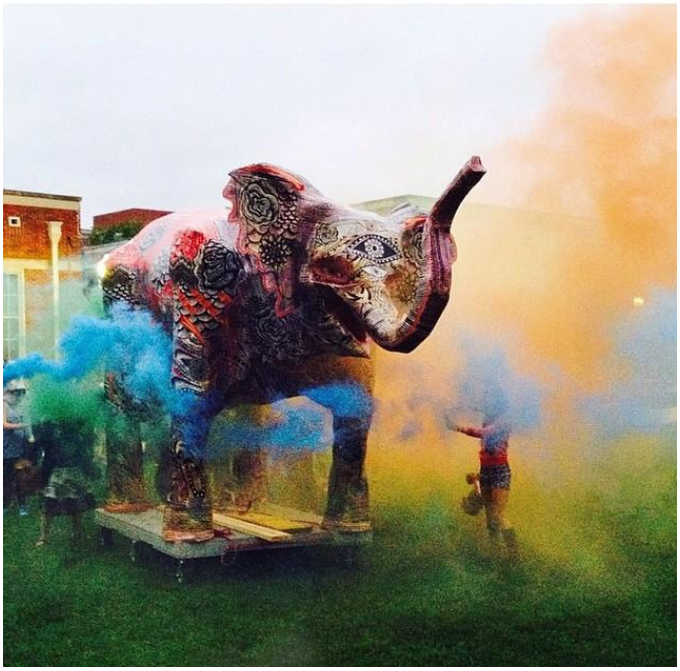
Donald Pollock, author of "Masks and the Semiotics of Identity":

> Anthropological approaches to masks and masking typically consider the meaning and symbolism of masks, and the social functions of masking ritual. [Masks and the Semiotics of Identity] considers how masks are able to perform such work, through a semiotic perspective that treats masks as icons and indexes of identity. Such a framework also broadens the category of `mask' to include other signaling systems which may be called upon by the semiotics of identity in any particular culture, expanding the traditional and stereotypical conception of the mask. (Pollock)

When I was beginning my investigation of masks, artist Dennis McNett visited ETSU, heavily encouraging and influencing my exploration. McNett executed a ceremony where participants marched through the streets of ETSU pulling and playing music with a giant elephant named Big Mary. All of the participants wore masks adorned with McNett's black and

red printed patterns. Some wore costumes and some had noisemakers. Once the elephant reached the quad, participants spiritually cleansed the area of the negative juju left from the hanging of an elephant called Big Mary in 1916.

Although his actual process and aesthetic of creating masks had little effect on my own, his invitation to viewers to participate and the ritualistic ceremony he held at the completion of the work opened my mind to the idea of what these masks could be. It was no longer up to me to wear and embody the ideas of the masks myself.



(Fig. 4) Dennis McNett. Big Mary 2014

The event was an eerie experience where we pulled a massive paper embodiment of doomed circus elephant Big Mary through the streets of campus, coming to a halt in the quad to perform a spiritual ceremony with numerous viewers gathered. While walking through the streets, participants in masks carried various noisemakers, but in general there was a heavy silence over us all, a seriousness given to the unfolding event. The masks made it difficult to see and difficult to be seen, giving me a sense of purpose and unity in our goal of spiritually

cleansing the area. The major ideas I took from this event were those of inviting the viewer to become a participant, eliciting autonomy through the anonymity of the mask, and creating a cohesive visual representation of the goals intended for the event.

(Fig. 5) Doll Mask #1

As I worked through my ideas for mask creation, I inevitably turned to my most fundamental ability: drawing. I began with a simple form, a rounded hood, and drew a face on it. I then used material I already had to block in shapes and embroidery floss to embellish the lines of the drawing. I also chose to not cut out eyeholes, instead leaving the wearer sightless and thus impairing their ability to act on their own. I based all of my subsequent masks on this first mask's form. This idea to cut off the wearer from their sight, and then hearing with the later addition of headphones, was pivotal in communicating the capacity of the mask to take control of the wearer and force them to act accordingly.

