THE MODEL OF ARTIFICE: THE DOLL SEEN AS A MIMETIC AND TRAUMATIC FIGURE IN THE PAINTINGS OF KEVINA LABONNE

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout this project-based research, I present the Doll not merely as a simple toy or collectible, but rather as an object worthy of artistic and intellectual consideration. As I define my practice in the chapters that follow, my art becomes challenging, if not contentious. Yet my objective is more complex: it is to examine different facets of the doll and to explore its potential as a subject of artistic expression, as a multifaceted catalyst for expanding and energizing my studio practice.

Within my practice I use pigment to reproduce the doll in two dimensions, whilst aiming to retain all the attributes the three-dimensional object can convey, whether this be beauty or a sense of the eerie. I examine the doll in terms of its idiosyncratic structural forms and study its cultural implications. The goal is to illustrate how the doll, in a number of different forms, may be used as a contextual vehicle for social expression within my practice. By reinterpreting its visual attributes, the doll is imbued with a range of meanings and this process has offered a new form of expression within my practice.

The Character doll, with its highly stylized and beautiful face, is often described as existing distinctly apart from conventional dolls. With its highly expressive facial features, this type of doll is rare and unusual (Tarnowska 1987: 7). The character doll will be discussed as an object of fascination in the first chapter, *The Mimetic Nature of The Screaming Character Doll*. I will describe how dolls, like the 'screaming' character doll in particular, have inspired me to create artwork that explores themes of trauma and persistent struggle. The doll will be described as a 'model of artifice', a complex figure able to trigger an emotional response. Finally, concepts of the uncanny will be explored

in this chapter in relation to the doll and its deathly character.

Use of the doll as the primary model in my practice has led me to seek out other artists who also use the doll as a source of inspiration. The second chapter *The Assault on the Doll* will review the use of such an artificial figure, not only as a model in art, but also as a metaphor for the tortured and dismembered human body as often presented in modern and contemporary artistic practice. Since the early twentieth century the doll has been considered a worthy subject for artistic examination. Surrealists such as Marcel Duchamp and André Breton for example featured figurative forms such as the doll, mannequin, automaton and the wax figure in their work; but the work of three artists in particular (Hans Bellmer, Armando Reverón and Shawn Barber) will be discussed in detail to further analyse the doll as an anthropomorphic object associated with the uncanny and horrific.

Although each of my earlier paintings has been influenced by the central protagonist figure of the screaming doll, each creates its own visual narrative and dialogue. With this in mind, I will demonstrate that this investigation is in itself a form of practice-as-research, which the final chapter, *The Doll Paintings*, seeks to illustrate. During this research, I have been inspired by my own collection of dolls, which I began to collect in 2007 when I first embarked on a Masters degree at Middlesex University. The collection includes the antique and damaged dolls, pin cushion dolls and individual fragments such as body parts, all of which have been purchased through online auction sites such as eBay or in charity shops and flea markets. Since completing the MA, my curiosity and enthusiasm for the character doll has developed, extending to incorporate other types of doll, which has in turn inspired me to create my doll paintings. This current research therefore represents the product of an interest in dolls (and the character doll in particular), that spans many years. For this written analysis of my

practice, I have included a discussion of works created during the research have been included with a personal response and description. This not only serves to clarify my intentions as an artist-practitioner, but also allows me the opportunity to reflect upon personal choices I have made during the painting process. Explored beyond its recognized status as a simple traditional toy for children, or as a collectible for adults, the doll will be presented and discussed here as a thought provoking tool of human imagination.

The aim of my exhibition *SIMULACRUM (26 September – 5 October 2013)*, was not only to express the continuity and progression of my ideas, but also to curate an environment that invited speculative and critical reflection on the part of the viewer. The final essay that accompanied the exhibition (See Appendix) provides an overview of the work presented at Heath Street Baptist Church in Hampstead.

Within this project, I was challenged to reflect and write about my creative practice and process of inquiry, from my position of a practicing artist and from the perspective of a researcher. Many questions arose relating to contemporary art practice and artistic research. How should the artist record his or her visual work within a written thesis? How do we describe and analyze the process of artistic research when artwork is so often documented and evaluated as a finished product? Such questions took on an added dimension for me given that my native language is French, and thus the prospect of conveying nuanced meaning in my second language has proved an additional challenge. It is clear that the focus of such research is to enrich my own artistic and creative process; that attempting to engage with theory to inform practice has allowed me to further reflect upon my individual experience and personal approach. Focused on the practice of painting, this inquiry, composed of both images and text, examines questions raised as they have emerged from my studio practice. As an artist whose practice

articulates research, my goal in this dissertation is to lend insight into my artistic modus operandi.

CHAPTER 1:

THE MIMETIC NATURE OF THE SCREAMING CHARACTER DOLL

At first glance, as a representation of the human infant, the doll has great visual appeal; but as the doll appears in a diverse variety of forms, I have been led to explore it on a number of levels as an intriguing and complex object. In contrast to its association with innocent play for example, on another level dolls may also have a sinister aura as a mimetic figure. This ambiguity, the juxtaposition of the doll's innocence as a child's toy and its darker resonances, make it a powerful subject for representation and inquiry. The doll exists as an artistic anthropomorphism that imitates the form of a child, but it also has intrinsic value as an aesthetic historical artefact.

In representing a range of human characteristics, the doll is able to provoke a plurality of powerful reactions amongst different individuals, from endearment and creative inspiration to utter repulsion and aversion; it is able both to charm and frighten. Expressing his attraction to the doll and its ability to engage the viewer in an imaginative and metaphoric world, Carl Fox (1972) as cited in Kuznets (1994:5) describes the doll as a "mirror of beauty, memory and the childhood grave." Others, like the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1966) felt revulsion because of the artificiality of the doll, which confusingly juxtaposed life and death within its form. The subject is one with real potential for further research, particularly in relation to the study of the character doll. These dolls, especially the 'screaming' character dolls, seem to me to take the ambiguity common to all dolls and heighten it even further; simultaneously charming and disturbing, they are mimetic yet also artificial and imperfect. This contradiction of the doll, as both an attractive and repulsive construct, has kindled my interest in investigating the doll through my own artistic practice as a form of visual research.

Assuming the figure of an adult, child or baby, the doll is an object designed and constructed as an artefact that mimics the human form. Although it is seen mostly as a child's plaything, the doll has assumed numerous cultural and symbolic roles beyond that of a child's toy. In Palaeolithic sculpture, the human form was already suggested and carved from rock, horn, branches and roots. As noted by the author Max Von Boehn, the doll has long been associated with sculpture, tracing its roots to the basic figurative sculptural forms created by pre-historic cultures (1832: 24). The doll has been subject to change over the years: it has been carefully moulded, clothed, and refined through advanced manufacturing techniques and the use of a wide range of varied materials. Whether from clay, rag, wood, wool, leather, porcelain, plastic or vinyl, over time dolls have been seen to exhibit the hallmarks of many creative techniques and to represent a range of ages and ethnic groups. The doll has functioned as a prehistoric idol, a fetish, a religious icon vested with innate power, or as a fashionable status symbol. The doll is rich in historical and cultural significance. It embodies more than a simple imitation of the human form; it is a figure that is heavily endowed with human emotion and motive, rendering the form as an object greater than the sum of its parts.

The character doll is a particularly complex product of human imagination, projection and creative impulse. Manufactured over a relatively short period of time during the early 1900's, the facial expressions of these dolls are modelled to suggest a range of emotions, from joy and laughter to despair, sadness and horror. As stated by Tarnowska (1987: 7), the first character dolls appeared around the early 1900's and their production lasted until roughly 1930. The result of an aspiration for great realism through complexity of detail, they illustrate a trend to create dolls with increasingly real-looking facial expressions. Because of advances in material science, and with the invention of

bisque porcelain as a new substrate for doll manufacture, a greater plasticity became possible for the creation of expressive facial features. Appearing delicate and true to human form, the character dolls possess the "qualities of the bisque", allowing for a more human-like skin tone. They appeared at a time when manufacturers, such as Kämmer & Reinhardt and Gebrüder Heubach, were competing for supremacy in the world market for modern dolls (Tarnowska 1987: 8). According to Tarnowska (1987: 8), the 'doll reform' depicts an historic period when character dolls presented distinct representations of the human form in miniature, created as traditional toys for children. As Tarnowska explains, this period was characterized by a unique demand for dolls that looked as realistic as possible.

To expand upon my study of these dolls, I have chosen to use as my main reference Maree Tarnowska's study, *Rare Character Dolls* (1987). I have found this book to contain a complete record of the most famous character dolls. An internationally recognised doll expert and dealer, the book illustrates Maree Tarnowska's clear expertise in this field. She possesses a large collection of 19th century dolls and is the founder of the Antique Doll Dealers Association of Great Britain. I will now introduce how the character doll differs from conventional dolls, which can be argued to represent a certain ideal of a very passive form of feminine or childish beauty. As stated by Tarnowska (1987: 7), the innovative character dolls move towards greater realism in the physical appearance of the face, with an unlimited range of expression. She describes them as "an attempt to represent the human face with more truth and realism." To achieve greater aesthetic appeal doll manufacturers joined complex new materials with the traditional techniques of artists, sculptors and painters. As accounted by Tarnowska (1987: 8), the American Company of Louis Amberg & Son employed artists and

designers, including Grace G. Drayton and Jeno Jusko, who contributed to the range of seventy-five different dolls, collectively known as *Baby Beautiful*, first released in 1910. Some character dolls benefitted from innovations like the sleeping eye-lid, an internal mechanism of wire and lead weight placed within the head of a doll which allows the eyes to close when the doll is in a recumbent position (Tarnowska 1978:13). Some were also designed with an open mouth (with or without tongue and teeth). As such, each model is historically unique and appealing in its own way and this level of detail reminds us that these dolls were not mass-produced, but each painstakingly designed and handmade.

However, I argue that the mimetic nature of certain types of character doll creates an ambiguous and disturbing quality. The most troubling of these dolls are those such as the "crying" doll, and especially the "screaming" doll, which mimic the form of children expressing negative emotions. In her study, Tarnowska (1987: 32) categorizes these sorts of dolls as 'horrors'. Invented by Casimer Bru's French company, the two-faced character doll is an example of such a perturbing creation; it possesses a laughing face on one side of its head and a crying face on the opposite side. A peculiar smile arises from one of these dolls. The expression, with its double row of teeth within the partially opened mouth, appears more like a grimace than an endearing expression of joy (Tarnowska 1987: 35). More elaborate mechanical innovations were produced by Bru who created the multi-doll faces, with some counting up to four different heads. The juxtaposition of beautiful form and modelling, with the suggestion of atrocity, repulsion or horror within the same figure certainly gives rise to a sense of eerie disquiet.

In Tarnowska's account the production of some character dolls employed children who modelled many different facial expression. For example, research suggests that manufacturers like Gebruder Heubach and Krammer & Reinhardt used their own children and grandchildren as models for their dolls (Coleman et al 1968: 1). This advanced and accurate method of reproducing human expression suggests the artistic creativity and originality considered in the fabrication of the character dolls. For her historical study, Tarnowska researched and photographed numerous 'rare' character dolls, presenting an important and diverse collection of these unusual dolls. Several versions of the screaming doll feature among her illustrated images. For example, enacting different poses and settings, two photographs of the same doll accompany a graphic physical depiction of a screaming doll (Tarnowska 1987: 66-67). The first image (Illustration 1.1) presents the doll in a detailed and old-fashioned flowery dress. While emitting what seems to be a piercing cry, she is brushing her hair with her left hand, while the other opened hand remains suspended in a gesture of apparent pain. Her unblinking eyes stare expressively downward as the gaping mouth lends an air of desperation. Tarnowska (1987: 138) describes the mouth of this screaming doll as 'open/closed', a term used to describe dolls in which the lips appear to be parted though there is no actual orifice.

Illustration 1.1

This screaming doll (Illustration 1.1) is typical of the character doll, preserved in pristine condition with its authentic original garments. A nostalgic artefact, it is highly collectible because of its historical importance and intrinsic value. Such a doll is very desirable to the serious collector who can afford today's high prices, or is fortunate enough to acquire one through an auction, flea market, or on-line venue such as eBay. Knowledgeable collectors have a passion for the character doll and enjoy building significant personal collections. I refer here to private collectors as Richard Wright, Ralph Griffith, Elmer Ell, Dorothy Hertig, Mary Lou Rubright, Jeanette Fink and Maree Tarnowska. Many fine collections and their owners are referenced in the Acknowledgement section of the book *Rare Character Dolls* (Tarnowska 1987: 141).

Illustration 1.2

To continue my analysis, the second image (Illustration 1.2) presents the same screaming doll in a different setting. Standing now amongst what appears to be little boxes and gifts, her face in frozen in an eternal scream of pain.

