GUY AND DOLLS

Goodness, what crazy purchases were prompted by the poignant predilection Humbert had in those days for check weaves, bright cottons, frills, puffed-out short sleeves, soft pleats, snug-fitting bodices and generously full skirts! Oh Lolita, you are my girl, as Vee was Poe’s and Bea Dante’s, and what little girl would not like to whirl in a circular skirt and scanties? Did I have something special in mind? coaxing voices asked me. Swimming suits? We have them in all shades. Dream pink, frosted aqua, glans mauve, tulip red, oolala black. What about playsuits? Slips? No slips. Lo and I loathed slips. . . . Having moreover studied a midsummer sale book, it was with a very knowing air that I examined various pretty articles, sport shoes, sneakers, pumps of crushed kid for crushed kids.

—Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (1955)

Humbert Humbert was never more tender or seemingly plausible as a family man than when tending to Lolita’s more mundane requirements. Shopping for clothes and comic books, managing sightseeing itineraries, or fetching ice-cold cherry Cokes, he seemed almost the model dad, or at least the diligent guardian. Befuddled, bemused, and frustrated, he found himself ultimately overwhelmed by the mammoth task of caring for and feeding an adolescent girl.

When considering the life and works of Morton Bartlett one can’t help but wonder about the care and feeding of the fifteen exquisite plaster children he constructed (and then photographed) in relative secrecy over the course of three decades. Bartlett, unlike Humbert, had to make his diminutive Lolitas from scratch, in fully realized detail, from their toenails up to their finely articulated tongues. Stacks of anatomy books, detailed measuring diagrams, and growth charts from children’s shoe shops provided reference for Bartlett’s scale drawings of
children’s development in monthly intervals from ages eight through sixteen. Once the figures were sculpted, Bartlett devoted himself to their maintenance and costuming, which involved hours of painting, sewing elaborately pleated skirts and smocked blouses, embroidering jackets, knitting cardigans, hats, scarves, and socks, and customizing wigs. Discovered in a Boston brownstone on their maker’s death in 1992, the child figures (the last of which was made in 1963) seem to have been groomed primarily for cameo appearances in a group of uncanny, stunningly moody, and ultimately disturbing black-and-white photographs. This is where the story of Bartlett’s “sweethearts” comes to life and where he parts company with a long tradition of doll collectors and doll-making hobbyists.

Bartlett, who died at the age of eighty-three, never married and lived alone his entire life. The dolls were a secret hobby, a project he shared with only a few close friends and the handyman neighbor who carried Bartlett’s groceries up the stairs every Monday for almost twenty years. A graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy, Bartlett spent two years at Harvard and then led a rather unremarkable adult life trying to keep small businesses afloat. By all accounts he had no formal art training, yet he started his work life with freelance advertising photography and moved through a succession of art-related ventures—from manufacturing gift objects to publishing a crafts magazine. He eventually landed in his own printing business. Like many artists, his day jobs tended to support or relate to his private work, though he supported himself briefly as a gas station manager and furniture salesman and served a short stint in the army.

A two-page spread in Yankee Magazine (April 1962) titled “The Sweethearts of Mr. Bartlett” and a reference to his sculpting hobby in the 25th Anniversary Report of Harvard’s class of 1932 were the only public mentions of his work during his lifetime, and his clandestine activities came to light only after his estate, which consisted mainly of the dolls, their clothing, and about two hundred photographs, was purchased by Marion Harris, an art and antiques dealer in Simsbury, Connecticut. Harris brought the work to public attention, first publishing the catalogue Family Found: The Lifetime Obsession of Morton Bartlett (Paul-Art Press, 1994) and then exhibiting the dolls and their apparel and many of the photos at the 1995 Outsider Art Fair in New York. Interestingly, Yankee Magazine presented Bartlett as a hobbyist who planned to exhibit his creations eventually. But unlike the typical mannequin- and doll-maker of his day, whose creatures revealed (when undressed) a kind of airbrushed genitalia, Bartlett chose to represent sexual characteristics as realistically as possible, even though he generally photographed his dolls’ bodies fully clothed. Apparently he needed his children to meet exacting standards of verisimilitude before he could dress them up and pose them.
The five essays in Harris’s book look to Bartlett’s childhood for an explanation of the impetus behind his peculiar approach to an already eccentric hobby. Great emphasis is placed on the fact that Bartlett, who was born in Chicago, was orphaned at the age of eight. Nothing is known of the circumstances of his parents’ death except that he was soon adopted by a Massachusetts couple, Mr. and Mrs. Warren Goddard Bartlett. The prevailing conclusion is that the plaster “children” took the place of the family Bartlett never had.