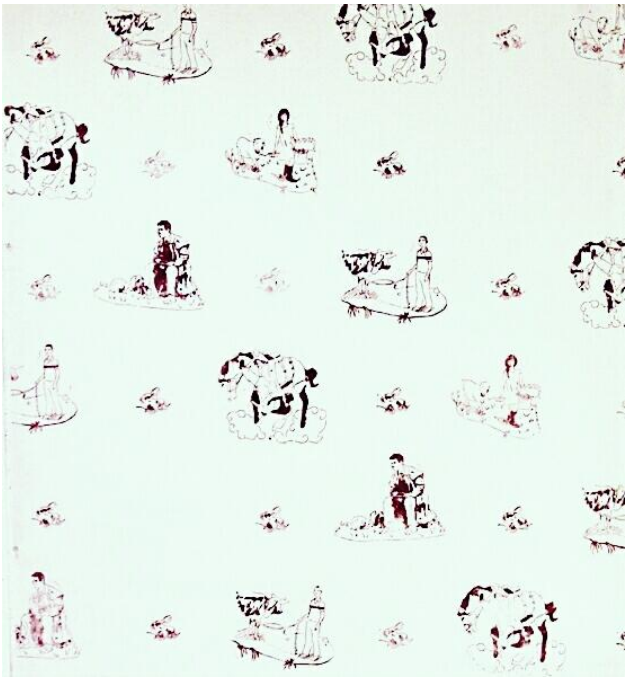
At this point I became enthralled with creating a backstory for these masked characters. I created several invented stories from memories of my childhood and then masks to accompany

the characters within them. I wrote a short play and created symbols to represent what each character stood for or to describe their personality. In this time, it was also suggested that I create a way for the audience to directly interact with the masks, leading me to write the first doll script that served as the instructions for the tea room in *DollHouse*. I came into contact with the work of Erwin Wurm, who often does work with what he calls sculptures. These interactive works invite the viewer to become a participant following a set of instructions and using props to put themselves into strange positions.

Wurm's work revolutionized the way I imagined viewer interaction. He transforms his viewers into sculptural objects. The parallel between viewer-as-object and woman-as-object struck me instantly as being the best method of conveying how a mask could control the participant. After viewing his work during an installation in SUBmarine Gallery, I went home and wrote the first script for my show: the tea room.

(Fig. 6) It's About Time - Doll Installation

This was a critical development in this work, allowing me to then structure a system of representation for the doll world I wanted to create. Also, this introduction into making participatory work enabled me to explore a more literal experience for the viewer, where they were invited to not just imagine this world for themselves from a flat image, but to live within the space of the dolls and to take on new personas. I utilized previous experimentation creating contemporary toile wallpaper to begin my exploration of developing this space.



(Fig. 7) Updated Toile

The ability to take on a different persona and perspective is incredibly important for thinking critically about a system of ideologies that we are already deep within: it gives the viewer an amount of distance from the issues of the system, thus allowing them to make judgments and decisions that are perhaps too difficult to make while emotionally invested in that system.

CHAPTER 8

DOLLHOUSE

(Fig. 8) DollHouse - The Tea Room

As a viewer entered the gallery, they were presented with an invitation: a statement on the wall inviting interaction and a table set for tea. Nearby, a mask with an unwavering smile was hung on the wall, fixedly staring down those who approached. The scene was decorated with bright pink and blue. A set of headphones with an MP3 player and a sign that read “Play Me” beckoned the audience to listen. If a viewer were so bold as to put the headphones on and press play, they were instantly serenaded by cheesy elevator music, and, after a few moments, a voice welcomed them and asked them to put on the mask. The voice paused to allow awkward fumbling and maybe a little bit of talking themselves into doing it. Then, the participant was directed through several actions relating to serving and appreciating tea, followed by etiquette advice from a doll herself. Within each section of the show, there was a similar presentation. In the kitchen, participants were instructed on how to bake and clean. In the living room, directed on how to use and respect the television. In the laundry, they were directed how to fold and

distribute cleaned clothing. Finally, in the bedroom, they were informed on how to dress and prepare one's self for confronting the outside world. Not only were actions of the viewer controlled with the recording, but also the amount a viewer could interact with each set. In every section there were three-dimensional aspects that the participant could sit on, open drawers, move things around and try things on. However, as with the recording, the viewer was controlled: approximately half of all the furniture presented in the sets was two-dimensional and flat. This inhibited full interaction and stopped the viewer from experiencing full autonomy within the installation: they could only manipulate some of the furniture and decor; the rest was unaffectable and unrelatably stuck to the walls. This also metaphorically restricted viewers from full interaction, the same way stereotypes and social norms stunt the potential of young girls.

(Fig. 9) The DollHouse - view of gallery

To say that each section and set of headphones merely gave direction and instruction would only be half of the description. There was a tone beneath each script that ridiculed the importance of these tasks. Even the voice used for the dolls giving advice was high pitched and disturbing. The words spoken were instructive and reverent, but the message was sarcastic and undermining. In the bedroom, for example, participants learned that it is important to discuss

one's friends and decide how well they are living up to doll standards. How else could everyone be sure that each member truly belonged within the group? Each section was designed to critique the values that are often instilled in young girls through social norms. My focus was the distribution of these values through dolls.