Through these images, I find that the term ‘expression’ yields its fullest meaning: a need to express, to press or to force out an emotion. Yet there is no internal mechanism, which might be argued as necessary to produce the cry. Despite the doll’s ‘silence’, its inanimate face nonetheless appears animate. The doll evokes a curiously blended emotional experience of wonder, empathy and antipathy with its eternal scream. The mouth remains the venerable focus of emotion as it concentrates intense feelings of anguish and distress. Yet at the same time, the eyes are presented as purely receptive;

they remain expressionless, an empty canvas, deep and vacuous. This unsettling juxtaposition of expression of real sentiment with evident artificiality evoke extreme disquiet, and should in fact, suggest that rather than a child's toy, these dolls were primarily targeted at an adult market. This discomfort intensifies as the scream invites the onlooker to consider its causality. Fixed as a photographic image in Tarnowska's study, the horrific expression of the doll seems to become heightened even further as this medium freezes it in time; such treatment again distances it from the conventional doll, which, used in play, is continuously held, moved and arranged by the child. This example illustrates the difficult task of the researcher: any attempt to reproduce the doll visually distorts the intended emotional experience for the viewer. The photo artificially reproduces the artificial; it becomes a copy of a copy of the human emotive experience.

Tarnowska (1987) argues that the objective of the character doll's manufacturer was undoubtedly to charm children, thus encouraging purchase by an adult, as is the case for any other toy. It should therefore appeal to a child's innate imagination. As a representation of human form, natural yet unmoving, it facilitates a transition to a parallel world of childish reality. In her paper on the subject, Susan Stewart (1993) conceives of the toy as a physical representation of fiction and a nidus for further narrative. According to her, it stimulates thoughts, mental images and intuition; the toy introduces a private state of awareness open to daydream and creativity. "It is the beginning of an entirely new temporal world, a fantasy world parallel to... the world of reality" (Stewart 1993: 57). In addition, miniaturization helps ensure the toy's winsomeness.

Within a finite time of reverie, Stewart points out that the mimetic figure is manipulated

by the child's imagination in a metaphoric world. Its charm is enhanced by the attractiveness of its small scale, which in turn allows the child a sense of physical superiority and control. The doll enables the child to explore the parameters of the adult world by playing or acting like the mother, father or teacher; assuming an imagined position within the adult world and thus also the power or control typically denied to children (Stewart 1993: 58). Hence, in evolving beyond its purely physical form, the artificiality of the doll disappears through human fantasy or imagination to illicit deeper meaning. Such factors succeed in bringing life to a plaything, at least within the child's understanding.

In his theorizing of the "*mirror image*", psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (2002) described the child as a "body in bits and pieces". Lacking self-determination, the child is drawn to the doll (which is smaller than the child, but also able to be controlled by the child). Lacan went further by using the example of a baby seeing its reflection as itself when staring in a mirror. He suggested that before encountering its nearly identical likeness, the child perceives only had a fragmented body "in bits and pieces" (Lacan 1953: 13). He also identifies the doll, and other objects, as a symbolic phallus, which confers a certain power on the child which he or she otherwise lacks.

With these 'factors' in mind, it seems that in some respects the character doll, as a toy, fails to provide for the fantasy world of a child. The short-lived production of the character dolls suggests the child's preference for banality, for pretty, if perhaps rather insipid traditional dolls without such highly emotive features. As Tarnowska (1987: 8) accounts:

> The more natural look of the new doll, which in some cases, displayed many of the less-attractive grimaces of a petulant child, might not have had an immediate appeal to the romantic and fairytale notions of a young child of those times... The public was not immediately enraptured, and its loyalty to the traditional presentation of the female beauty remained strong. It has even been recorded that some editions of the new-type doll proved such poor "sellers" that the manufacturers were left no option but to destroy those remaining unsold.

This preference suggests that the vapid facial features of the inexpressive dolls help with the child's process of identification and projection, whereas the highly expressive forms are more limiting. Even Frau Käthe Kruse, the creator of Käthe Kruse dolls, describes the character doll as a toy which leaves 'little play for the imagination of the child' (Bok 1912). As indicated previously, some models of the character dolls, like the multi-doll faces which count up to four heads, may appear disturbing due to the replication and exaggeration of expression. It is clear that the horrific elements, in the face of the screaming doll for example, diminish the child's ability to engage with the object through play.

So it seems that, despite its elegant design, the character doll remains void and artificial, and may be perceived by the child as an abnormal object. This example suggests the difficulty in reproducing objects which exists in nature. As artists we are subject to the restraints of choice, perspective, intentionality, as well as the limitations of materials and technology (Negrotti 1999: 6). The artificial may imitate the natural, but it can never actually *be* natural. This notion of 'reality' is complex, suggesting as in the

previous example, that surface appearance may be deceptive and that reality lies somewhere beneath the veneer of the visible world. The disinterest of children implies that reality for the child lies somewhere other than in the ghastly qualities of the character doll's face. We may therefore recognize the difficulty for the artificial to achieve its task: successfully reproducing a convincing physical representation of an endearing infant. The screaming doll betrays the child's own terror and terrified self-imaginings; hence it becomes unattractive and inadequate to situate within the child's imaginary world of play. Plainly these observations have certain implications for my own intervention as a painter: the paintings I undertake as research do not solicit children, as audience; instead they are likely to target the adult and to jar the memory and experience of infantile fear.

My practice has been strongly motivated by the displaced meaning and narratives that are triggered by the doll in its many guises and interpretations. Consequently, I have experimented with all sorts of dolls, plastic, porcelain, and even bisque-made dolls, like the half-dolls. Half-dolls are tiny dolls (most are between 2 to 6 inches tall), comprising a human torso without legs. Often used as decorative accessories, they are often used to top functional items such as pin cushions, powder puffs and whisk brooms. While such antiques are plentiful, some forms of half-dolls are still produced and remain popular today. However, the type of doll which has most consistently attracted me as an artist, and is my primary focus of enquiry, is the 'screaming' character doll. The latter appears animated and yet bears the stiff or frozen expression of an eternal cry. This "frozen animation" explains the constitutive ambiguity of the object and its inspiring quality for me; it fascinates because the cry suggests the irresolution caused by a possible incident or trauma.

Among the different forms of character doll, I have chosen to explore the screaming doll as a representation of a traumatized subject for my painting. I will further explore the concept of trauma and how the screaming doll is manipulated intentionally within my work to project an image of victimhood. As I explore this subject, with reference to the theories of Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's, I also investigate how the doll retains the deathly qualities of an artificial figure, and therefore resides within the domain of the 'uncanny'. As I have familiarized myself with a selection of relevant essays on the subject of the doll, I wish also to introduce the writings of such prominent literary figures as Maria Rainer Rilke, Sigmund Freud and Hal Foster, all of whom have explored the ambivalent nature of the doll in their writings.

My choice of using the 'screaming' character doll, the attached body, the horrific face, is deliberate: the aim is to use the doll as a means to initiate a discussion of complex social issues such as violence, trauma and abuse. Recurring trauma, especially in infancy, can be argued to shape and contribute to personality formation. The word 'trauma' etymologically draws from the Greek word *traumat*, meaning 'wound' (Brown and Nairne, 2001: 6). It possesses similar significance when used in a medical context where trauma refers mainly to a serious physical injury. The term is generally reserved for an individual who has suffered physically or psychologically from a terrible, intense and uncontrollable event. Trauma may produce lasting neurosis. Psychological trauma may therefore result from the emotional disturbance subsequent to a catastrophic or damaging incident. Emerging from this instant of 'rupture', the event becomes a festering wound permanently altering the individual's coping mechanisms.

Symptoms recognized in post-traumatic stress syndromes include acute stress reactions, aversive behaviours and abnormal psychological reactions (Herman 2001: 56). In *Seminar I*, Jacques Lacan (1993: 191) describes how "Trauma, insofar as it has a repressing effect, intervenes after the fact (*après coup*, *nachtraglish*)." The 'fact' is the emotional shock as it manifests subsequent to the stressful event or physical injury. By revisiting Freud's theory, Lacan asserts that the unconscious is worthy of comparison to a complex language. The most significant impact is that it is often difficult for the repressed mind to return to its normative, pre-traumatised state. The subject may develop compulsive behaviour and is more susceptible to depression. At the extreme, hysteria may result from such trauma and impair a constructive interface with one's environment. As caused by psychological trauma, hysteria is a condition manifested by unconscious emotional conflict, severe mental dissociation and inappropriate emotional response (Lacan 1993: 12). Given this complexity, I have chosen to explore trauma as something to be concealed- a disquieting taboo subject both difficult to reconcile and depict.

Through my painting I project the image of the screaming doll as a traumatic figure, to trigger its perception as the image of an abused child. The process of perception begins when one integrates, classifies and interprets information consciously or unconsciously: it is an operational and subjective experience of the world, as it involves our senses. In other words, perception is ability to observe, critically evaluate and understand. Consequently, the capacity of the doll to specify something other than a toy relies upon the rich density of its symbolism. It is fascinating how, when I observe a character doll's body, the latter may be interpreted symbolically as a young child's body. Due to its symbolic nature, the artificial toy may indeed be perceived as an embodiment of

innocence. Yet the artificial toy with its expressive face exemplifies trauma. As an artistic subject the screaming doll is unique; it is a conduit for the representation of complex emotional experience and relevant social issues. As a result, the painted figure becomes allegorical.

To continue with the depiction of the doll as a signifier, I will now explore how the doll, which is made in human likeness, may generate a visual image suggesting death. In his essay *Dolls (*1914), the poet, René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke, presents the confusion between the toy and a corpse, as he reveals a very peculiar aversion to the subject. Partly a scathing critique of the doll's existence, this text presents Rilke's critical views on the doll's place within the imaginative reality of a child. As a reflection upon dolls and puppets, the text seems to be an attempt to cope with his own terror in encountering the toy. According to Eve-Maria Simms (2004: 73), Rilke's hatred of dolls stems from his experience with the doll during his childhood. Research by Simms suggests that Rilke had been treated as a girl by his mother, who after the earlier loss of a baby daughter, named him Sophia and forced him to wear girl's clothes and to play with dolls. It appears that this experience had a great impact on his negative perception of the doll, as Rilke describes the doll in his essay as profoundly soulless and absent.

As stated by Rilke, the doll is kept in existence only through great mental effort from one's imagination. Indifferent to the child's attachment and emotion, the doll is described by the poet as "a perfidious, indifferent, unbreakable thing" (as quoted by Simms 2004: 74). He believed that the day would come when the child realized that the doll does not need her and that she has wasted her affection. For Rilke, the doll functions as a definite man-made object, against which the child asserts her own

identity. In the end, the doll aspires to wasted tenderness. As maintained by Simms (2004: 81), the doll always ends up being simply a rigid inanimate corpse. The dead-like doll relates here to the infantile mind; a developmental stage wherein one cannot distinguish between life and death.

Simms points out that the reproduction of the human body through the doll may sometimes result in an image of complete artificiality. In this situation, we recognize the impossibility of the artificial to reproduce the characteristics of a natural being: hence, the deathly quality of the doll, the confusion between toy and corpse. Simms (2004: 78) claims that "...part of the terror the doll inspires in Rilke comes from her lifelessness, her indifference and her unresponsiveness to the child's emotions." We may observe here that there is a clear common factor in how the doll, as an object, is subject to a more sinister interpretation. In his essay *Exquisite Corpses*, Foster (1993) argues that, in an inert body, we confront a paragon of the human form with the eventual recognition of the dead body. Categorizing the doll as an object which is 'mechanical-commodified' (the remaking and reconfiguring of the body as a commodity and machine), Foster (1993: 126) describes it as a disturbing confusion of life and death. He points out that it is precisely this confusion about the inhuman personality that attracted the Surrealists, as these artificial bodies were ideal for their image '*repertoire*' and suited their desire to exploit something novel within the art world. Devoid of life, the doll imitates humankind through its exterior mimesis, but due to its elementary ambivalent and vacuous nature, it exemplifies at the same time a lifeless object. I believe that it draws upon this potential precisely because of its 'uncanny' and un/familiar elements, and the repetitive image of being in/human. The doll projects elements which one may instantly identify and it becomes therefore worthy of being explored in both psychological and

semiotic terms. Its artificial existence is uncanny in nature because it imitates the human form.

Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay on *The Uncanny* needs mention to further this analysis on the uncanny and deathly qualities of the doll (Freud 2003). He insists that the uncanny can be witnessed in any effigy which appears merely mechanical or automatic, such as dolls or other life-like mechanical objects:

> ...things, persons, impressions, events and situations that are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny in particular forcible and definite form... waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata.
>
> (Royle 2003: 2)

For him, the uncanny may involve an unusual commingling of the familiar (what Freud names the *Heimlich*) and unfamiliar (the *Unheimlich*). It may arise from terror or fear; from the perception of the unfamiliar or from the repetitive (as in feelings of *déjà vu*) or from the experience of unlikely coincidence. For example, the perception of involuntary repetition may impart an uncanny feeling to an event that would otherwise be perceived as a simple accident or matter of chance. As Freud (2003: 150) explains, it often "arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when the symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes..." In this view, the uncanny is heightened through the indistinct (non) human and (in) animate nature of such figures and the uncertainty and confusion they create. Automatons and dolls become portents of death in life through their inanimation. As we can see again, the doll is included in this discussion of the uncanny, precisely because of its lifeless, inert body.

