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VASARI DIARY

## Vasari Diary: Artists Playing With Dolls

BY Barbara A. MacAdam POSTED 01/02/18 4:46 PM

### Not to Be Toyed With

In the great tradition of 20th-century doll-maker, -deconstructor, and -reconstructor Hans Bellmer, journalist Grace Banks takes a look at the female stand-ins from an obverse perspective—that of a woman. In her often-disturbing book *Play with Me*, published by Laurence King, 43 artists, mostly women, imbue their subjects—female figures in every variety, medium, attitude, and posture—with political and social power and authority.

The shiny, heavy, tech-savvy, and sex and violence-laden paperback is divided into four sections: Blow-Up, Muse, Female Gaze, and Cyborg; among the high-profile artists weighing in are Laurie Simmons, Lee Bul, Vanessa Beecroft, Jeff Koons, Martin Gutierrez, and the collective The Ardorous.

It opens with a bang: Bellmer's 1936 sculpture of a segmented nude female torso, featuring two vaginas and two sets of breasts, one placed up top, where the head should be, and the other down below. It immediately calls to mind the iconic Paleolithic-period Venus of Willendorf, a figure that may or may not have been a fertility goddess—strong but eternally enigmatic. Closing the book is a series of doll collages, consisting of sculptures, paintings, and an installation of plastic figures from Vusal Rahim's series "My Name is Sarah."

What makes this last so powerful is the way it cubistically takes us inside the doll, capturing inner stress through the cut-open head of a Barbie doll with another head peering from inside. A diabolical corkscrew constitutes a female, with winged “arms” held akimbo and little plastic penises wrapping around tiny legs at its base. Rahim is exploring the problems of women in Azerbaijan through storytelling.

Where male artists often use figures of women to portray their adoration and fears, as well as disgust, women use them to project themselves as super-heroines, fierce Medeas, or pathetic victims. They may end up as fetish figures or demons.

Looking outside Banks’s book, artists like Sally Saul and Rona Pondick have long expressed themselves through sculpted personae. Saul’s soulful, reflective, Roz Chast-ian sculptures speak to a mood of the moment—a state of wonderment or even dismay at the ways of the world. The handcrafted figures are humble and introspective, often bird-human hybrids. Pondick’s sculptures, also human-animal hybrids, take the form of assertive self-portraiture, the artist’s face defiantly staring us down. She presents herself as a confident, uncompromising Sphinx, determined to win. These artists’ thought-provoking works are at once of the moment and of all moments, timely and timeless, pulling mythology into the present and bringing to bear moral and life-and-death matters, some even more pressing than the ongoing battles of the sexes.

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