Works Described

Masks

(Fig. 10) DollHouse - Green Doll Mask

The first and most important part of this installation is the mask with its recording. The masks alone are a heavy driving factor in many of the important ideas that I elaborated upon earlier in this text. A mask has the power to strip someone of their identity, allowing them to be dehumanized, or to blend into a collective. In essence, this show pivots upon the mask's ability to do both. When the viewer adorns the mask, they are no longer themselves. This gives them the power to act without consequence, to justify actions they could not take as an individual identity. Again, this has two sides. This power can be used to overthrow corrupt systems, to question the status quo, to stand as one with others. It can also be used to strip a person of their abilities, to force them into submission, to take away their autonomy. When we put on masks, we accept and come into the designated role.

Another way the idea of the identity-stripping masks is used in *DollHouse* is in the painted objects found throughout the show. Mostly consisting of plastic kitsch items, these objects had personality and bits of information about society within them. By spray-painting them to match the decor of my dollhouse rooms, I stripped them of any identity they had acquired, forcing them to simply match the room.

(Fig. 11) DollHouse - Masked Objects

Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes wrote the following about the mask's role in society in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*:

> Mauss proposes that our seemingly natural and self-evident conceptions of our selves, our persons, are in truth artefacts [sic] of a long and varied social history stretching back, at least in principle, to the earliest human communities. Other societies have held very different notions of the self, and each society's notion is intimately connected with its form of social organization. . . . In such societies each role was in daily life the locus of different rights, duties, titles and kinship

> names within the clan, and was on ceremonial occasions vividly exemplified by different masks or body paint. (Carrithers 2)

This excerpt from *The Category of the Person* points out connections between the society's structure as a whole and the individual roles portrayed. It also notes that these abstract roles become visual in special events by the wearing of masks and adornment. This concept makes the masks key in pinpointing the idea behind this show. The masks stand in for roles characterized by pop culture beliefs. They make concrete and physical the abstract of what that ideology tells us to be.

The masks and headdresses were the beginning of this project: I embarked on an aesthetic investigation into as many different culture's masks as I could find in a short period of time. I arrived at the hood shape of my current masks that was taken from the shape of Russian stacking *matryoshka* dolls. Then, I refined my search as I polished my making.

(Fig. 12) DollHouse - Blue Doll Mask in The Tea Room

Recordings

The recordings, listened to by the viewer from within the mask, take on a very direct role. Where the mask strips you of a former identity, the recordings initiate a new identity. The viewer is first walked through a series of instructions they must follow to properly be incorporated into the doll world by a narrator. These instructions direct the participant to move their bodies in certain ways that mimic simplified homemaking tasks, such as opening the oven, getting dressed, and distributing laundry. The simplification of these actions and repeating them as a series is meant to allude to ritualistic dancing that requires participants to move in specific ways in order to achieve set goals. The movements are meant to be the satirical equivalent of these ritualized dances: the American pop culture version. They teach the moves each participant needs in order to be like a doll.

(Fig. 13) DollHouse - Viewer Interaction 5

From outside of the mask, viewers only witness participants moving in seemingly pointless ways, often being put off balance or holding strange positions for a number of seconds. This works as a more serious note on how from an outsider's perspective a culture's rituals and rites can seem completely foreign and silly. Once a viewer decides to better understand what

they're watching by listening and participating themselves, the entire routine makes much more sense.

In the second part of the recording, a doll speaks directly to the viewer, giving them tips about being the best doll they can be. This part is meant to be humorous, as the voice used for the doll is quite strange and the tips are flippant. The second part also offers critique, though. The critique is not direct, but it allows the participant a chance to openly laugh at what they are being instructed to do before they are allowed to take off their mask. This is crucial in creating an environment where the viewer knows they are supposed to be laughing, questioning the values of this society even while it feels so close to home.

While the recordings are addressing a lot of antiquated ideals and gender roles, they also highlight how those same issues survive even today. The purpose of the inclusion of these roles is to open up a discussion about how oppressive ideologies still hold sway in our contemporary society (See Appendix A).

(Fig. 14) DollHouse - Viewer Interaction 1

Sets

The backdrops began as I was developing individual characters for a play. There was a necessity to put my characters in a context of symbolism, to visually accompany their character traits. This idea of giving the characters a space within which to act that perpetuates the nature and characteristics of each character was incorporated into *DollHouse* through the creation of a set for each room of the house.