Through Hoffman's tale of *The Sand-man* (1814), Freud identifies a sense of the uncanny within the elements of duplicity: the automaton, death, and the presence of the familiar/unfamiliar. In *The Uncanny*, he provides a thorough study of 'uncanny' elements present within the text. *The Sand-man* tells the story of a central protagonist, Nathaniel, who is morbidly haunted by his father's sudden death and a childhood perception of the Sand-man, who comes to enucleate the eyes of little children. Whilst already engaged to a young woman named Clara, Nathaniel falls in love with the automaton Olympia, 'who', at the end of the story is dismembered. Freud focuses on the uncanniness of the doll as a response to Ernst Jentsch's own study on the uncanny, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906). In his essay, Jentsch describes how Hoffman employs a brilliant psychological manoeuvre by placing his readers in doubt as to whether a particular figure is, in fact, a real person or an automaton. However, Freud wished to prove that the doll is not the only motif that creates an uncanny effect in the story of *The Sand-man*. He went further than Jentsch in describing how the uncanny feeling brought about by the apparently animate doll derives from an 'infantile' wish or desire of Nathaniel's (Freud 2003: 141) which is likely to have its origins in his conflicted relationship with his father, castration anxiety or the Oedipus complex (Freud 2003: 232).

Although Freud ultimately discards the doll as a reflection on the Oedipus complex, I want to persist in discussing the uncanniness Olympia evokes in Hoffman's tale. According to Foster (1993: 70), Olympia is clearly presented as the projection of Nathaniel's 'fantasy of seduction' and his love for her is a result of his search for the idealized 'feminine attitude'. Each of these concepts are derived from the exposed relationship between Nathaniel and Olympia (through Hoffman's writing) as well as the

physical and gestural description of the doll as viewed through the young man's eyes. Olympia is characterized as 'beautiful, slender, of perfect proportion and splendidly dressed' (Hoffman (1967: 194). For Nathaniel, she is an excellent listener, who sings, plays the piano and dances perfectly well. The story's other characters (Hoffman 1967: 207) view her as rather rigid and stiff, even comparing her to a 'wooden doll'. However, Nathaniel appears so blinded by his love and desire that he remains nonplussed by her cold hands, lips and other physical aberrations, focusing rather upon his idealized image of Olympia as a lovely living being. As an objectified and feminized model of a woman, the doll succeeds in misleading Nathaniel. The attraction of her physical appearance overcomes the disbelief that her repetitive mechanical responses prompts in others; Nathaniel's wants to perceive life within the artificial and inanimate body and thus his imagination does so. However, the lack of sentient human reaction stands in opposition to this illusion. This discussion reiterates the 'uncanny' Freud describes as an effect occurring when the distinction between the imaginary and the real is effaced.

Because of its 'deathly' quality, the artificial body of the screaming doll proves an effective visual symbol for jeopardy in reality. It possesses a great potential for representation which I have incorporated into my own practice. The screaming doll conceals a certain veracity within its childish and simplified form, possessing a referential dimension or a simplified anthropomorphic quality that I have used extensively to objectify the 'uncanny' in my painting. The material presence of the screaming doll and its eternal cry act as a metaphor for the complex relationship between the physical object and the temporal or fleeting; the doll's cry cannot be heard, but the framing of its mouth indicates the traumatic experience which caused it. The childish object becomes semiotic; it immediately symbolizes something else, as an idea or image.

CHAPTER 2:

THE ASSAULT ON THE DOLL

The artist's model is generally a living person; someone who serves as a subject, employed to pose and imitate immobility. However, this chapter will introduce the figure of the doll as the main substitute for the living model and as a metaphor for the artificial body within the arts; themes which I explore in my own practice. From Max Ernst's *Die Anatomie* (1921), Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée* (1934 – 37), to Cindy Sherman's work *Untitled MP #261 / #263* (1992), each reveals the doll as a motif frequently employed across the mediums of painting, sculpture and photography. Initially contrived to imitate human anatomy as closely as possible, the doll, dummy or mannequin has become a model for these artists. Therefore, I present the works of three different artists - Hans Bellmer, Armando Reverón and Shawn Barber - to demonstrate the doll as an important reference for creative practice. This analysis will also further investigate the doll as it relates to the uncanny.

Hans Bellmer's (1902 - 1975) first works comprised of realistic studies of a child's doll, making use of his technical skill as a draftsman. The painting, *Die Puppe* (1934), which presents the doll with a child's face and sexually mature body, and whose innocence seems corrupted by sensuous abandon, very early suggested the erotic direction of his future work. I examine the work of Bellmer so as to reflect upon his obsession with the adolescent female body. There is a continual investigation of the body as a site of and metaphor for physical violence and psychological manipulation in Bellmer's work, explored through the substitute body of the doll. For this study, I reference a combination of biographical and historical information, cultural and critical theory, to contribute to a broader interpretation of the doll.

Among the many incidents which led Bellmer to create his dolls, three main personal events are commonly cited (Lichtenstein 2001; Webb 1985; Green 2005). The first influence was the reacquisition of his childhood toy-box which his mother sent him in 1931 (Lichtenstein 2001: 19). This box contained a collection of broken dolls, spinning tops, glass marbles and linocut magazines, among other souvenirs. This reunion with his childhood belongings had a great emotional impact on Bellmer. As he stated in a letter to Patrick Walberg (Webb 1985: 26), he was suddenly conscious of his lost innocence, exchanged for a disturbing life in which he had "to earn a living on reaching the age of reason." As recounted by Therese Lichtenstein (2001: 21), who made a thorough study of Bellmer's dolls, the second event occurred when Bellmer's young cousin Ursula moved to Berlin and became his neighbour. Lichtenstein asserts that Ursula happened to be an object of erotic fascination for Bellmer, as his sexual attraction for the adolescent later influenced the physical form of his sculptures or dolls. The third event happened in 1932, when Bellmer accompanied by his wife Margarete, his brother Fritz and Ursula, attended the operatic interpretation of *The Sand-Man* at the Berlin Opera House (Webb 1985: 26). It seemed that Bellmer was fascinated by the life-like doll Olympia, her mechanical and human quality, and the final tragedy, as she is dismembered. Simultaneously, it appeared that all these factors stimulated Bellmer's imagination and contributed to the creation of his own dolls.

Dedicated to Ursula, Bellmer published *Die Puppe (The Doll)* in 1934; it was a compilation of ten photographs of the first doll he created, with a short text drawing upon his childhood memory (Lichtenstein 2001: 24). With the help of his brother Fritz who was an engineer, Bellmer constructed the first doll from an assemblage of different materials. The articulated doll was composed of a wooden structure, metal bars, and

layers of flax fibre, papier maché and plaster of Paris. Visible to the viewer, the stomach enclosed a mechanism and little panoramas, each illuminated by a torch-bulb. Soon thereafter, Bellmer composed *The Doll*, a recollection of each stage in the construction of the doll, from its basic wood and metal frame to its final elegantly completed form. The incomplete doll was photographed in different arrangements and rooms, and shown with different props. The first images present the doll as a wooden and metal armature, followed by later photographs of a more structured form covered in plaster. Wearing a hat and wig, her face is more defined in the third photograph which also presents a blurred and translucent image of Bellmer, posing with his creation. The fourth photograph suggests the doll's construction, as it shows a combination of body fragments – a leg, a foot, head, wig, arms, torso and other skeletal elements of the body – lying helter skelter on the floor. In the other photographs, the doll is seen disassembled and then reconstructed with an arrangement of body parts as Bellmer explores the artistic potential of the dismembered body.

At this stage of Bellmer's practice, photography proved to be an important medium. It seems to have served his aim of capturing the essence of the doll, allowing him to transform his fantasy into a preserved reality. He was able to capture a certain animation in the body-object he photographed, and the fragmented body was given a specific purpose in each photograph. The photograph became not only a form of documentation, but also a means to capture the elusive qualities of eroticism Bellmer wished to project onto the doll. The artist imagines a scenario for each photograph and each image reveals a new arrangement of body parts, evoking a sense of possession. As Lichtenstein (2001: 25) observes:

> Paradoxically, as both creator and director of these scenarios, Bellmer used the mobility of the doll's parts to pin it down. In all its variously bodily permutations, the doll is restricted, trapped, and as pale as a corpse.

These initial photographs suggest very clearly the erotic obsession that the doll presented to him within a world of imagination and play, and within his own artistic mind. Through the use of the photographic image, Bellmer succeeds in capturing an ephemeral and uncanny quality of the doll, perhaps even more so in his second published work *Die Spiele der Puppe (The Games of the Doll)* (1949).

The photographs of the second doll in *The Games of the Doll* display a more ambiguous female body, one whose parts are reversible and interchangeable. The need to surpass the first doll's limited flexibility made Bellmer and his brother construct a more elaborate doll. It possessed further refined body parts: two pairs of legs, a torso with four breasts, a central ball joint and two pelvises, providing naturalistic articulation of the limbs. While the womb-like central sphere permitted the doll to achieve life-like postures, each pelvis was capable of being reversed and could serve as breasts and shoulders or thighs and buttocks. He eventually took more than a hundred photographs of the second doll in different poses and scenarios, in interior or exterior environments (Lichtenstein 2001: 7). Hand-coloured with delicate tones of blue, green, purple, mauve, orange and yellow, each photo is visually striking. This use of colour gives the image a heightened intensity, and the atmosphere creates an oddly hostile setting, as the dismembered, reassembled doll seems more exposed and helpless than in the first published journal.

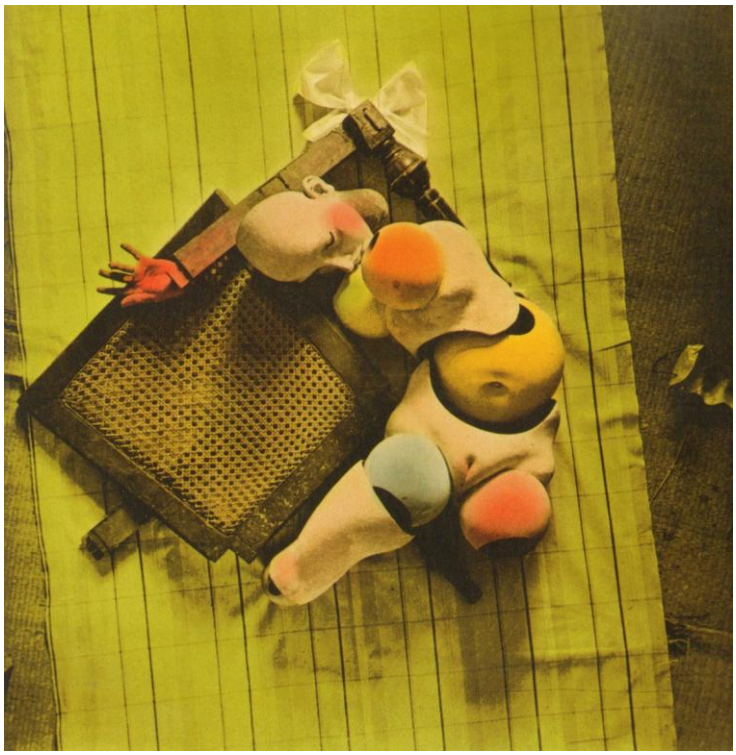

Illustration 2.1: Hans Bellmer. *Photograph V, La Poupée (The Doll)*. 1935/1949. Hand-coloured vintage gelatine silver print affixed to original mount, 14.3 x 14.1 cm.

The images in *The Games of the Doll* present deliberately complex scenarios, as they create scenes of terror and unrealistic fantasy. The artist himself admitted that the photographs had to 'be provocative to be effective' (Webb 1985: 38). For example, in *Photograph V* (Illustration 2.1), the fragmented doll is seen reclining on a blanket besides a dismantled chair. Intensely coloured, she has pink cheeks, one orange breast, the other yellow; her stomach is formed of a yellow sphere as her stomach, whilst the spheres that articulate her thighs are coloured red and blue. Her body is displayed in a curve and her hand is attached to the beam of the chair. *Photograph VI* (Illustration 2.2) shows another calculated assemblage of the doll. As he toyed with the boundary between the real and the unreal, Bellmer succeeded in building an alternative reality for the doll where she possesses "existence". This time, the doll is headless and tinted bright red. Her body consists of two lower halves connected to the stomach sphere with

a white ankle sock and a black leather shoe on each foot. The grotesque female body leans against a large tree with a pile of cloth and leaves at her feet, as if the body has been found like this, stumbled across in the woods. Another arresting detail is the man in trench coat, partly concealed behind a second tree in the background. As modelled by Bellmer, he adopts the role of persecutor. Clearly, the image of *Photograph VI* deals with not only with the subject of the erotic, but reveals Bellmer's repressed desire, fantasized intentions and sadistic proclivity. Within the disturbing and brutal scenes suggesting rape, assault and threat, the doll is presented as passive, almost receptive, assuming the countenance of a prostitute, acrobat, or victim. A disturbing presentiment projects from these photographs: the fetishizing of body parts, the woman as object and the fragmentation of the sexual form, as achieved through Bellmer's sculptural mutilations and reconstructions of the female body.

Illustration 2.2: Hans Bellmer. *Photograph VI, La Poupeé (The Doll)*. 1936. Hand-coloured vintage gelatin silver print, 12 x 8 cm.

