

Montserrat College of Art Gallery

PLASTIC
PRINCESS
BARBIE[®]

AS ART

Curated by Leonie Bradbury





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Cover, **Pia Schachter**, *Bulimia*, 2001, c-Print
Left, **Crudo**, *Lilli Divided*, 2002, B&W photograph
Right, **Todd Haynes**, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1987, video stills

November 11, 2005 - February 4, 2006

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Tula Asselanis
Leika Akiyama
Kathleen Bitetti
Linda Carney-Goodrich
Crudo
Tom Forsythe
Joe Gibbons
Todd Haynes
Jeffrey Heyne
Gwendolyn Holbrow
Richard Leonard
Pia Schachter
Cynthia von Buhler





Leika Akiyama, Detail, *Bubbles Bubblicious: A Collection of Dreamy Zen Mandalas; The Barbie Edition*, 2005, mixed media

Plastic Princess Barbie® As Art

essay by Leonie Bradbury

A Crafted Image

Plastic Princess: Barbie® As Art showcases visual, performance, and video artists whose work features one of our most potent and long lasting (pop-) cultural icons: Barbie. A widely recognized image, Barbie has become a complex and loaded symbol whose influence crosses international borders. She is a symbol of female power and physical idealism, as well as a merchandising phenomenon. Whether pro or con, Barbie is viewed by most as more than a doll. She is a receptacle for countless projected ideas ranging from the ultimate female or male fantasy to an actual woman. From feminist nightmare to female pioneer, from German sex symbol to a wholesome role model for young girls around the world, Barbie embodies a feminine ideal and can be seen as a reflection of what 'America' expects from its young female population.

Since their introduction into the American market in 1959, more than 800 million Barbie dolls have been sold. According to Mattel, "every second, two Barbies are sold" around the world. Barbie is now considered a global power brand, earning over one billion dollars in sales every year. Widely available to children and adult collectors around the world, Barbie is a product of the contemporary commercial image-making industry. Mattel employs a large number of staff solely to reinvent and update Barbie's looks and persona. As a result, everyone knows who Barbie is. There are, in fact, more Barbie dolls in the U.S.A. than human beings.



Tula Asselanis, *I, Doll: The Unauthorized Biography of America's 11½" Sweetheart*, 1996, video still



Leika Akiyama, Detail, *Bubbles Bubblicious: A Collection of Dreamy Zen Mandalas; The Barbie Edition*, 2005, mixed media



Richard Leonard, Detail, *The Mother of All Barbies*, 2005, mixed media

What many people do not know is that the original Barbie doll was based on a postwar German pin-up doll named Lilli. Created by a firm called Greiner & Hauser (GmbH), the three-dimensional Lilli was designed as a pornographic caricature and sold to adult men in tobacco shops. She, in turn, was based on a sexy comic strip character in the German newspaper *Bild Zeitung* (German equivalent of the *National Enquirer*). However, when Barbie was introduced to the American public (as a virtually identical adult looking doll), she was destined not for men, but for young girls.

Since her conception, a predominantly female segment of the population has loudly expressed mixed feelings on Barbie's ability to be a positive role model for young women. Whether their objections are based on her unobtainable, anatomically incorrect, and exaggeratedly developed figure, or her unrealistic, overtly luxurious, and — in some eyes — promiscuous life style (the lack of marriage to Ken), Barbie just couldn't get it right. There has always been a reason to hate or despise her and to not let your daughter have one. But when it comes down to it, Barbie's power and influence is hard to resist; you may be able to but your daughter won't. The original Barbie, however, provided an unprecedented exemplar for female independence. With no children or husband to nurture, Barbie advocated a new kind of woman; single and sophisticated, with a number of careers, friends,



Tom Forsythe, *Malted Barbie*, from *Food Chain Barbie* series, 1997, c-print



Tom Forsythe, *Barbie Enchiladas*, from *Food Chain Barbie* series, 1997, c-print

and even a boyfriend. Over the years, Mattel has carefully crafted the incredibly seductive and desirable image of an environment of ethnically diverse friends, little sisters, babysitter kids, and, of course, the ever-attractive Ken in various forms. Theirs is a sun-filled life that takes place against a backdrop of pink mansions, beach parties, picnics, convertibles, malls, and hair salons.

