

Plastic Eroticism

Romy Querol studied journalism and publicity in Barcelona, lighting and photographic technique at the Training Center in Mexico City, and digital photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She has shown her work in different venues, notably at Barcelona's Galería 9MA and Madrid's Casa Árabe, both of these in 2009, as well as in the Abu Dhabi Arts Foundation (United Arab Emirates) in 2008.

Simulacra of desire

Ovid recounts that Pygmalion fell madly in love with his sculpture of a woman, Galatea, and to indulge him Venus granted her the gift of life. Meanwhile, the medieval alchemists attempted to breathe life into the homunculi created in their laboratories and it is said that Saint Albertus Magnus actually performed such a wondrous deed. At times photography is capable of working a similar sort of transfiguration. Today we know that what in its historical beginnings was called the "mirror of nature" can sometimes transcend its merely specular function. The British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor invented the concept and the word "animism" to describe the vital energy residing in certain inanimate objects, according to the beliefs of different primitive cultures. Primitive and modern cultures, we might add, given our own experience, since for both boys and girls the lead soldiers and the dolls we (respectively) played with were living subjects, not just representational objects.

Of dolls we know that they are extremely ancient simulacra. The philologists, on the other hand, have been unable to agree as to whether their French name, *poupée*, derives from *pupila*, Latin for *pupil*, or from the Roman empress Popea, who after losing the child she was carrying in her womb sought consolation in a tiny surrogate female figure. In this instance, as in that of the photography of our loved ones, the figurative representation concealed its status as an object and acquired that of a living being, at least in the subjectivity of the empress.

In our Western culture dolls were initially simulacra used to educate little girls in their future function as mothers. This held true until March 1959 when a New York company began marketing the Barbie doll, which opted for the eroticization of the simulacrum. Henceforth, its infantile pedagogy would be not aimed at the future mother but at the future temptress, the female who was meant to triumph in the discotheque, the fashion parade, the social gathering or in the market of male power. This new departure would lead to the phenomenon known as *sexting*, an English term that might be rendered as the "conscious eroticization of minors," which has scandalized many pedagogues and led to a lot of social debate. The phenomenon has not only affected the child population, for in recent years psychiatrists have coined the term *pediophilia* to refer to adults who get sexually excited using dolls and attempt to satisfy their desires with them, since dolls offer no resistance to the desiring subject.

This lengthy preamble serves as an introduction to the exceptional collection of photos by Romy Querol, who with her skill in framing and lighting has laid bare, never better said, the erotic appeal of the children's artefacts we call dolls, which, shuttling back and forth across the narrow frontier between the animate and the inanimate, manage to disconcert our libidos. Her dolls, without ceasing to be such, become suggestive

objects of erotic pleasure, perturbing fetishes transmuted into sexual phantasms for those who contemplate them.

You need a lot of visual talent and sensibility to carry out the optical metamorphosis performed by the camera—a common or garden iPhone—of Romy Querol, who with her framing and lighting turns inert matter into an object of desire, for in her existential experience she has learnt that eroticism is the art of suggestion. An uncommon visual intelligence subtends her educated gaze when interrogating, with equanimity, the forms of our everyday surroundings.

With her sexualized dolls, Romy Querol brings up, here, the old issue of the disturbing ambiguity of narcissistic object-choice, as we fall victim to their full lips, their eye shadow and, hands on pubis, their insinuating poses. A consummate lesson, this, in the status of erotic play, which she has learned from life and from observing the objects of the world that surrounds her. This fresh vision of a very common object—the child’s doll—is tantamount to an ethic and aesthetic rereading, not only of human simulacra in miniature, but of the global ambiguities concealed in our everyday visual environment.

Román Gubern

These dolls won’t be found under the Christmas tree

Jacinto Antón

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“I love them, I think they’re marvellous, exceptional, the dolls acquire a second, secret life that’s normally beyond our ken.” Román Gubern is fascinated by the series of subtly erotic images that photographer Romy Querol has created with dolls (mainly Barbies) which are being shown to the public for the first time from Wednesday at the Barcelona gallery B,14 (Calle de Johan Sebastian Bach, 14).

The writer, media historian and erudite scholar of eroticism and pornography enthusiastically supports the exhibition *Plastic Eroticism* by the well-known photographer, for whom he’s also written an essay. *“Dolls are extremely ancient simulacra that have been traditionally used to educate little girls in their future function as mothers,”* he observes. *“The Barbie doll involves an eroticization of that simulacrum and wasn’t aimed at the future mother but at the future temptress.”* Gubern points out how Querol *“with her skill in framing and lighting has laid bare, never better said, the erotic appeal of the children’s artefacts we call dolls, which, moving back and forth across the thin line between the animate and the inanimate, manage to disconcert the libido.”* Without ceasing to be dolls, he adds, they become *“suggestive objects of erotic pleasure, perturbing fetishes transmuted into sexual phantasms for those who contemplate them.”* These dolls won’t be found under the Christmas tree, that’s for certain...

Romy Querol (Barcelona, 1961) finds it hard to add anything to Gubern’s dithyrambic presentation. With her smiling velvety grey eyes, she looks like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. “There are twenty 50 x 50 cm photos taken with an iPhone. I particularly

like playing with reality and that everything's in the eyes and the mind of the observer." Indeed, what Romy proposes is miles away from the crudeness of other initiatives with Barbie dolls, like having them enact the *Kama Sutra*, with the invaluable help of Ken. The main protagonists will be next to the photos in the exhibition. "They appear in an installation alongside a video with a clip from *Zabriskie Point*."

The idea occurred to Querol, skilled at fashion journalism and castings, when doing portraits of children. "I spend a lot of time with dolls; I bought some Barbies and began photographing them. With dolls you can do anything, just like with real models. Why shouldn't Barbie dolls have an artistic side? At first when I put them together they had a lesbian feel, it was all very elegant but I said to myself, maybe not. So I took them individually, one by one, trying to get the best out of them, with the same styling as if they were humans, hoping they'd show their more erotic side: a come-hither smile, a lock of hair falling across the face, a half-glimpsed breast."

"Better to desire a doll than a dummy," Gubern points out. "This is a project worthy of support, in Spain there's not much tradition of eroticism. There's porn, but that's something different. Effectively investing her dolls with libido, Romy paves the way for a refined, intelligent eroticism whose only precedent is, I reckon, Leopoldo Pomés."