I will now discuss the symbolism of Bellmer's doll, which is a perfect example of how an inanimate body, despite its lifelessness, may succeed in stimulating creative endeavour. Influenced by his erotic feelings for his cousin, the doll reflects Bellmer's 'fantasy projections' of young girls (Lichtenstein 2001: 24), as she invokes recollections from his adolescent memory. The panoramic mechanism of the first doll allowed him to delve into her private life, to accentuate his sense of control and possession over her. Bellmer himself explained about both dolls:

> "There was a convulsive flavour to them because they reflected my anxiety and unhappiness. To an extent they represented an attempt to reject the horrors of adult life as it was, in favour of a return to the wonder of childhood, but the eroticism was all-important, they became an erotic liberation for me." (Webb 1985: 34)

According to Lichtenstein (2001: 16), Bellmer was determined to create an anatomically vivid girl who would satisfy his lustful desire: "This derives from the juxtaposition of shocking victim poses and innocent flirtatiousness" present in his photographs. As quoted in Webb (1985: 177), the artist took advantage of his physical 'anagram'; in reinterpreting the definition of 'anagram' as it pertains to language (the rearrangement of the letters of a word, or phrases) and reapplying the term to the destruction and rearrangement of the body fragments, Bellmer created new meanings. He explained:

> "I tried to rearrange the sexual elements of a girl's body like a sort of plastic anagram, I remember describing it thus: the body is like a sentence that invites us to rearrange it, so that its real nature becomes clear through a series of endless anagrams. I wanted to reveal what is usually kept – it was no game – I

> tried to open people's eyes to new realities... The anagram is the key to all my work" (Webb 1975: 98).

The concept of the anagram therefore allowed Bellmer to increase the complexity of his photographs; through extreme arrangements of the doll's body he explored the female body as guided and created by his own prurient desire. For this reason, in his essay *Exquisite Corpses*, Hal Foster (1993: 118) connects Bellmer's work not only to sadism but also to masochism when the artist claimed his wish to help people "come terms with their instincts", as he had himself already done. Hence, the doll's body becomes physical media which, exploited by the artist through imaginary and subjective composition, is capable of surreal transformation to satisfy his lust. Consequently in its complexity, the doll becomes an appealing figure for erotic desire; it is an object of devotion yet revulsion, of longing yet furious rejection, a physical artifact existing within a world of empirical fantasy.

Bellmer's work received a great deal of attention, attracting both praise and criticism. According to Lichtenstein (2001: 4), the response tended to be "liberatory and redemptive, even proto-feminist, or dismissively interpreted as misogynist and deviant." In the late 1930's, Bellmer was warmly welcomed by the Parisian Surrealists, who were fascinated by the automata and the idealization of the *femme-enfant*. Notably, his photographs were published in surrealist journals as he was described in the *Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme* (1938) as a "surrealist writer, painter and builder of large dolls" (Webb 1985: 53). The doll or mannequin was a central theme for Surrealists such as André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Man Ray, among others – both as a fetish and a photographic motif. Large numbers of female mannequins, dolls and

automata, could be seen in surrealist shows (Webb 1985: 46). For example, sixteen different shop mannequins were displayed at the International Surrealist Exhibition (1938); each was dressed, modified and arranged by different Surrealist artists (Bradley 2001: 48). Salvador Dali presented his work *Rainy Taxi* that featured two mannequins- one of which was presented with the head of a shark (a similar installation, *Dali's Dream of Venus* was presented at the New York World's Fair in 1939). A Surrealist of the 1940's era, Jean Brun commented positively upon the doll's effectiveness as both an object of art and an artist's model. According to Brun (1950: 31), the doll succeeds in "effecting the conjunction of the everyday and the imaginary, the animate and the inanimate, the natural and the artificial – it is the first and only surrealist object with a universal, provocative power."

Bellmer was invited to exhibit with the Surrealists and did so, exhibiting his work in *Jointure de Boules* with them in 1936. His doll suited their ambition on a symbolic level, as it embodied a number of surreal and fetishistic qualities. Fiona Bradley provides an interesting description of the term 'fetish'. She defines a fetish as any inanimate object which, consciously or unconsciously, someone embodies physically as a mental obsession or sexual desire (Bradley 2001: 44). As Bradley explains, the fragmented and duplicated doll of Bellmer is both a fetish and Surreal object: it is a tool that Bellmer uses to gratify his lascivious desire for the young female body.

Bellmer's disturbing doll was also strongly criticized. Violence and sadism are often associated with the photographs of the doll's repeated shattering and reassemblage. In deliberately dismembering and reassembling the doll, Bellmer created disturbing images which communicate a sense of terror and self-destructive impulse. The dolls

evoke both innocence and victimization. Foster (1993: 101) sums up the images of the doll as an:

> ...uncanny confusion of animate and inanimate figures, ambivalent conjunction of the castrative and fetishistic forms, compulsive repetitions of erotic and traumatic scenes, difficult intricacies of sadism and masochism, of desire, diffusion, and death.

Furthermore, the interpretation of Bellmer's images in relation to Fascist ideology illustrate the importance of offering multiple interpretations rather than confining his work within a single fixed meaning. Critics accused Bellmer of using the female body as an object upon which to stage scenes of rape and violence. As Foster claimed, if the dolls are considered as sadistic, the object of the sadism is clear: woman. However, according to both Hal Foster (1993: 208) and Rosalind Krauss (1993: 209), Bellmer used the doll imagery as a tactic. As Krauss describes, Bellmer produced "the image of what one fears, in order to protect oneself from what one fears – this is the strategic achievement of anxiety..." Bellmer himself, as quoted in Jeleski (1972: 21), embraced the outrageous nature of his work by replying that the world is itself scandalous.

Illustration 2.3: Hans Bellmer. *La Poupeé (The Doll)*. 1934-35. Gelatin silver print, 15cm x 14cm.

In her text, *Sex Pictures*, Krauss used the image of *The Doll* to support her view that it was a 'failure' not to associate the configuration of the swastika with the second doll's form (see Illustration 2.3). It was obvious to her that Bellmer's doll could be read as an attack upon Nazi fascism and therefore a personal assault upon his father, who was a Nazi supporter. The doll may, therefore, also be interpreted as an ambiguous symbol of rebellion against the repression of the National Socialism of Germany in the 1930's.

Lichtenstein (2001) supports Krauss' view, asserting that the dolls reflect Bellmer's frustration and opposition to the rise of Nazism. For her, they represent a surreptitious attack upon the established order and authoritarianism of the Nazi regime, which Bellmer associated with his father. As quoted in Webb (1985: 27), Bellmer announced before the creation of the dolls that he would indeed 'give up all work which, even

indirectly, could be in any way useful to the State." This decision indicates Bellmer's desire to be liberated from restraint and oppression, a decision which ultimately led him to create the dolls. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Bellmer constructed his first doll in 1933 – the same year Hitler and the Third Reich came to power (Lichtenstein 2001: 1) and the year that his wife Margarete was diagnosed with tuberculosis. In his essay *Exquisite Corpses*, Hal Foster (1993: 118) goes even further by arguing that the doll can be seen as an incestuous assault, "a turning away" from his father. It was inspired by the childhood toys supplied by his mother, by his sexual attraction toward his young cousin, and through the technical help of his brother. It can be reasoned that the creation of the doll fulfilled a deep-seated desire for Bellmer to escape the horror of his adult-life. It was a response to the rise of fascism and a rebellion against the existing sexual mores and social norms defining gender roles within Germany at that time. Bellmer's photographs appear so evocative, disturbing and surreal, that they maintain their ability to captivate and disturb despite the passage of so many years.

In constructing the doll, Bellmer drew upon his comprehensive knowledge of literary, artistic and historical accounts of the doll. As quoted in Prokopoff (1991: 14) he said himself: "my work was always carefully thought out and controlled". He was highly inspired by the techniques of several visual artists, among who are Audrey Beardsley and Felicien Rops (Webb 1985: 11), and Arnold Böcklin (Webb 1985: 50). His use of light, colour and composition in *The Games of the Doll* is highly reminiscent of the work of these artists. With reference to Bellmer's literary mentors, his knowledge was enriched through the works of Heinrich von Kleist *On The Marionette Theatre* (1810), and Charles Baudelaire's 1853 essay, *The Philosophy of Toys*, amongst others (Webb 1985: 50). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the work of E.T.A. Hoffman and *The Sand-*

Man also inspired Bellmer to create his first doll. In the 1930's, the artist was introduced to Rainer Maria Rilke's essay *Puppen* (Dolls) by his friend Lotte Pritzel (Schmied 2006: 15), and it seems that he was also aware of Freud's study *The Uncanny* (Green 2005: 15). Each of these artists and writers explore similar themes in their work – the uncanny, violence, eroticism and death. As quoted in Green (2005: 16), art critic Wieland Schmied asserts that Bellmer devoted himself to the history of the doll, "everything that had ever been written about dolls and artificial, anthropomorphic creatures," before attempting his own artistic exploration.

Within the art world, the macabre connotations carried by the doll may become a highly debatable subject. To illustrate, I mention two painters, the Venezuelan artist Armando Reverón, and contemporary American artist Shawn Barber. Both have explored the doll or similar hand-made figures extensively in their paintings. During my research I found that, compared to Hans Bellmer, there are few published works on these two artists. Most publications discussing Reverón's work are written in Spanish, however Elderfield (2007: 229) points out the existence of some English sources such as exhibition catalogues, newspaper and magazine articles which I have used to continue my investigation into the doll's influence on artist's lives and practice. Amongst these, I have chosen the work of Armando Reverón and Shawn Barber for analysis, as the doll has played an essential role in their artistic production and thought.

Regarded as one of Latin America's leading Modernists for his figurative and landscape paintings, Armando Reverón (1889 – 1954) is remembered for his important creations of the '*muñecas*' or dolls (Elderfield 2007: 7). His work is technically diverse and characterized by the wide use of pencil, chalk, pastel and charcoal on board, paper or

canvas. An accomplished artist, Reverón pursued painting at the *Academia Nicional de Bellas Artas* in Venezuala, and won a scholarship in 1911 to visit Europe, continuing his studies in Barcelona (Elderfield 2007: 221 – 222). While in Spain, he studied with José Ruiz Blasco, the father and teacher of Picasso, later becoming an active member of a group of Modernist artists, the *Circulo de Bella Artes*. In 2007, The Museum of Modern Art in New York conducted a major retrospective exhibition of Reverón's work, introducing more than a hundred of his paintings, drawings, and handmade objects, including the life-size dolls. This show and the exhibited dolls will be mentioned several times during this analysis to stress the impact that dolls seem to have had on the artist and his work. The presence and interpretation of the dolls - the artist' models, seen as objects/subjects within the space of the exhibition - will be examined.

Illustration 2.4: Armando Reverón. *Muńena (Doll*). 1940s. Synthetic Fibre, textile, wire, cotton fibre, printed paper, jute and pigment, 159 x 50cm.

Plagued by severe nervous breakdowns since a young age and a steady decline into dementia in later years, Armando Reverón worked in complete isolation during the early 1920's. Surrounded by his uncanny dolls which he used as models in his later paintings, Reverón lived in a very lonely and imaginary world. In his essay *Dolls and Objects*, the author John Elderfield (2007: 194) describes how, with the help of his lifelong partner Juanita Ríos, Reverón made his own wooden easels and brushes for use in his painting. Reverón gave great attention to the construction of his life-size stuffed models, created from torn and sewn discarded burlap sacks. The faces of these sculpture-like, anatomically correct figures had painted human expressions enhanced with make-up. Their feminine bodies had articulated bending limbs, formed with internal concealed wire, and well defined fingers and toes. Furthermore, they were endowed with clothing, jewellery and accessories such as musical instruments. Anthropomorphized through names such as Niza, Serefina, Teresa, Graciela, and Josefina, these adult-sized dolls were treated as human beings and filled Reverón's personal imaginary world (Elderfield 2007: 43). During an interview with Elderfield in 1953, the artist traced his interest in the doll to childhood, and particularly to a significant period of isolation endured whilst suffered from typhoid fever:

> Since then I have liked the world of the fantastic, of dolls that are like living characters but they do not speak. They only look. It is I who speak. They look at me and listen to me...and they hear me. (Elderfield 2007: 193)

The dolls sustained his imaginary world and 'theatre'; there were reports of Reverón staging plays, concerts, entertaining himself and sharing tea at his 'café' with his 'nonhuman companions.' As quoted by Elderfield (2007: 194), Reverón stated that life

for him was “a great theatre.” In his review of Reverón’s work in the *New York Times* (2012), Holland Cotter describes the dolls as “a cross between a play group and a harem”. Literally, it is clear that Reverón exerted control over them as both subjects and playthings within his daily life. He stood as both maker and master of his imaginary and theatrical world, wherein these artificially created characters were his silent companions and the artistic inspiration for his painting.

Gradually, the subject of the doll became central to Reverón. By 1948, he abandoned landscape painting to concentrate on depicting himself with the dolls (Elderfield 2007: 165). He displayed these nude or semi-nude female figures either individually or in groups. Constructed with breasts and carefully painted with other feminine characteristics the dolls are found within different interior scenes. Through the artist’s eye, these outwardly artificial objects cease to exist as inert mannequins and are transformed through the use of light and colour into gestural figures with a sense of movement. The dolls appear in many self-portraits of the painter as if they are partly an expression of his own self-identity. The composition of Self-Portrait with Dolls (1949), for example, shows Reverón gazing at the viewer with two dolls emerging from the background. The same patchwork dolls appear in the work *Woman with Dolls* (1950) and *Old Man, Three Women, and a Child* (1948) (Illustrations 2.5 and 2.6), reworked in a completely different composition. In a final example, *The Three Graces* (1945), three standing women are depicted; the central figure appears to carry a drum whilst another is seen wearing a *mantilla* (cloak) over her shoulder. This painting appears to depict real female models, but, as Elderfield (2007: 165) argues in his essay, in fact the models seem to be the life-size dolls.