Unobtainable Beauty

A number of the artists included in *Plastic Princess: Barbie® As Art* play with the conflicting interpretations and feelings that most people have regarding Barbie. Linda Carney-Goodrich's performance piece *Barbie Monologues: My Life in Barbie* offers a glimpse of the incredible hold Barbie has over our collective psyche. Based on interviews with women (and some men) of all ages, this one-woman show explores our love, hate, fascination, envy, and outrage with America's most popular doll. Interviewees represented through vignettes, comedy, and performance art detail how the doll has affected and influenced their lives. Some always wanted to have one as a child but weren't allowed, and later, as adult women, hated to admit their desire and despised the part of themselves that wanted to not just have her but, in essence, be like her. Others had plenty of Barbies and loved them but grew to see the distorted ideal she presents and want to somehow protect their own daughters from repeating the same cycle of low self-esteem generated from the unobtainable ideal of beauty that she represents. Others still never had Barbies, but have witnessed the tremendous effect the Barbie phenomenon has on our culture and feel the need to respond.

For photographer Jeffrey Heyne, what began as an investigation of consumerism grew into an outright fascination with Barbie's physical shape (2005, p.9). Embedded in resin and obscured by brightly colored O-rings, his images of Barbie take a minute to recognize. The image is purposely out of focus, in low contrast, and merged into a dark background. The doll's features are closely cropped and extremely close-up, which disconnects any context that may give reference

to Barbie's image. The viewer has to discover it. Heyne's deliberate distortions of the doll's "perfect proportion" question the Barbie ideal and the message she conveys to young girls. Ultimately, his work considers the human condition and the desire for conformance and acceptance.

Royal Traveler: The Barbie Project (2005, p.7), an installation by Kathleen Bitetti, specifically addresses Barbie's unrealistic size. Presented in three parts, it represents the artist's experience as a child growing up in Quincy, MA, when the two female personas she was aware of were Abigail Adams and Barbie. Abigail Adams and her family's history was, and still is, ever present to those living Quincy. In addition, Bitetti, like most little girls, grew up surrounded by Barbie dolls. In *Sewing for Abigail*, the artist sewed white dresses that would fit Abigail Adams, based on measurements of Abigail's dress at the Adams National Historical Park. In *Then (Lilli) & Now (Barbie)*, she scrutinizes the dimensions of the Barbie body (scaled to supermodel 6 ft height) and compares them to those of Abigail Adams. The third component, *Dress Up*, invites the visitor to physically try on clothes designed to reflect the sizes of both of these American role models. Of course, the Barbie clothes will prove to be impossible to try on.

With pieces like *Queen Kong* (2003) and *Keep It Clean* (2003, back cover), sculptor and self-proclaimed 'Barbiologist' Gwendolyn Holbrow has been exploring the powerful hold Barbie has over the female psyche for years. She investigates her personal relationship with Barbie by asking questions such as "Am I like her? Why? Do I want to be?" According to Holbrow's research, Barbie brilliantly reflects our communal fears and desires. Barbie's radioactive aura is generated not by the marketing department at Mattel, but from somewhere deep within our psyche. She states, "When you look at Barbie, you see what you want to see." Barbie thus transcends her 'doll-ness' and becomes a plastic idol. Holbrow tries to look at Barbie within a larger cultural context, taking into consideration the differences in the interpretation of Barbie in American vs. non-American cultures.

Born and raised in Japan, multi-media artist



Cynthia von Buhler, *Mirror, Mirror on The Wall*, 2005, mixed media



Joe Gibbons, *Barbie's Audition*, 1995, video still

Leika Akiyama offers a truly non-American point of view. As a young girl growing up in Tokyo, the contrast between Barbie (with which the artist's American friends played) and her Japanese counterpart, the Ricca-chan Doll, made quite an impression on Akiyama. In her mind, Barbie is the female archetype of the Western world. The aesthetic appeal of Barbie and her fantasy world filled with convertibles, dream houses and couture wardrobes symbolized the extreme wealth and dominance of America. "Growing up in the late 1960's and 1970's in Japan as the country struggled to emerge as an economically viable country, anything and everything American was looked up to as the ideal model to aspire to. The blond haired, blue-eyed doll with the impossible female figure left with me a strange fascination with what was at the same time alluring and yet unattainable." Akiyama's piece *Bubbles Bubbliscious* (2005, p.2 and p.3) places this quintessentially American female character in a fantasy setting, creating a context for Barbie's dream world to collide with the artist's.