In her own commentary Harris reports that, after interviewing everyone she could track down who knew Bartlett, a “consistent image became clear. A picture reinforced by the many experts also consulted—psychologists, psychiatrists, art historians and academic scholars—who reviewed the material . . . and came to the same consensus. The body of work served as Morton Bartlett’s surrogate family, sublimating the lack of real relatives while acceptably containing his own private storm, a need for a family life, and ensuring that the fantasy remained safe by never crossing over into reality.”

Why the insistence on this one (no doubt partially accurate) mapping of Bartlett’s obsession? One look at the photographs and a flood of conflicting interpretations arise. The cloying sweetness tinged with loneliness sets up an immediate visual contradiction—followed by a nagging sensation that there’s more to these sunny faux children than initially meets the eye. Is it the pictures themselves or knowledge of their maker that whispers of pedophilia? It’s difficult to tell. Just as Humbert attributes his misery and subsequent desire for all Lolitas to the loss of his beloved Annabel Leigh at age twelve, so too can one imagine Bartlett’s loss touching off a chain of associations far more complex than simply the desire to populate his home with the siblings, children, and grandchildren he never had. Nor does the more disturbing but equally obvious suggestion of pedophilic tendencies do justice to the full panoply of Bartlett’s motives, though it would be a shame to ignore the invitation for a kinky fantasy or two about the actual sculpting of the hidden fine points of their design—a fantasy reinforced by the strong scent of arrested adolescence that hangs in the air around his gang of kids. The accepted (seemingly desired) model of Bartlett as father is certainly an obvious place to start to unveil the mystery of the works. The only two pictures I’ve ever seen of the artist show a man dressed in comforting, fatherly style. In a formal portrait taken when Bartlett was only in his early twenties, he’s seen reading in a cozy, blanket-covered chair in collegiate tweeds, a pipe, wire-rimmed spectacles—a dad in the tradition of reassuring dads. Yet the comforting paternal image he projects isn’t too far removed from, say, the lovable but questionable Henry Higgins or the Maurice Chevalier character in Gigi singing “thank heaven for little girls,” or even from Humbert himself—characters who can be both comforting and threatening (as soon as one interrogates their motives). And it’s interesting to note that Bartlett’s beloved cat was named Gigi.

Lifelike plastic figures of snub-nosed children with dun-colored, greenish, brown-dotted, fansmouth faces floated around me. I realized I was the only shopper in that rather eerie place where I moved about fish-like, in a glaucous aquarium. I sensed strange thoughts form in the minds of the languid ladies that escorted me from counter to counter, from rock ledge to seaweed, and the belts and the bracelets I chose seemed to fall from siren hands into transparent water. —Humbert Humbert

The fifteen mannequin children of Bartlett’s creation feel like a posse of department store escapees, dressed out of a bandbox. While the faces are meant to have an international flavor, the cast of characters look as though they were fathered by the same Geppetto. The level of craft, observation, and anatomical precision is way beyond what would suffice for a simple game of dolly dress-up. Each figure, at one-half human scale, could take up to a year to sculpt. The head alone might take ten months. There are twelve girls and three boys. The boys, all around age eight (the year Bartlett lost his parents), bear an uncanny resemblance to the artist himself. The girls in particular are startling in their anatomical detail. They range in age from awkward prepubescence (pigeon toes, little bellies) through early puberty (budding breasts, faint suggestion of a waistline) to full-fledged teendom (developed breasts, soft curves, a defiant hands-on-hips stance suggesting a sophisticated, brazen

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one now largely lost but abundantly available in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

MB: It does. I’ve always looked at McCahan’s use of popular images and texts like the cartoons that were popular in his youth. He paints an understandable story, and then you can give it multiple interpretations. Now should be about the right time to show McCahan to the rest of the world, because it is a moment of transition in our society. It’s a moment to rethink modernism, which is being attacked by fundamentalists and other conservative forces that want to limit its possibilities. That’s what McCahan is expressing and trying to deal with. At the beginning of his career, he was outside or behind the development of modernism. At the end of his life, he was far ahead, because he was dealing with questions that we are only getting to now, at least in the visual arts. We have a problem with the Bible because our times are so secular. On the other hand, if you can really understand the Bible, it’s just a system to explore and explain things you don’t really understand or don’t know how to express. That’s what McCahan was trying to do.