Elderfield recalls an interview between art historian Juan Liscano and Juanita Ríos (2007: 165 - 166), in which Rios revealed that Reverón used dolls because he had no access to living models. Sometimes, Rios would pose nude for him and then the artist would paint the dolls with the 'qualities' of her skin.

Illustration 2.5: Armando Reverón. *Mujer con Muñecas (Woman with Dolls).* 1949. Charcoal and coloured chalk on paper, 86.4 x 64.5 cm.

In an article for the art magazine *Remexcla* (2007), Jodie Dinapoli's critique of the MoMA show that there appears to be no 'boundaries' between 'the picture, the depicted and the painter' in Reverón's work. She states: "...the dolls seemed to be brought to life as characters that are needed to fill-in his self-made universe." The artist succeeds in

using these inanimate dolls to create a whole series of paintings and drawings, each composed with delicate realism. The craftsmanship and aestheticism of Reverón's dolls affords the artist a critical tool of experimentation. As such, the dolls become not simply artistic models, but rather his constant companions; they stimulate his creative vision and are integral to his work."

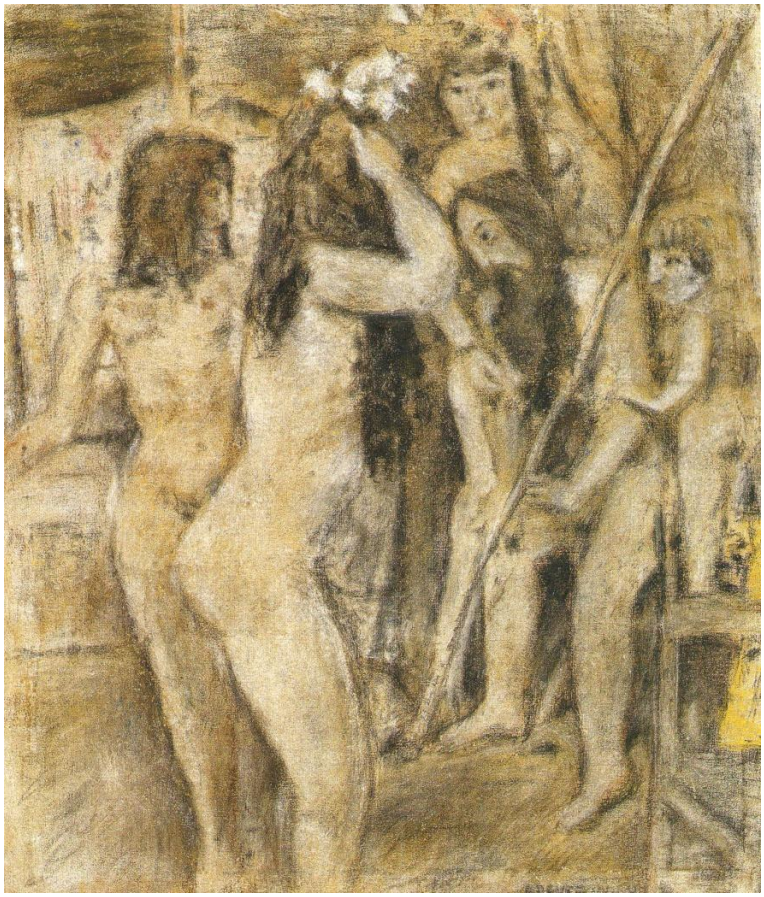

Illustration 2.6: Armando Reverón. ***Anciano, tre mujeres y niño [Figuras]***
(Old Man, Three Women, and a Child). 1948.
Tempera and charcoal on canvas, 95.5 x 81.5cm.

The controversy as to whether or not the painted figures appear 'rigid' within Reverón's artwork reflects the difficulty of successfully animating the inanimate. Through experimentation, observation and fantasy Reverón intended to make these dolls appear lifelike, however, in many of his paintings they remain inflexible figures. In studying

Reverón's work, Cotter describes how the later paintings seem 'particularly eerie' and exhibit a peculiar lack of human emotion. The painted figures seem devoid of character, facial expression or personal identity. Of Reverón's work, the art critic writes: "there is an evident confusion of real vs. fabricated elements. In some, the figures really look like dolls, with inert bodies and garish faces. In others, they appear as sexual women, their anatomically details fetishistically rendered" (New York Times 2012).

Dinapoli (Remexcla 2007) suggests that the women in Reverón's paintings appear less 'rigid' and 'come to life' in contrast to the artificial female characters featured in Marcel L'Herbier's *L'inhumaine* or Hans Bellmer's dolls. In obfuscating the line that separates the animate and the inanimate, Reverón attempted a complex exploration of animating the non-living. He used inanimate figures as subjects in his work, yet intended to create an aura of realism. Each painting depicts the doll as living within the niche that the painter has created for her. As Reverón experiments with the animation of the inert doll, he captures elusive qualities of eroticism and sexuality and yet betrays his underlying obsession with these unnatural figures. The dolls ultimately provide him with a structure to explore the physical and visual qualities of his chosen artistic medium.

In addition to exploring the doll as an object, I have also had the opportunity to exhibit my work over the course of this research, and as such I want now to examine whether and how the 'exhibited' doll, may be transformed into a work of art through the condition of its "presentness". The doll, as a product of Reverón's creative mind and an important fixture of his studio practice has accompanied his other work into the exhibition space, serving to draw the connection between his artistic practice and the reality of his daily experience. An example is *Niza* (1940s) (Illustration 2.7), a stitched rag doll, tattered and yellowed with age, "who" was featured at the entrance of the

show. As Dinapoli (Remexcla 2007) noted: “the dolls command the strongest interest, for they are not only characters depicted in his works... but are actual sculptures.” The physical space, the actual layout of Reverón’s artwork within the exhibit, was engagingly arranged to emphasize the dolls. Introduced both as subjects and objects in this way, they become creations of significance in their own right.

Similarly, many exhibitions of Hans Bellmer’s work have displayed his dolls alongside his photographs of them, reinforcing their legitimacy as artworks amongst more conventional artistic media. For example, the exhibition *Double Sexus* (2011) which toured in Germany, the Netherlands and America, displayed Bellmer’s dolls alongside the unsettling works of Louise Bourgeois. As documented in the exhibition catalogue (Jelinek 2010), the show drew parallels between their provocative explorations of the human form, creating an interesting dialogue between two artists who never actually met in life.

Illustration 2.7: Armando Reverón. *Niza*. 1940s. Texture, wire, cotton fibre, printed paper, and pigment, 150 x 56 x 20cm.

Both Louise Bourgeois and Hans Bellmer use fragmented body parts in their work to create bulbous and androgynous forms. Distinct from her other sculptural works, Bourgeois created a range of figures and life-size busts sewn in fabric: a series of cell-like vitrines, woven-fabric pieces, and a small group of totemic figures. She began these in 1995, pursuing a reconstruction of her past by turning to her own carefully preserved childhood clothing. These she transformed into stuffed figures and sculptures created from cut and reassembled pieces of cloth. Francis Morris (2007: 120) describes her iconic stuffed figures as having the "slightly macabre, eerie quality of dolls removed from the context of play." As presented in *Double Sexus*, here Bellmer's dolls assume another layer of meaning, allowing the viewer to perceive them as sculpture; the context of their display within a gallery, enhances our perception of the doll as both a form of art and as an artist's tool. This inclusion of the doll in the exhibition provides invaluable insight into the creative process of the artist.

The qualities of the doll as a "found object" are often drawn out within my own practice as a way to explore and obscure the boundary between object and image, opening my work to varied interpretation. To examine how the doll allows one to experience the object beyond its utility within the world of play, I intend to investigate its service as a surrogate model/object in the compositions of Shawn Barber. My critical analysis and interpretation of Barber's work examines the manner in which the artist convincingly animates the doll's lifeless, artificial body.

It is Barber's depiction of the doll as a dark or menacing subject that first piqued my interest in his work and I have followed his practice for many years, tracing developments in his technique and career. Barber has lectured and taught painting,

drawing and illustration at several universities and art schools, including the Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida, where he earned his BFA in 1999. Recognized for his tattoo portraits, Shawn Barber is a talented painter and illustrator, also known for his tattoo portraits, and includes Atlantic Records, *The New Yorke*r and *Rolling Stone* magazines amongst his clients. His solo show *Youth of Today* (2011) at Fecal Face Dot Gallery in San Francisco presented eleven works from his ongoing doll paintings. It featured the *Doll Series* (1999-2012), in which the artist expressed his concern for a world becoming increasingly absorbed with superficial popular culture (Barber 2008: 8). These paintings express the loss of innocence and discarded dreams of a younger generation. More complex than his tattooed portraits, the *Doll Series* fascinates; the artist presents skilful arrangements of the inanimate body to elicit a strong emotional response from the viewer powerfully addressing the central theme of the loss of childhood innocence.

Illustration 2.8: Shawn Barber. *Concealed.* 2007. Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm.
Illustration 2.9: Shawn Barber. *Muffled*. 2007. Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm.

The pervasive use doll figures in Shawn Barber's paintings originate in the artist's observation of baby dolls as found in various states of modification and disrepair. In the works *Rattled, Muffled* and *Concealed* (Illustration 2.8 & Illustration 2.9; 2007) Barber cleverly transforms the popular saying "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" as represented through the depiction of the three mystical apes of Japanese proverb, into an ambiguous image where the doll's head becomes a conduit for social anxiety. The artist reinterprets this idiom to depicting the anguish of a contemporary society, wherein the child becomes a victim. In each painting, the focus is upon two deified hands which firmly grasp the doll's head, while simultaneously covering its eyes, ears or mouth- the profane corruption of childhood then becomes the central theme in this work. Another painting, *Multiple Skull Heads* (2005) presents translucent layers of baby doll heads alternating with skulls. Adjusted to scale, the commingled heads undergo a visual transition from flesh to barren bone, creating a gruesome transmutation (Illustration 2.10). The eerie metamorphosis of the doll heads with skulls reflects a world-weary awareness, a morbidly cynical view of life that cuts acutely through the superficial veneer of modern consumer culture. Barber disparages the nostalgia and sentimentality of the doll and focuses instead on a darker perception of popular culture. In so doing, he enjoins memories of ephemeral childhood with grotesque imagery to reflect upon the problems of contemporary society.

Illustration 2.10: Shawn Barber. *Multi Skull Heads.* 2005. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm.

Barber's work presents an evocative visual reflection of 'American society' and he describes his *Doll Series* as a visceral response to the culture and society in which he lives. As Barber explains in an interview with Aaron Hunt (Thefourohfive 2009), he has used the dolls "as icons for content – teaching younger people and high school kids have influenced much of that work. Being American in a country full of clueless droids has also influenced this work tremendously. Much of the work I do is reactionary, visual commentary." Rich in visual metaphor and symbolism, the doll series is constructed with great intensity and meticulous detail. In some individual works, the doll appears superficial, powerless and disconnected from reality; incapable of exerting control, it remains a docile and compliant plaything. Yet this passivity is deceptive: beneath this veneer, the dolls reflect the deep sense of apprehension, decay, and abandon that pervades his work. As a further example, the painting *Jezebe*l (2011) depicts a baby doll with an intense, blazing reddish skin tone; surreal, as if the child's face has been crudely skinned. Similarly, the bold surface of *Plastered* (2011) features

intense layers of dripping black paint and thick brushstrokes to create texture that adds to the grotesque aesthetic of the work (See Illustration 2.11 and Illustration 2.12).

Illustration 2.11: Shawn Barber. *Jezebel*. 2011. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 cm.
Illustration 2.12: Shawn Barber. *Plastered.* 2011. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 cm.

The disturbing images of the dismembered, decomposing and mummified doll heads examine the symbolic imagery of the artificial body. The artificial body of the doll becomes a surrogate; it imparts a wider warning of the jeopardy for individuals and society as a whole faces as a result of social degradation and the increasing commodification of culture. Barber's works are a visual commentary on the carnal nature of humankind, and the social issues problems that such desires can unleash; he exposes the dark realities that lie below the seemingly perfect artificial surface. The doll then offers a rich and provocative symbol with which to engage the public with the wider themes of his art. In the *Doll Series*, Barber depicts children as deeply embroiled in situations that may ostensibly seem innocent but which, on closer inspection are revealed as twisted and violent. I argue that Barber uses the doll as a disturbing image of childhood fraught with abuse and trauma. While the images may be distressing to look at, Barber's paintings confront such disturbing social realities, raising awareness of

that fact that such issues should not be ignored. His use of ordinary plastic toy dolls which typically have a non-artistic function also creates a play of ideas around notions of commercialisation and the mass production of culture that add additional layers of meaning to his work.