Photographer Pia Schachter considers her images of Barbie as conversation or dialogue starters. They exemplify the struggles that many women face in real life, but also represent the choices they make in order to obtain the ideal female beauty. Schachter chooses Barbie dolls over human models because in her view, Barbie is one of the few tools young women have for self-projection. For decades, Barbie has been a major receptor of emotion, where young women felt safe to act out, imagine, and express. According to Schachter, it is actually because of Barbie's unobtainable beauty that we are able to see her as triumphant with hope. In each of her photographs, Barbie dolls portray scenes of a woman's struggle for self worth at various stages of life. *Bulimia*, (2001, cover) illustrates a young woman's battle with bulimia. *The Mistake*, (2001) encompasses the pain, helplessness, and confusion of unwanted pregnancy and the erroneous impulse to throw away what seems, at one stage of life, a mistake. While the dolls in the photographed moments help the viewer to achieve distance and objectivity from the emotional topics, the images remain poignant and persistent reminders of taboo subjects and

situations in our society. “Like it or not,” as Schachter says, “these are realities that need to be confronted and acknowledged so that we can begin to overcome them, and to heal.” Clearly, these aren’t the types of images that little girls are encouraged to imagine when ‘playing Barbie,’ yet many young women will grow up to find themselves living such moments.

New York-based artist Crudo takes the idea of the objectification of Barbie to another level. In his photographs, mixed media sculptures, and paintings he explores the very existence of Barbie. In a style Crudo terms “hypermodern,” his work features Barbie and Ken in a way that bypasses obvious parodies and dives into the psychological innuendo of these symbols of pop culture. His interpretation is neither Barbie-bashing nor pure admiration, but an intimate study of Barbie the woman, her relationships with her friends, and our relationship to her. Crudo’s most poignant way to present Barbie is through stills from virtual movies. By having Barbie displayed and depicted in intimate, often overtly sexual positions with other Barbies, Crudo pushes the boundaries of how we understand and perceive her. In *Ken’s Fantasy I, Virtual Screen Test* (2002), he alludes to Barbie’s ability to fulfill common male fantasies and her origins as a porn doll. In *Lilli Divided* (2002, inside front cover) the artist presents the viewer with an actual representation of the original German Lilli doll. She is posed nude, looking directly at the viewer, and walking suggestively. In bisecting her, Crudo further emphasizes Lilli’s role as an object of male desire.

Crudo also brings Ken under the microscope. Through several photo essays, he follows Ken’s physical transformations over the years. Despite the skillful creation of their dolls’ image, Mattel cannot always control how Barbie or her ‘friends’ are perceived. In 1993, for example, Earring Magic Ken was introduced to the American market. With his earring, purple vest, and ring necklace, he was an instant success in popular gay culture. As a direct reference to the widely held interpretation within the gay community of Ken as a homosexual, Crudo’s *Optical Illusion Scene* (2002) emphasizes Ken’s cult reputation as Man-Candy by showing

him intimately involved with another Ken. Crudo’s representation of Barbie and Ken is unique in that he shows both of them from a homosexual point of view.

The sordid history of Barbie’s plastic ‘family,’ i.e. Ken, Skipper, and Midge, is also featured in the humorous award winning documentary *I, Doll – The Unauthorized Biography of America’s 11½” Sweetheart* (1996, p.3). While chronicling Barbie’s metamorphosis from German porn doll to children’s toy, to female role model and modern icon, writer, producer, and director Tula Asselanis investigates the Barbie doll phenomenon and her effect on people’s lives. The artist conducts interviews with adoring fans and culturally diverse critics of Barbie’s unrealistic body image for women. Those interviewed express feelings, both pro and con, about the 6 ounces of plastic that has become a national icon.

Illegal Art?