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erotism). Exquisitely rendered pencil studies found alongside the photos show girls with big attitudes that Bartlett’s dolls could mimic with their changeable body parts—a large assortment of detachable plaster arms, legs, and heads. Bartlett must have been keenly aware of the window dressing, advertising display, and mannequin designs of his time, particularly those of Lester Gaba, who launched the fashion for “mannequins in a setting” and was the first to present typically American, freckle-faced teenagers running or standing on tiptoe.

Like Geppetto, Bartlett sought to breathe life into his creations. His blue fairy turned out to be his own Brownie camera, and the photographs he took reveal an uncanny awareness of the power of light and lens to animate the inanimate. Painted plaster skin turns supple and dewy through his watchful viewfinder. There are no happy accidents or spontaneous amateur moments. The melodramatic theatrical lighting shows the influence not of the collection of photos of real families and children from the ’30s and ’40s that was found among his possessions but of fashion and movie magazines and the black-and-white staged television dramas of the ’50s. According to an old friend, Bartlett would interrupt whatever he was doing to tune in to the ’50s soap One Man’s Family (“dedicated to the mothers and fathers of the younger generation and their bewildering offspring”).

His own photographic soap operas included two sisters in bed, one peacefully sleeping, the other reading by heavenly lamplight; several images of a saucy seated girl admonishing her pet (or pets); and many children waving hi or bye. A single crying face does double duty as both boy and girl. There’s lots of posing in Sunday best with a “Mom, do I have to?” demeanor and much sad, dreamy, off-camera gazing. But mostly the figures just strut their stuff, showing off the beautiful costumes Bartlett painstakingly designed for them.

The haunting quality of Bartlett’s images can be partly attributed to the lighting and the sense of the characters emerging from deep shadow. They wear fixed smiles, open mouths, and knowing looks, far less vacant than the Barbies we’re used to. When the dolls make eye contact with the camera it’s reminiscent of an old school yearbook photo. When they gaze off camera one is reminded of the dreamy Hollywood glamour portraits of George Hurrel—little Norma Shearer and Myrna Loy retouched and softly lit from above. A portrait of a young blonde in a sombrero appears to be shot through a Vaseline lens. Looking over her shoulder, lips parted, tongue peeking out of the corner of her mouth, she looks for all the world like a child star in a movie still, the most “alive” of the Bartlett girls. The most gripping image by far is a tiny little Bartlett boy wearing a hand-knit ski cap and sweater set, grinning maniacally at the camera, seated in a human-size chair. The boy is dwarfed and unprotected and very, very alone.

My first encounter with Bartlett’s photographs was appropriately startling. In 1995, a friend called and ordered me to visit Marion Harris’s booth at the Outsider Art Fair immediately. I saw the photos and was astonished. I was convinced I’d seen them before, maybe as a child, but quickly realized that was impossible. The pictures were, in any case, like familiar faces in a crowd, and the almost generic dolliness of the faces, the pleating proportions of the bodies, and the relaxed, unconstrued postures of the mannequins reminded me of the kinds of pictures I love to look in Doll Reader Magazine ads and of vintage Man Ray and Rodchenko photographs. The images also had a fresh look, as though a photographer might have shot them yesterday. That they were shot in black-and-white gave them a slight patina of nostalgia, as if that were the intention of the photographer. The easy, almost commercial quality of the photos only hints at the uncanny while it masks a darker subtext. There’s nothing flat-footed in these images except for the funny little bare feet of the children.