The doll has become Barber's muse, a talisman with which to reconcile his own fear and anxiety. As he manipulates the doll, the scenes are strewn with vomit, blood, mould, decay and other detritus. It is striking that these images tend towards a representation of the body turned inside out; to the disgusting and the 'abject'. According to Julia Kristeva (1982), the body may be described as the primary site of the abject. Kristeva argues that one is subjected to abjection at the point of separation from the mother. The abject can be seen as aggressive; it destroys borders and consists of those bodily elements that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety such as bodily functions that are deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discourse, disturbing identity, system, and order. The presence of the decapitated doll heads, or skulls, clearly adds another level of discomfort. It is clear to me that the aim of the artist is to create an amalgam of damaged or decayed body parts, drawing upon both the visceral internal parts of the body that usually remain hidden in addition to its external features in order to evoke the abject and the uncanny. Returning to Freud, it is unsurprising that the psychoanalyst chose the doll to illustrate his concept of the uncanny. The doll exemplifies the uncanny through its ability to bring joy, yet provoke anxiety; by mimicking the living as a non-living entity; by appearing animate and yet existing as inanimate and by confounding the distinction between the natural and the artificial. The ambiguity of the doll thus elicits a level of anxiety associated with the uncanny.

As I have explained in this chapter, the artificial body of the doll - as an object found or constructed - has been proved a source of inspiration to many artists, who have adopted and manipulated it in different ways to explore different themes within their work. The image of the doll has been subverted and appropriated by Bellmer, Reverón and Barber as symbolic of a range of meanings far beyond its functional use as a child's' plaything. The doll, like other toys, offers itself as an object of endearment to a child, and yet to observe aggressiveness in a child's behaviour towards the toy is common. Such abrupt or violent treatment of the doll has been widely analyzed by psychologists exploring child development and play technique. Freud's theory is in part an analysis based upon his grandson's game "*Fort-Da*", in which the infant throws away his toy so as to manage his anxiety about the absence of his mother (Gay, 1995: 599). The repetitive compulsion of this game, of disappearance and return, enables the child to use fantasy to replace an absent mother, and to learn about 'representation'. But the action also suggests a psychological mechanism to cope with loss, a hostile and resentful reaction manifest through primordial violence. Similarly, many artists appear to cope with anxiety through artistic creation, using it as an area of their lives (perhaps the only area) over which they have control. This is a significant aspect of Freud's notion of 'sublimation', which he discusses in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (2002). Freud defined the 'sublimation' of an individual as the process of transforming impulsive and primal instincts into other useful physical and psychological activities. Whether consciously or unconsciously, art becomes a way to make sense of a complex and alienating world, a world that can provoke feelings of anxiety and disillusionment.

CHAPTER 3

THE DOLL PAINTINGS

The figure of the doll has engaged my complete creative attention during the course of this research. The doll paintings represent the only time that I have deviated from my focus upon human subjects and models within my practice. I came to the realization that the doll, which embodies beauty and child-like innocence, is also linked with themes of horror and the uncanny. My interest has gradually shifted from the Character doll to other forms such as damaged doll body-parts and pin cushion dolls. As a result, the project has generated a series of paintings featuring a variety of dolls – *The Character Doll, The Sitting Doll, The Sleeping Doll, The Pin Cushion Doll,* among others. The following discussion will explore the referenced works created during this project, with a particular focus upon *The Character Doll*, specifically in relation to the psychoanalytical theories already discussed. Most importantly, I will reflect on how I have drawn upon the example of the screaming doll and others to explore and project an image of victimhood.

Narratives triggered by the doll's numerous forms and iterations motivate my practice. The process explores imitation of the doll, often resulting in an uncanny experience. It often begins with a discovered doll and the germination of an idea arising from this novel object. The character doll as an object intrigues me; it triggers ideas and suggests the manner in which to create the painting. The doll is then explored in many ways, by being manipulated and sometimes dismantled, before being re-created in paint. The bodies of the dolls I have in my collection are very malleable as they are made of cloth. They are easily manipulated and I often exploit their flexibility to shape their forms in order to create a disturbing figurative and compositional structure in my work. The doll body is given substance through manipulation. Through the act of painting, the image of the doll becomes manifest from an array of marks, lines and blots of paint, with the help

of brushes of different sizes. The doll becomes the raw material: through artistic reflection and intentioned production, it represents both the subject and content of the painting. In other words, it provides the opportunity for something new to evolve and to surface visually.

I now wish to describe *The Character Doll*s series as one in which the central themes of the uncanny and infantile trauma are examined. The first work I wish to mention is *Deep Seated* (Illustration 3.1), a double painting inspired by the same distressed childish figure of a doll. In both acrylic paintings, the facial features portray a little girl and her emotional state during a compelling instant. The doll is depicted as sitting with her mouth agape and her arms tightly stretched by her sides against a large background of uniform colour. Concerned with rendering an accurate appearance, I have carefully depicted her face and dress. Half-made from cloth, her body is hidden under a patterned dress. To support the doll's seated position, it was secured with an with an elastic band and while this is not reproduced in the paintings, the decision not to depict any open space between the elbow and the waist, adds to the sense of the figure's confinement. The figure's static posture and expressive facial expression suggest the possibility of an ongoing, intense tragedy; indeed, the repetition of the image alludes to the repetition of abuse or trauma, expressing both its actual recurrence and the way in which such events may haunt the victim mentally and emotionally in its aftermath. My intention here is that the viewer's gaze should travel between one painting and the other, allowing each individual to imagine the narrative that connects the images and there are a number of visual clues within the work that may guide the creation of this story; for example, the right bluish, half-closed eye suggests either blindness or exposure to sustained violence. Each of these elements contributes to the intended purpose of this work: the assimilation

of detail to create the impression of a traumatized and tragic figure.

Illustration 3.1: Kevina Labonne. *Deep Seated*. 2010.
Acrylic on canvas, 92cm x 122cm.

My intention in duplicating the figure is to enhance the narrative; each painting reinforcing the tension and troubling surreal dislocation present in the other. The seated half-blind, childish, figure is seen directly in front of the viewer, at whom she gazes, mouth open, to let out her persistent cry. The facial and bodily details impose an impression of vulnerability and anxiety, an image of a damaged childhood. My intent is to create a lasting visage that implies, yet obscures the occurrence of a traumatic event. The blurring of pigments subordinates the background to the dominant isolated figure placed prominently forward and allows the onlooker to form his or her own interpretation of the context and setting. One cannot deny that something is happening, or has happened, despite the lack of narrative framing: the subject of abuse is always the child/doll herself and such a treatment focuses attention directly on the subject.

Deleuze (2003: 6) defines the power of isolating a figure in a painting, as "the simplest means, necessary though not sufficient, to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact." According to Deleuze, isolation frees the figure from both representation and narration in Bacon's paintings, because of the lack of any visible narrative structure and the unclear character of the figure. In *Deep Seated*, my objective is to render the work as emotionally engaging, by suggesting the imminence of an event: it is happening or has happened. The inward agitation of the painted figure is indicated by the fixed open mouth which we interpret as an infinite cry. These features create a sense of synergy or resonance: the mouth framing the silent cry becomes the physical indicator of inner struggle, a symbol of pain and childish incomprehension. The painting *Deep Seated* prompts introspection, an act of confrontation and recollection with unresolved past traumatic events.

The Little Soldier/An Encounter (Illustration 3.2) is another work composed of two paintings and offers an intense portrayal of another childish figure inspired by the screaming doll. The work projects the personal and psychological repercussions generated from profound trauma. In these paintings, a child's face and scream are interpreted through vigorous and agitated brush strokes. Much of the face is hidden beneath what seems to be a green helmet lending a sense of anonymity to the figure. As the title suggests, the screaming figure, isolated through terror, is imbued with the urgency of a present harm, whether psychological, physical or both. Yet the patterned clothing, imprinted with cars, recalls youth and innocence.

Illustration 3.2: Kevina Labonne. *The Little Soldier/An Encounter*. 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 92cm x 122cm.

In the paintings *The Little Soldier/An Encounter*, both the plasticity of the medium (acrylic paint) and the surface itself call attention to the paints' materiality. The figure's features are fragmented and distorted with erratic brush marks, conveying and amplifying the intensity of the traumatic scenario. The animation of the face, even more intense in the second painting, deals with degradation, destruction and repetition- elements again associated with the experience of trauma. The face is constructed by melding greyish and slightly pink-flesh tones in a gradual transition; the colours are chosen as emblematic of the subject's chaotic state. There is a fluctuation between abstraction and vivid representation. Still, the face is accentuated by a strong light, producing a sharp contrast with the monotony of the expansive grey background. Furthermore, in the different works mentioned within this essay, separate canvases of similar formats are brought together to create a single work. The use of multiple canvases allows for a mutual interaction between the images, helping to prompt the creation of a traumatic narrative.

In *The Little Soldier/An Encounter*, the mouth of the figure becomes the centre through which the whole tension of the body passes and the absent eyes, suggestive of blindness, enhance the sense of the figure's inner agitation, disorientation or confusion. There is a contrast between the highly charged figure and its relatively neutral flat background. The loose, greyish brush marks and the disintegration of the face, reconstitute symptomatically a traumatic figure within the space. The screaming mouth painted by Francis Bacon is described by Deleuze (2003: 24) as the culminating crux of the painting, as a sensible, expressive 'zone': "the hole through which the entire body escapes, and from which the flesh descends." As such, the open mouth or scream becomes symbolic of possible abuse.

The same feeling of pain and helplessness may be seen in another series of work, *The Hanging* (Illustration 3.3). Three different canvases, of similar size, stage an isolated and screaming figure, hanging by his feet. Restrained, the body is presented in an extreme position of confinement within a narrow frame, and on closer inspection, one may observe the rigidity of the repeated figure. In an effort to visualise the internal emotional state, the fragmentation and duplication of the individual's face is created through deliberately expressive brush strokes. The face has been constructed with great detail, as can be seen by the distinct treatment of the eyes, eyebrows, and eyelids. The cloth acts as a straightjacket in which the body is squeezed and freedom of movement restricted.

In painting the figure upside down and duplicating the figure in the middle canvas, the paintings provide significant narrative potential. In preparing for this work the 'screaming doll' was hung upside down using a metal doll stand, an accessory typically

used to display the doll, which supports its weight by securing the neck. Through the use of the triptych, the repetitive figure adds an aura of tragedy to the work. I would even argue that the triptych of *The Hanging* produces what Deleuze (2003: 58) calls a "matter of fact".

Illustration 3.3: Kevina Labonne, *The Hanging*. 2011.
Acrylic on canvas, 75cm x 130cm.

In his treatise on Bacon's artistic process and numerous triptychs from the early 1970s, Deleuze describes "a matter of fact" as an 'event' that is made or registered by a body of sensation, a figural form fluctuating between the figurative and the non-figurative, between representation and abstraction. The different components of such brutality of fact are amplified by what he identifies as three fundamental rhythms found in Bacon's triptychs: the vibration (a painting composed of a single figure), resonance (a painting composed of two figures) and forced movement (multiple paintings such as the triptychs, which Deleuze considered as the most intense form of synthesis). Therefore, "the matter of fact" comprises not only the distance that separates the distinct panels, but also the rhythmic disturbance or forced movements that accompanies the painted

figure of the triptychs. In *The Hanging* for example, the figures exist in a unique territory of their own and they are isolated from any narrative form that may assign a fixed meaning to them. The figures resonate together in all their complexity, conjoined by the movement and rhythm established by repeating the figure. According to Deleuze (2003: 59), the 'Figure' is a recognized form, represented by the human body in Bacon's paintings. Transformed, destroyed, fragmented and translated into horrific imagery, it is painted in building blocks to create a semblance of reality. Deleuze explains that the figure connects through direct stimulation of the viewer's nervous system. The painter communicates in stages, evolving from 'Chaos' as represented through a series of grotesque marks, transitioning to the suave, refined strokes of 'Sensation'. Bacon employs the triptych format to illustrate the different elements of the same figure without diminishing it to a common essence. On the contrary, the triptych allows a level of complexity to emerge and creates an ethereal sensation of visual satisfaction. Similarly, the repetition in *The Hanging* highlights the minutiae of the work and stimulates critical discourse as the duplicated figure appears restrained by red cloth.

Illustration 3.4:
Kevina Labonne, *The Sitting Doll II*. 2010.
Acrylic on canvas, 61cm x 91cm.

The use of clothing to obscure the figure literally and metaphorically is an element also utilised in my series of *The Sleeping Doll* and *The Sitting Doll* paintings (2009-2010). Here clothing is used alternately to conceal or reveal the doll's body. The doll is an effigy representing purity and beauty, yet its vision of beauty is based on the representation of superficial physical features of the human form; it is undebased with internal viscera, a cerebrum or genitalia for example. I have used a very similar artistic approach with both the series of *The Sleeping Doll* and *The Sitting Doll*. Realistically painted, each work depicts a detailed study of the china doll, and examines the symbolism of this artifice during a moment of exploration, dress and play. The dressed sitting or sleeping doll is presented as a reflection of infantile innocence. Constructed of simple material, industrial stuffing, odds and ends, the body of the doll confounds the distinction between the living and inanimate, the natural and artificial. In the series *The Doll Parts*, through a process of experimentation and creative instinct, I composed arrangements with dolls and random body parts that I had variously sourced. Decontextualised from their usual arena play and infantile fantasy, the object emerges in its materiality as an artistic object; the doll appears as a prop, here enmeshed in a world of specifically adult make-believe.