In addition to addressing issues of Barbie as a symbol of female limitations and abilities and male desires, *Plastic Princess: Barbie® As Art* also addresses the overarching issues of copyright infringement and so-called ‘illegal’ art that many artists, including all of the artists featured in this exhibition, face (whether they are directly involved in lawsuits with major corporations or indirectly because they’ve managed to operate below the radar). In today’s society, where information and images are readily available to be scanned, downloaded, and copied, issues of copyright and trademark infringement are in the forefront. As a result, contemporary artists need to be vigilant and careful as large corporations such as Starbucks, Disney, and Mattel are consistently suing artists for incorporating trademarked logos, characters, and merchandise into their work. Many artists currently find themselves in costly legal battles fighting for their creative rights under the Fair Use policy. Some corporations go so far as to allow artists to use their imagery if they relinquish all reproduction, sales, and exhibition rights. As a result, the corporation controls the dissemination and content of the works of art. The situation is ironic, since copyright laws were originally intended to facilitate and promote the exchange of ideas.

Although created a number of years ago, Tom Forsythe’s now-notorious photographic series *Food Chain Barbie* (1997, p.4) still has tremendous resonance today. His work is central to the exhibition. In December 2003, after a five-year battle for free speech and artistic license and two million dollars in legal fees, the lawsuit Mattel filed against Forsythe in 1999 was finally settled in favor of the defendant. Forsythe considers his use of Barbie as political and social criticism presented with humor and parody. In the *Food Chain Barbie*



Kathleen Bitetti, *Royal Traveler: The Barbie Project*, 2005
mixed media

series, Forsythe presents Barbie as a type of food, sustenance, and nourishment to be consumed. Mattel sued Forsythe for portraying Barbie as a piece of plastic rather than a role model, carefully crafted over decades of marketing.

Joe Gibbons, an experimental filmmaker now based in Boston, has made a career out of exploiting the messy circumstances of his own life, creating unabashed works that are equal parts psychodrama, autobiography, and confession.

Here, his work is combined with an inanimate object: Barbie. In *Barbie's Audition* (2001, p.6), Gibbons plays a sleazy film director opposite Barbie. The piece lampoons the movie audition and its legendary corollary, the casting couch. Barbie is recast, not as the impossible-to-attain ideal of beauty but as the victim of sexual harassment and exploitation. Gibbons's remarkable tête-à-têtes with his super 8 camera reflect his endless fascination with "how a person constructs or defines their sense of self."

Well-known filmmaker Todd Haynes' career defining Barbie-mation video *Superstar: Karen Carpenter Story* (1987, p.1) is an imaginative dramatization of the life of Karen Carpenter and her struggles with an eating disorder. It appropriately features Barbie dolls as all of the actors. Haynes' intention is not to criticize the dolls themselves, but to use the ideal beauty that Barbie represents and warn viewers of the tremendous influence the adherence to such an ideal can have on a young woman's life. Shot with a hand held camera, slowly cruising through suburban Seventies Southern California, the film evokes idyllic moments. Interspersed are clips of Nixon in office and the Vietnam conflict. However, Haynes' portrayal of Carpenter's life is a distressing examination of the effects of public expectation and its devastating consequences. In October 1989, after scores of successful bookings and enthusiastic reviews, A&M Records enjoined Haynes against further distribution of the film. Despite his offer to use the film for educational purposes only and to donate all proceeds to the Karen Carpenter Memorial Fund for Anorexia Research, *Superstar* has since literally become illegal art. However, an abbreviated bootleg version of the film is on view in the gallery.

One artist who unifies both the concept of Barbie as an unobtainable ideal and the use of a commercial product for artistic purposes is Cynthia von Buhler. *Her piece Mirror, Mirror on the Wall* (2005, p.5) consists of two toy mirrors (originally distributed by Disney) refurbished by the artist. Each contains an audio component and display images of Barbies that appear as the viewer's reflection. The Mattel Toys mirror's audio

component issues statements such as "You look Beautiful," "One day you'll meet your prince," "Your hair looks lovely." It perpetuates myths of beauty and female dependence (waiting to be rescued by a prince or man) and provides girls with affirmations based on looks rather than intellect. The accompanying image is that of a typical blond Disney/Princess Barbie. In contrast, the CVB Toys mirror's audio component declares: "You have good ideas," "You're so talented and creative," and "You are very smart." The accompanying images are of five ethnically diverse dolls. The artist thus creates an alternate message that more accurately reflects the diversity of our society and the many roles women play. Further broadening the definition of 'beautiful,' von Buhler creates an ideal that is more appropriate for young girls today while simultaneously challenging the role that corporations play in defining these ideals.