My own childhood memory of images of this sort—representations of children presented as entertainment—is tinged with a vague sense of uneasiness, not completely unpleasant but certainly a feeling that grown-ups didn’t altogether get what was and wasn’t scary. Books, movies, and TV shows—from Snow White to Gummy—seemed to deliver double messages. Peter and the Wolf and Tubby the Tuba were resonant with spooky notes and adult themes. Dare Wright’s 1937 storybook The Lonely Doll is told through a series of clumsy, amateurish, low-contrast photographs. In the book, an abandoned doll lives alone in a big house and discovers teddy bear friends in the garden who keep her company. The story, whimsical at times, becomes vaguely disturbing when Edith, the stuffed cotton doll with doe eyes, gets an undeserved and oddly suggestive spanking from Mr. Bear. The puppets of Burr Tillstrom (Kukla, Fran, and Ollie) and the marionettes of Bil and Cora Baird were transformed by black-and-white TV to mysterious, at times almost sinister, children’s amusement.

One of the photographs in Bartlett’s Yankee Spread shows an international lineup of “Finnish,” “Scottish,” “Italian,” “Swedish,” “English,” “Polish,” and “Irish” dolls. Assembling dolls from different countries was a collecting convention of the midcentury, and by presenting this image in the magazine rather than one of his moody dramas Bartlett placed himself squarely in the (somewhat) socially acceptable role of doll enthusiast. The notion of doll children of the world represented as angels of peace and a dream for the future reached full expression two years later when the Pepsi-Cola pavilion at the 1964 World’s Fair hosted Walt Disney’s It’s a Small World boat ride in a “Salute to Unicef.” There, “300 Audio-Animatronic children from more than 100 different nations [would] sing, dance, and entertain guests to a happy tune.” The Small World dolls are eerily reminiscent of Bartlett’s universe, though one would imagine the sound track to Bartlett’s small world sung in a minor key. The power of the post–World War II visual sensibility lies in its shiny-penny quality: Everything points toward a better brighter future of ease, efficiency, and leisure time. Only in hindsight does the darker subtext beneath the naive perfection of those images reveal itself.

Although his photos weren’t meant to be seen by anyone, one senses that Bartlett nonetheless never let himself cross the line. All the tightly controlled narratives allude to nothing less benign than fairy tales, bedtime stories, and walks in the park. It’s tempting to liken Bartlett’s activity to that of Henry Darger, whose cast of thousands of naked Vivian girls inhabited a threatening planet of rape, murder, and war. The source material for the Vivian girls, too, came from popular culture, and the girls were likewise anatomically explicit (with penises for genitalia in most cases), but the comparison between them and Bartlett’s plaster colleens stops there. Darger’s troubled youth, history of being institutionalized, and fifty-year career as a socially marginal laborer cast him in the role of “outsider” as an artist and otherwise. Bartlett lived a quietly conventional life, his bachelorhood and secret hobby being the most obvious exceptions to “normalcy.”

It’s interesting to speculate as to why Bartlett needed to photographically record the dolls and why he needed to make the transition from fact to fantasy. To build a set is to create a pictorial land for characters to inhabit, if only for the brief moment that they are viewed through the lens. The desire to edit out peripheral material, both physical and psychological, establishes boundaries. Camera to eye creates two walls, a floor, and ceiling, almost like a walk down a corridor. Tape and glue, rough edges, and studio detritus are momentarily deleted, and a temporary location for a subject to live and breathe comes forth. Elusive depth, unnatural light sources, and confusing reflections conspire to make a real place out of undefined territory. Other rooms and lives, pasts and futures are implied nearby. A new world is created when the shutter snaps.

Bartlett’s images are far more resonant than product and catalogue shots, though on paper a description of them would probably sound like promotional material for the Ginny doll, a ’50s favorite. In his Harvard class bio, Bartlett made his only known reference to his private pastime: “My hobby is sculpting in plaster. Its purpose is that of all proper hobbies—to let out urges that do not find expression in other channels.” While I doubt that many stamp or coin collectors would share that sentiment, Bartlett’s strong desire to let his hobby be just that, and still the outlet for his repressed urges, gave his life’s work its rigor and a tension that kept the magic alive for him for nearly thirty years. In a culture where we like our dads to be dads, he played his role admirably, delivering pictures of children as beautifully complex, multilayered, and exasperating as the real thing.

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