The *Pin Cushion Doll* series features tiny half-dolls, covered with pins. These 2 to 6 inches functional dolls, also known as dresser or pincushion dolls, were commonly composed as a human figure set atop a rounded utilitarian body. Produced in Germany in vast quantities during the 1900s – 1920s, the half-dolls were often constructed of porcelain and presented in a variety of appealing attitudes. Some are delicately and beautifully painted with refined detail, while others lack in quality and are meagre moulded pieces. Many of the finest dolls were made in Germany by Goebel, Heubach

and Dressel & Kister, Hertwig, Karl Schnider; cheaper models were commonly of Japanese manufacture. They were often attached to pin cushions, powder boxes and other decorative or useful accessories such as tea cosies, perfume bottles, lamps, and brooch holders.

In initiating a painting, I engage with my materials and imagine possible depictions of the doll's alternate form, its 'porcelain' flesh, painted and clothed body, expressed on the surface of the canvas. In a sense, I anticipate the result before I begin. In his critical study of *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation,* Gilles Deleuze (2003: 71) explains that the painter never begins work as a 'blank canvas'; rather he discusses how visual or mental elements co-exist in the artist's mind's-eye before the actual painting begins. As such, I find that my imagination takes flight through the preliminary application of paint, layer upon layer, until a final form begins to emerge. The process is one of transition from initial ideas, using texture and light-coloured hues until the complete sculptural form of the doll has emerged.

Though each pin cushion doll I have painted is unique, there are cohesive elements between these works. The pin cushion doll is usually presented as a highly shaded figure emerging from the formless, dark background of my paintings. This indefinite, rather amorphous void is presented to highlight the doll figure without recourse to illustrative contextual narrative. The painted pins then become dominant, highlighted against a dark foreground shadow. In each work, the pins appear as aggressive projectiles, piercing the subject from all angles, creating an unsettling image with a wider cultural reference. The effigial pincushion dolls of *Pinned Down I - III* (Illustration 3.4) for example, call to mind voodoo or revenge dolls pierced with pins in

order to magically harm or punish another person. The resemblance of the chimeric doll to a human being is what makes the half-doll such an attractive subject for representation.

Illustration 3.5: Kevina Labonne, *Pinned Down*. 2011.
Acrylic on canvas, 25cm x 30cm each

The use of art to communicate conflicting experiences is central in my practice. Each painting exploits the capacity of the doll to exceed its material and spatial properties, to instead endow it with emotion, which is also prompted in the viewer. This articulation is invaluable in establishing the intrinsic contradiction of the doll as both an object and subject. Repetition then becomes a useful tool to explore trauma, as it critically amplifies the significance of the traumatic scenario. My intention is to create powerful paintings which are appreciated for their content and figurative elements. The repetition of the figure in my *Pin Cushion Doll* paintings, as in *The Half Doll I – III* (Illustration 3.5) yields a sense of the uncanny, examining the pinned figure from multiple views and reinforcing the sense that the figure is repressed, both literally and metaphorically 'pinned down'. The repetition is also intended to create anxiety in the viewer, altering a familiar and habitual object into something strange and the uncanny.

Illustration 3.6: Kevina Labonne, *The Half Doll*. 2011.
Acrylic on canvas, 25cm x 30cm each.

As I have shown through the series of *The Character doll*, *The Sleeping doll*, *The Sitting doll* and *The Pin Cushion doll*, the doll and its representation through paint have remained the primary concern within my studio practice. Many more distinctive paintings, which have not been mentioned in this writing, but which may be seen in my final portfolio, have been created during the process of this research. I have found this theoretical enquiry helpful in informing my understanding of the doll's cultural and artistic status and meanings and acrylic paint has remained my primary vehicle for self-expression. As I explore the complexity of dolls, the screaming character in particular has been chosen for its symbolic imagery; it is presented as an embodiment of trauma.

As much of this imagery defies simplification, I have rationalized my creative practice and my perception of the doll through critical inquiry, using the history of the doll, it's place within art history and psychoanalytical theories of trauma, as descriptive and interpretative tools. These have been used to justify my practice and to argue that the doll is contentious, ambiguous which has intrigued and inspired the practice of many artists and remains worthy of closer inquiry. In this discussion of my art I have called

attention to different elements within my paintings, drawing out the ways in which the doll may evolve from its simple objective nature into something more; a surreal object with an often deeply personal meaning for the viewer. It is the artwork's potential to communicate with and even transform the mental and emotional state of the viewer expressing profound sentiments through representation and the manipulation of pigment that drives me to paint.

There has been a transformation in my painting style and thinking over the period of study. As the subject matter of my painting has evolved, I have adopted less erratic, smoother, and more measured brushstrokes as a means of expression. Another shift in my practice has been the inclusion of salvaged dolls – broken and damaged – in the exhibition space alongside the painting, a decision that has led me to make bolder use of the exhibition space itself. Essentially, this project is grounded in my personal choice to shift my focus from the traditional 'living model' to the doll, which has become the primary subject of my practice. By studying the cultural and historic contexts in which dolls were produced and used and relating these findings to its representation in art, I have furthered my understanding and appreciation of the doll as a cultural icon. My presentation of the doll evolved through a process of intense experimentation, in which the subject was manipulated and contorted into a variety of positions for representation. As a result, the construed bodies with doll-like characteristics have been reproduced in my creative practice, to create a body of work which was exhibited last year in a showing titled *SIMULACRUM.*

CONCLUSION

Led by my creative practice, these ArtsD texts consider both the technical and theoretical aspects of my research of the last four years. More precisely, the narratives are intended to contextualize and explore 'The Doll' as a reflection of my creative journey. My perspective has changed over the course of the process as a critical engagement with art history has come to inform and widen my understanding of the artistic image of the doll and as such has generated new directions in my work and thought. This project has inspired me to think about how I approach the depiction of the doll in relation to other artists who have used it in their work, particularly Bellmer, Reverón and Barber. I have drawn upon other artists' work to reflect upon the concept of the doll as a both a model for art, and its presence as an intrinsically artistic object. As analysis and interpretation have come to inform my perspective, so they have generated a conclusion, an appropriate mode of representation and form for my work.

The primary objective of this practice-based research is to explore the doll as a subject of focused imaginative and creative inquiry. In general the doll is represented as an insignificant object outside the context of play or childhood fantasy; it is therefore important for me to illustrate the functionality of the doll as relevant to art. In offering this challenging series for critical review, I hope this research helps to place the doll within its broader cultural context, and in so doing further our understanding of the cultural and symbolical significance of the doll. Much of this research explores psychoanalytic and critical theory to illuminate the relationship between the traumatized subject and the process of creative projection and production. I have explored the area of trauma and its recurrence, with a particular focus on the doll as both subject and semiotic figure. As a creative act, my art is used to enhance reality and to indicate the presence of trauma. Through this synopsis I have proposed that the doll is a contentious

and worthy subject for original research. Above all, I hope that this effort will prove to be useful to those interested in the doll within the context of fine art.

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1.2 "Screaming" *Jumeau* doll, 22 inches. Collection of Ralph Griffith and Elmer Bell, (Tarnowska 1987: 67)

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2.5 Reverón, Armando. *Mujer con Muńecas (Woman with Dolls).* Private Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, (Elderfield 2007: 132).

2.6 Reverón, Armando. *Anciano, tre mujeres y niño [Figuras] (Old Man, Three Women, and a Child).* 1948. Collection Fundación Museos Nacionales, Caracas, (Elderfield 2007: 127).

2.7 Reverón, Armando. *Niza*. 1940s. Collection Fundacion Museós Nacionales, Caracas, (Elderfield 2007: 87).

2.8 Barber, Shawn. *Concealed.* 2007. Collection of Coro Kaufman and Melissa, (Barber 2013).

2.9 Barber, Shawn. *Muffled*. 2007. Collection of Coro Kaufman and Melissa. (Barber 2013).

2.10 Barber, Shawn. *Multi Skull Heads.* 2005. Collection of Gerald F. Loboff and Barnaby Penn. (Barber 2013).

2.11 Barber, Shawn. *Jezebel*. 2011. Private Collection of Shawn Barber. (Barber 2013).

2.12 Barber, Shawn. *Plastered,* 2011. Collection of Henry Lewis. (Barber 2013).

Chapter 3

3.1 Labonne, Kevina. *Deep Seated*, 2010. Private Collection of Kevina Labonne, photo credit: Kevina Labonne.

3.2 Labonne, Kevina. *The Little Soldier/The Encounter*, 2011. Collection of Dean Hall, photo credit: Kevina Labonne.

3.3 Labonne, Kevina. *The Hangin*, 2011. Private Collection of Kevina Labonne, photo credit: Kevina Labonne.

3.4 Labonne, Kevina. *The Sitting Doll*, 2010. Private Collection of Kevina Labonne, photo credit: Kevina Labonne.

3.5 Labonne, Kevina. *Pinned Down*, 2011. Private Collection of Kevina Labonne, photo credit: Kevina Labonne.

3.6 Labonne, Kevina. *The Half Doll*, 2011. Private Collection of Kevina Labonne, photo credit: Kevina Labonne.

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APPENDIX

SIMULACRUM:

26 September – 5 October 2013

SIMULACRUM presented more than 30 paintings created over the past four years since the start of my ArtsD project, and a small collection of dolls displayed in the basement. The exhibition space introduced a considered selection of works, divided between the two main floors of Heath Street Baptist Church. The range and scope of work from my studio practice could be seen through the successive series of works, which resulted from personal encounters with different forms of dolls. The Character doll, which was my main interest at first, has led me to engage with other varieties of dolls, some of which I have bought and collected from eBay, charity shops and flea markets. The title *SIMULACRUM* referred to the artificial human likeness triggered by the doll motifs in my work; a likeness which has inspired me into creating a series of work and where the act of reproducing the doll and similar sculptural figures is central.

The space of Heath Street Baptist Church was suggested by Professor Jon Bird who introduced me to the Minister Ewan King. Founded in 1861, the church is located between Hampstead High Street and the Heath, and is a fairly easily accessible location in London. For the exhibition, I opted to use only two levels of this unconventional space – ground floor and basement – utilising walls and wooden boarding with stained Art Nouveau glass windows and high ceiling. This place of worship differed from a typical gallery space. It offered a special and tranquil exhibition space, which challengingly accommodated the different series of works I showcased. I believe that this building strongly contributed to the presentation and design of the exhibition, and added to the affect of the paintings.

In SIMULACRUM, the works reflected how I have used the concept of the body and the power of visual metaphor to challenge representational genres. I have taken the motif of the doll to explore the possible narratives that are produced by this life-like object under its numerous forms and re-interpretations in my paintings. These paintings address the meaningfulness of the familiar, yet, with inferences of bodily constraint, the doll is transformed. Away from the world of play, it becomes a surrogate of jeopardy for the real body; an empty and cold vessel which symbolises both life and death.

The show began on the ground floor with the Doll Parts paintings and continued with an expansion of other series of work to the basement. The Doll Parts paintings explore body fragment of dolls, displayed sparingly or in a mass of body pieces over each other. The staging of these dismembered bodies became a voyeuristic scene composed of (un)recognizable body parts.

Illustration 1: Ground floor, with the series of the Doll Parts

The arrangement of these artworks involved a conventional and intuitive process of juxtaposition and dramatisation. Each space and wall of the church consisted of a specific series of works and showed a period of evolution in my approach and style, enriched by the qualities of space and light. It was important for me to alter the flow and density of the rooms and to interrupt the rhythm by using critical works in unexpected or dramatic relationships.

The exhibition continued with the diptych and triptych paintings of *The Pin Cushion Doll* series, and *The Sleeping Doll* series. *The Pin Cushion Doll* series result from studies of tiny half dolls, staged differently, and each covered with pins. This figurative, upper-part body is for me a compelling subject of representation, where I can combine both imaginative (the excessive pins) and observational elements together. The presence of the pins is dominant in every painting as the subject seems to be overtaken by the sheer volume of pins piercing on all sides. Although I aim to retain the 'identity' of the doll, through subtle manipulation, I have added details to alter and transform its meaning. For example, in this series of paintings, the pins have been added to create effect. In each occurrence, I push the object to the precipice between plain 'literal' and 'acquired' meaning, so that the object exists beyond the familiar. Here, repetition forms part of the process – a creative decision to amplify the staged scenario. It appears in the replicated painted figure, or in the compositional structure of using separate canvases to create a single work.