Finally, there are those artists whose primary motivation to incorporate Barbie in their work is that they find her fun to work with. They collect the dolls, think she's fabulously dressed, or simply find her an inspiring source of material. All of the above apply to Richard Leonard and his Barbie doll dress, *The Mother of All Barbies* (2005, p.3). Attracted to the doll's plasticity and texture, Leonard finds enjoyment in the pure aesthetics of the doll. While Leonard's view of Barbie is not critical, the doll is re-contextualized by its use as a sculptural medium.

Over the years, Barbie has been deconstructed, reconstructed, heralded, and loathed, but her impact is hard to ignore. Considering Barbie's status as a cultural icon and her widespread influence, this examination of the Barbie phenomenon reflects only the tip of the iceberg of her influence on visual culture. This exhibit brings together works of art that demonstrate the effect of Barbie within a number of cultural contexts such as feminism, gay culture, and the use of a commercial symbol or product for purposes of artistic expression. Each of the artists included in *Plastic Princess: Barbie® As Art* challenges, subverts, but also embraces the so-called plastic princess, whose iconic image creates powerful artistic and cultural statements.

Checklist

Leika Akiyama, *Bubbles Bubblicious: A Collection of Dreamy Zen Mandalas*; *The Barbie Edition*, 2005, mixed media

Tula Asselanis, *I, Doll: The Unauthorized Biography of America's 11½" Sweetheart*, 1996, video

Kathleen Bitetti, *Sewing for Abigail from Royal Traveler: The Barbie Project*, 2005, mixed media, *Then (Lilli) & Now (Barbie) from Royal Traveler: The Barbie Project*, 2005, mixed media, *Dress up from Royal Traveler: The Barbie Project*, 2005, mixed media

Linda Carney-Goodrich, *Barbie Monologues: My Life in Barbie*, 2006, live performance

Crudo, *Gay Ken: Fruit of the Loom*, 2002, B&W photograph, *Gay Ken: Bianchi*, 2002, B&W photograph, *Lilli Divided*, 2002, B&W photograph, *Virtual Screen Test: Bild Lilli*, 2002, B&W photograph, *Virtual Screen Test: #1 Barbie*, 2002, B&W photograph, *Scene from A Virtual Movie: Ken's Fantasy I*, 2002, B&W photograph, *Scene from A Virtual Movie: Behind every great man, there's another great man*, 2002, B&W photograph, *Still from A Virtual Movie: Optical Illusion Scene-Kiss or Candlestick*, 2002, B&W photograph

Tom Forsythe, *Malted Barbie from Food Chain Barbie series*, 1997, Supergloss photograph, *Barbie Enchiladas from Food Chain Barbie series*, 1997, Supergloss photograph, *You Can't Beat GE from Food Chain Barbie series*, 1997, Supergloss photograph, *Sizzling Links from Food Chain Barbie series*, 1998, Supergloss photograph, *Heatwave from Food Chain Barbie series*, 1998, Supergloss photograph, *Every Barbie for Herself from Food Chain Barbie series*, 1998, Supergloss photograph

Joe Gibbons, *Barbie's Audition*, 1995, video

Todd Haynes, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1987, video

Jeffrey Heyne, *Barbie with O-Rings No. 2*, 2004, toned silver print and resin on aluminum, *Barbie with O-Rings No. 4*, 2005, toned silver prints and resin on aluminum, *Barbie with O-Rings No. 6*, 2005, digital print and resin on aluminum, *Barbie with O-Rings No. 9*, 2005, digital print and resin on aluminum, *Barbie with O-Rings No. 12*, 2005, digital print and resin on aluminum

Gwendolyn Holbrow, *One Dozen Large White D Cup*, 2003, mixed media, *Keep It Clean*, 2003, mixed media, *Queen Kong*, 2003, mixed media, *Pets*, 2003, mixed media

Richard A. Leonard, *The Mother of All Barbies*, 2005, mixed media

Pia Schachter, *Bum Bum*, 2001, c-print, *Bulimia*, 2001, c-print, *Lips*, 2001, c-print, *The Mistake*, 2001, c-print, *Wifebeater*, 2001 c-print

Cynthia von Buhler, *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*, 2005, mixed media

Right, **Jeffrey Heyne**, *Barbie with O-Rings, No. 2*, 2004, toned silver print and resin on aluminum

Back cover, **Gwendolyn Holbrow**, *Keep It Clean*, 2003, dolls, fountain pump, mixed media





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