Gender, Aesthetics, and Sexuality in Play:
Uneasy Lessons from Girls’ Dolls, Action Figures, and Television Programs

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Abstract

How does children's play with dolls and action figures engender exploration of gendered identities: from aesthetics and appearances, to social standards, and various rituals and performances? This paper examines recent research in art education and gender studies concerning dolls and figural toys marketed to girls. As an artist and teacher educator, I will draw upon my teaching experiences and examine artifacts of pedagogy from popular material culture. I will address issues of consumption while taking into consideration taboos of gender and sexuality within public and private play. While children's toys as symbolic bodies may pose narrowly gendered and heteronormative models of adulthood, this article argues children may also begin to counter paradigms of gender and sexuality within unintended, subversive play at home and school. I will also propose coalitions of art and material culture, through which teachers can facilitate inquiries and projects around thoughtful juxtapositions of play, performance, and art-making.

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Some dolls can be the dominant player, instructing their makers to dress them to perfection. More often, though, the doll is submissive with his or her maker, who manipulates the doll to his or her satisfaction. Kat Toronto. Barbie: Dolls that want to be Barbie sometimes more strongly identify with the bimboification kink. These women may get liposuction, breast implants, and other body modifications to better imitate the German doll. Rubber Doll: Not Stretch Armstrong, but dolls in full-body latex suits. Artist Kat Toronto was also attracted to the aesthetics of dollification. Her photo series Dolls in the House of Venus is currently showing at the Resistance Gallery in London. Toronto's photography examines femininity as a mask, something put on or discarded. Lynn Peril is the author of Pink Think, College Girls, and Swimming in the Steno Pool. Her column, The Museum of Femoribilia, appears in BUST magazine. She lives in Oakland, California. I've heard moms and dads scolding their children about wanting to play with everything from Weebles, to Lipsmackers, to Hot Wheels. You still see cooking and cleaning toys marketed to girls, and tool kits and action hero toys being marketed to boys, and rumors have it that at one point, a pole-dancing doll circulated the toy dept. of an unmentioned store, until it was (I imagine) very quickly recalled for an innumerable amount of reasons. Advertisements and television programming often poses narrowly gendered and heteronormative models of adulthood to young people. However, play enables children to reconfigure meanings and iconography different from those intended by marketers and/or feared by parents, demonstrating that what is intended may not ultimately designate those messages and images ultimately constructed by young people.