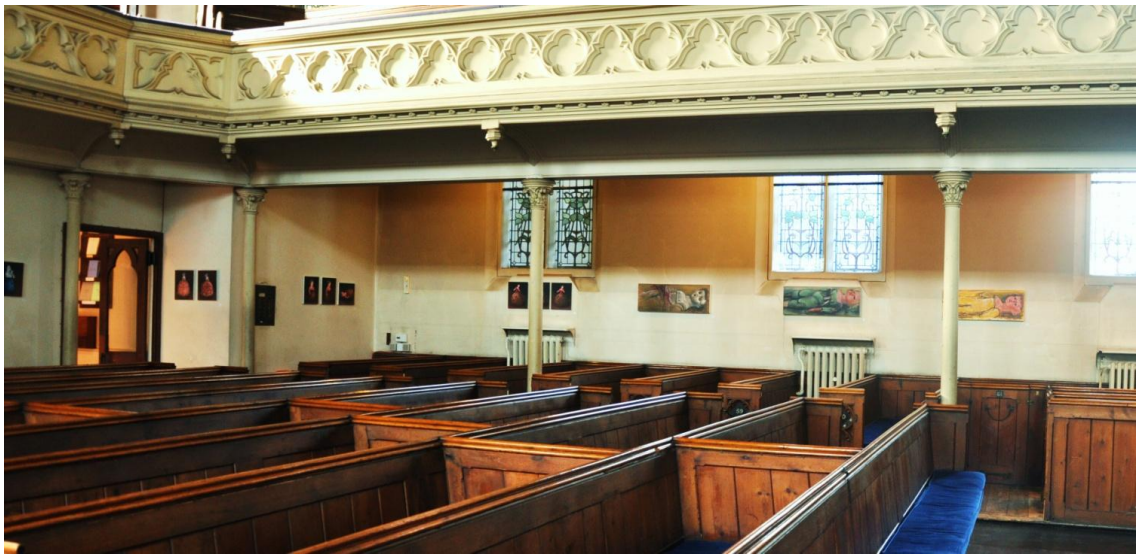

Illustration 2: Ground floor, with the series of the Pin Cushion Doll and The Sleeping Doll

The Sleeping Dolls present close studies, which aim to capture the ambivalent nature of the doll by combining the physicality of a prone recumbent body with the intensity of its open eyes and fixed gaze. These paintings explore the symbolic and imaginary nature of the clothed/unclothed body of the doll. The corridor in the entrance and the wall along the staircase, which led to the basement, had also been used to present smaller individual works which I believe demand close attention in terms of their own ambiguity and density. Overall, I hoped that the different staging of my paintings privileged the immediacy of the visual, propelling movement and established instant engagement with the viewer; factors which I consider valuable to my works.

Illustration 3: Basement, with Deep Seated

The basement, which benefits from a very large open space, was chosen to display the larger paintings from the Doll Portraits series. *The Doll Portraits* are close-ups, descriptive paintings of the doll's face or of the sitting doll. Painted realistically, *Deep Seated* (2010) explore the possibilities of the image to express the subject's artificiality and to project a sensation of manipulation and transgression. Painted, in what is intended to be, an ethereal and realistic way, these two paintings were the only exhibited work in *SIMULACRUM* where I have used the Character doll as my model. These figures or portraits are derived from a desire to mould and stage the doll by enhancing the attractive and expressive or inexpressive facial characteristics of the doll. Different from the works found on the ground floor, both in size, subject matter and painting style, the Doll Portrait paintings figure similar fragmented brushstrokes. Each work is characterized by an accumulation of brush marks, abrupt layers of paint, and repeated gestures. The change of painting technique, from more delicate and finished effect to

erratic and varied brush strokes, resulted from experimentation with mark-making and surface. Importantly, the variations in pictorial style occur according to the depicted subject to enhance the visual effect. *Deep Seated* are double paintings, depicting the same small screaming doll. My intention is for the viewer's gaze to travel from one painting to the other, a visual narrative unfolding in a continuous movement. Both faces are enhanced by vigorous, agitated brush strokes to increase the paintings' effectivity and drama. Through these apparent disparities in the painting style, the works in the basement opens up a new world to explore and interpret.

Illustration 4: Ground floor, with the series of Doll Portraits

Important elements of the exhibition contributed to the written documentation and presentation of the show. For instance, the two A2 text-panels were intended to add significantly to the viewer's comprehension of the exhibition's content. The first wall panel, found at the entrance of the church, provided an introduction of the show and my artistic focus on the doll. The second wall text, present in the basement, was very close to the installation of dolls. I described my personal taste in approaching the doll as a

small ‘collector’, interested mainly in the old damaged doll and preoccupied mostly by the its form of representation. Another element was the A4 resume provided to each visitor which covered a brief summary and description of my background as an academic and artist. Furthermore, the exhibition plan provided the title, date and medium of each painting, as well as the location of each work within the building. The paintings present in the church were made from observational studies of dolls which I found and collected. I painted most of them directly onto the canvas without any preparatory work. Hence, the presence of the dolls collection found in the basement was absolutely crucial to me, as the found object is crucial to my practice. The different dolls and body parts were presented consequently as documentary referents. The way I draw inspiration from the doll’s visual attributes is important in the working process, hence the actual process of painting itself. All these written and displayed elements were conscious decisions to add to the exhibition’s conceptualization and create an effective art experience.

Illustration 5: Ground floor, with the installation of the Doll Collection and wall text-panel

Before starting to paint, models are essential to me during the creative process. The use of the doll as a model within the arts, by the Surrealists for example, has proved that models can be more or less anything. Apart from a life model, any inanimate object can be used as a model for something else as long as it may be reproduced and adapted. Within this context, the doll may be seen as an artificial model, symbolic of the thought behind it. The doll is therefore my ideal model; it is passive and submissive, and is both real and virtual because of its figurative form. This miniature replica of the human body lends itself easily to physical manipulation, especially if its body is made of cloth. Therefore, the doll serves a double purpose of being both a tangible object and human subject. I argue here that the doll engages the real and incite due to its mimetic nature. It plays directly a figurative and emblematic role when transferred onto the canvas. Consequently, its pose and appearance are influential and significant to the created work in the end.

Whether as a whole or body fragment, the doll is related to representation and perception in my practice, and questions the boundaries of the inanimate. The doll chosen as a model precedes the creative work and is, as mentioned before, prominent to the final work. The chosen doll and pose can change the aesthetic experience. Also, once the work is complete, the painted figure may replace the model in some works, causing the doll to disappear. Here, I would refer to the painting of *Deep Seated* as a good example, where I believe that I succeed in depicting an individual instead of the figure of a doll. On the other hand, in works like the *Pin Cushion Doll* series, the artificial figure prevails and reminds of the existence of the half doll. The model remains present: it inspires and brings to life something else virtually present in the experience of it. This ambiguity proves that the doll characterizes the perfect subject to

be analysed as a created object of artifice, and as a vehicle for expressing the more philosophical context of the ambiguities of human fear and desire, identified as the uncanny.

The exhibition *SIMULACRUM* provided me with the opportunity to present the range of work completed during this practice-centred research. The works mapped my process of development in themes, artistic preoccupation and approach, where the doll is a subject explored and adapted within a focused and critical inquiry. In many ways, the doll, at once life-like and inanimate, is represented as a range of paradoxes in my paintings. All art is received subjectively, as every representation is open to interpretation. But, ultimately, I hoped that the viewer would see my works as being dense, rich in interpretative ambiguity and significance.

Text Panel 1

SIMULACRUM

SIMULACRUM presents a selection of paintings by the artist Kevina Labonne, who addresses the body of the doll as a porous site of contemplation and interpretation in her practice. Her aesthetic fascination with the object results into a series of acrylic paintings in which the act of reproducing the doll and similar sculptural figures is central. The exhibited works acknowledge the parallels between art, narrative, reality and fiction, referring in some way to the very complex nature of their construction.

One of the fundamental notions of SIMULACRUM is to present the doll as a thought-provoking substitute for the human body, and as a valuable topic of consideration and research within a series of paintings. The significance of the exhibition lies in the bodies of work themselves, and subsequently, the title of the show refers here to the superficial human likeness triggered by the doll motifs in Labonne's paintings. This exhibition is intended to present the body of the doll as a model of artifice, a figure which when manipulated, may produce an effect of *vraisamblance*.

All the present paintings in SIMULACRUM come from the artist's observation of the doll under its numerous forms, imbued by its rich symbolism and power of projection. Seen as an inanimate object and model, the doll is taken away from the world of play. Through the act of painting, it is copied and represented, in the extent to which the unreal is blurred into the real. While imitating the human form through artificial means, realism brought to a soulless and desexualised replicated body, causes a subject to be given 'life' only through animation and manipulation. However, in the end, realism matched with lifelessness may seem attractive to some, but also uncanny and repulsive to others.

Text Panel 2:

The Doll Collection

“SIMULACRUM presents a small collection of dolls which I have gathered along this practice-based project.

Over the past years, I have collected and painted all sorts of dolls; from plastic, porcelain to bisque-made dolls, such as the half dolls commonly known as Pin Cushion dolls. One type of doll which had my attention for quite a long time is the Character doll with its highly expressive features. The quality of the frozen animation signals the ambiguity of the object, hence its attractive quality for me. Each of these dolls differs in terms of the ways I can sense them: I can hold the doll up, feel its weight, discover the parts and contours, its assemblage and wholes. They invite me to do something with them. Despite their solid appearances, some dolls may be very fragile, especially the bisque and porcelain dolls. A simple fall may cause them to crack. However, certain times I break down the doll on purpose so as to find out how the parts are brought together and to explore the doll’s operating and practical function. All these form part of the tactile experience and manipulation involved in confronting the object and subject before the act of painting itself.

I am also attracted to the old doll – the damaged chips, hairline cracks and worn areas. The old doll has no memory to offer. Yet, as it had been tampered with, it symbolizes experience, the abject, and a certain loss of value due to its deteriorated state. In fact, I am not interested in repairing the doll and restore it to its prior ‘state’, as normally a doll collector will do. But, the more damaged the dolls are the more compelling and attractive they are for me to collect and paint them...”

Kevina Labonne. Sept 2013

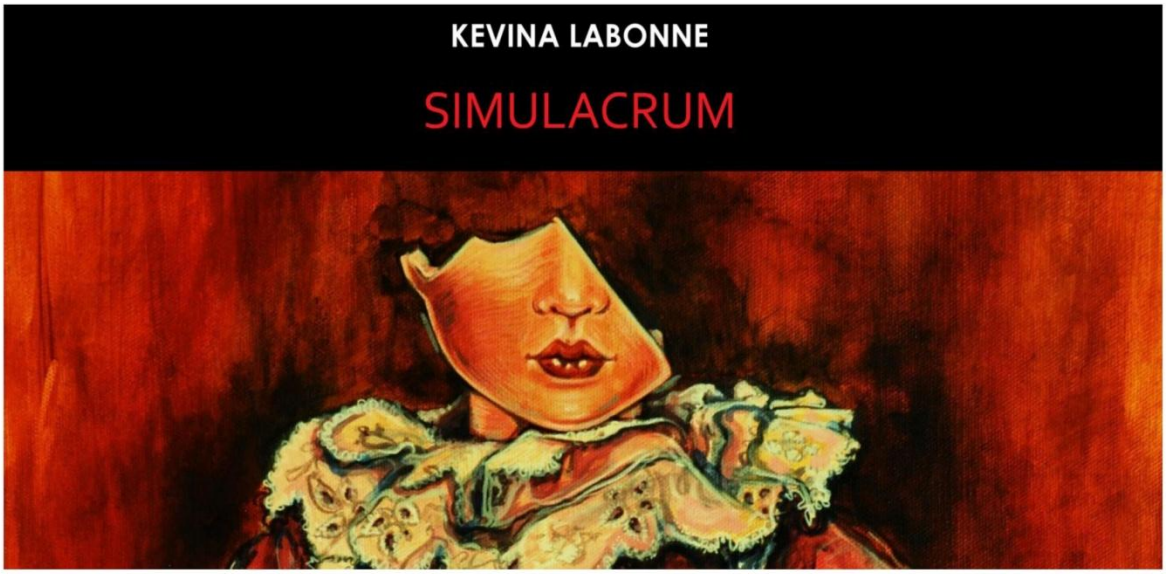

Image (detail): **My Name is Mandy**, acrylic on canvas, 2013.

23rd September to 6th October 2013

EVENTS: ***Private View: Friday 27th September 2013, 6-9pm (RSVP needed)***
Exhibition Tour by the Artist: Saturday 5th October, 3-4pm

OPEN: ***Monday to Saturday, 11am-5pm***

SIMULACRUM features around 25 paintings by the artist Kevina Labonne. Inspired by the doll, Labonne uses the concept of the body and the power of visual metaphor to challenge the borders of representation. She has taken the motif of the doll to explore the possible narratives that are produced by this life-like object under its numerous forms and re-interpretations in her paintings. Away from the world of play, the doll becomes a surrogate of jeopardy for the real body, and reveals a sinister and uncanny existence.

Kevina Labonne (b.1982, Mauritius) has exhibited in galleries and institutions in the UK and abroad. Recent group exhibitions include *To be Conceived: From Past and Imagination*, London (2013), *ImaginHer*, 198 Gallery (2012), along with being shortlisted for the *Fallout Factory Annual Competition* in Liverpool (2013). Labonne graduated with a distinction in Fine Arts from the University of Mauritius in 2007. She is currently completing a practiced-based PhD in Fine Arts at Middlesex University in London, where she earned her MA in Fine Arts in 2008.

Figurations of bodies and the inspection of body fragments have always been major elements in Labonne's work. Her actual research at Middlesex University analyses the significance of the doll as an artificial miniaturized representation of the human form, and as a substitute for the artist's living model. **SIMULACRUM** is Labonne's first solo exhibition in the UK.

For more information and/or if you wish to attend kindly RSVP to **kevinalabonne@yahoo.co.uk**

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