For much of my life I took part in theatrical productions. My experience with acting informs much of *DollHouse*, with a special impact on how I approached set dressing each room. Creating sets for theater production and for a dollhouse share much of the same intents: a design start with a limited amount of space, several scenes that should feel cohesive, and the objective to create a space in which the characters act in their own world. Both utilize two-dimensional objects as well as three-dimensional, allowing room for movement within the space and displaying large-scale items, while also providing enough interactive elements to allow a viewer to believe what they are watching. My intention with the sets was to provide enough information for a viewer to watch a participant enter into the control of the mask and perform their tasks as a doll in their own context. The rooms of the house further exemplified the feminine nature and themes of the show, bringing a recognizable domesticity while not overwhelming the spectacle of mask and participant.

(Fig. 15) DollHouse - Viewer Interaction 6

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

My goal in creating *DollHouse* was to find harmony between the nostalgia and suspicion I felt for these inanimate objects. I re-immersed myself and viewers into a world of powerlessness while also creating an empowering scenario where participants were able to take off the controlling masks and walk away from that influence in their lives. *DollHouse* was successful in initiating viewer reflection upon the themes discussed herein. From the feedback I received, I conclude that the work was impactful enough to bring up issues of the way our world is presented to children. Several viewers discussed how dolls create an unsettling worldview for kids. Also, the idea of how parents' yearning to render a safe and beautiful world for their children was often belied by cultural norms and expectations that destructively pigeonhole individuals. While much of the work itself focused on women's issues, there was response from both female and male viewers equally, especially from parents.

This show and its supporting paper investigated the effect toys can have on a young person's life - I show that these objects initiate a resounding influence that can set into motion a person's identity. The power toys hold can be both positive and negative: bringing creative empowerment as well as crushing standards. My research often cites the ever-controversial Mattel product Barbie.

Barbie and dolls like her stand as icons in American culture. Through Barbie, Mattel has instructed and guided little girls into adulthood, handing down expectations and social norms. Despite how negatively the preservation of these ideas can be construed, it has also meant

something to women seeking a foothold for their desire to retain an identity through societal changes.

However, one of the purposes of *DollHouse* was to critique the inability of these dolls to adapt to changes. This is not only an issue for dolls, but toy companies in general who continue to offer toys to little girls that promote domesticity and parenting. These two attributes are incredibly crucial in creating successful adults - man and woman - but the continuation of these as the only two options for women can crush opportunities for empowering youths and adults alike. I personally have a difficult time accepting that I have ever experienced oppression, but I used this show as a platform to re-evaluate my own gender and place in society.

There is and will always be inequality in the world - the point is not to somehow end it in a self-important statement, but instead to draw attention to the ways female characters are still handled in our media and in our products. This show uses retro styles contemporaneously to demonstrate a lack of change in our landscape, as well as cutting out any story my characters could have lived. I seek to make visible that which is often swept under the rug or touted as attention seeking; feminist issues are all of our issues and show up in every aspect of our lives.

CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION

1. *DollHouse* - The Tea Room

2. *DollHouse* - The Living Room

3. *DollHouse* - The Bedroom

4. *DollHouse* - The Laundry Room

5. *DollHouse* - The Kitchen

6. *DollHouse* - Viewer Interaction 1

7. *DollHouse* - Viewer Interaction 2

8. DollHouse - Viewer Interaction 3

9. *DollHouse* - Viewer Interaction 4

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APPENDIX

Recording Example - Bedroom Script

- Please put on the mask.

- Follow these instructions to take your next step into incorporation into the dolls.

- Reach both hands up above your head. Now bring both hands down, crossing them in front of your face and continuing down to your knees with them crossed.

- This is the dress of protection: it helps you look like other dolls so you won't be thought different.

- Now, circle your right hand over your right cheek, and then your left hand over your left cheek. Slide your right pointer finger over your top lip, then over your bottom lip.

- This is the makeup of symmetry: it is important to hide our flaws so that we aren't worth less than other dolls.

- Now, pick your right foot up and point your toes. Keeping those toes pointed, place your foot back on the ground on your tiptoes. Pick up your left foot and point those toes . . . replace it on the ground, now with both feet pointed. On your tiptoes, walk in place. These are the shoes of vulnerability: it is only okay to be vulnerable in fun ways, when others can laugh.

- Complete these motions again: reach both hands up, and bring them down to your knees. Circle your right hand over your cheek, then your left, then slide your finger over your top and bottom lips. And finally, point the toes on both your feet and sashay in place.

- The dolls are beautiful, but they bury their insecurities deep within themselves. They give these words to you:

- Make sure you talk about friends who aren't around while you're in the bedroom - it's important to make sure everyone meets our specific standards.

- Wear your frocks as protection against change when you leave the house. Change will only make you ask unimportant questions.

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