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Dichotomy of Self

Master of Fine Arts Thesis
Independent Film & Digital Imaging

Shelly Hokanson

Governors State University
Fall 2012

Dichotomy of Self

Doll gasped deep, piercing parcels of air and filth and life. Green... brown... laughter... shrieks... silence.

“Really? This is how it ends?” Reaching.... grasping... slime... Emergence. Re-orientation. Alive.

Strands of scum clung to Doll’s hair like leeches, her clothes soaked with mud. It made no sense. She wasn’t even supposed to be here today. What does “supposed to” mean, anyway? Her mother might say that God makes all the rules. Her friend Rabbit might say that survival is paramount and is the only device driving any notion of “destiny.” Doll hesitated to draw too many lines in the sand, as life had means to cause even the most steadfast of souls to rewrite beliefs and intentions on a whim. In the face of a moment of culmination – her swan song – an emphatic period landed to conclude the story she didn’t know she was writing. It seemed suddenly important to acknowledge the dichotomies that so often drove wedges into her life.

Dichotomy: a division into two especially mutually exclusive or contradictory groups or entities; also: the process or practice of making such a division

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dichotomy>

Now and Then.

I began the investigation of myself as an artist only recently, in 2006. A childhood memory resurfaced, illustrating why I had spent my entire life chanting the mantra, “I am not creative.” This memory, in combination with evidence to the contrary via my burgeoning collection of photographic work, illuminated a path I had long ago deemed off limits. At the crossroads, I chose the path untraveled, and began exploring my creative self through digital imaging.

The first draft of my artist statement explained my attraction to dichotomies in nature: hard vs. soft, light vs. dark, predator vs. prey. Little did I know, it would soon explain an equally complicated beast – a dichotomy of self. Myself.

This body of work explores - through a character named Doll - the impressions, emotions, and realizations I have experienced while undergoing a transformation of self, both inside and out. Over the past 3 years, I have lost 107 pounds of body weight, then gained 38, and lost another 4. I intend to continue the journey downward. Life’s plans don’t always align with my intentions. Perceptions of and reactions to external transformations are often wrought with emotions: celebration, concern, bold-faced deception. Internal transformations, while hidden from public view, have proven complicated, messy, and often confusing. The process, though, has led me to live with greater purpose now than I ever could have otherwise.

This collection of images also explores the dichotomy of solitude vs. companionship. I have accomplished most of the milestones and all of the failures of this transformation alone. I taught myself to cook; navigated the produce aisle alone as I tried to identify kale and Brussels sprouts (I

still haven't figured out what parsnips are); ran down gravel paths and dirt trails with just the squirrels and birds at my side; drove to the gym in solitude on cold, rainy nights to spend quality time with the treadmill and my iPod; plodded down unknown streets through faraway towns with nary a friend to cheer me on and not a soul to congratulate me at the finish line.

Doll's adventures seek to explore the perceptions of and reactions to change from both a personal and an external point of view. Some images may be understood from Doll's point of view. Others depict events and circumstances as outsiders might witness them happening to Doll. While moments in time have been selected to represent key aspects of this journey, the road to this point began long before the first photograph was ever captured, and will continue long after these images come down off the wall.

My own story begins in 1984. Ronald Reagan remained President of the United States, after beating out opponent Walter Mondale and his running mate, Geraldine Ferraro – the first woman ever nominated to the Vice Presidential candidacy by a major political party. Apple introduced the Macintosh computer. Beverly Lynn Burns becomes the first female Boeing 747 Captain in the world. Ryne Sandberg was the MVP of the Chicago Cubs, and those Cubbies broke my heart for the first and last time. I was in 4th grade.

In 1984, I simultaneously aspired to be a veterinarian, a pediatrician, and a nun. I did not aspire to be an artist. By 1984, I had already ruled out the possibility of any future in creative pursuits. It all started with Sister Bernie. Once upon a time, on a random day in my grade school art class, I drew a purple pig. I'd probably rather have drawn a purple horse or unicorn or tiger, but

alas, I could not draw well. Pigs were easy enough. For that simple pig all dressed in purple, I endured what, at that time, was the worst possible fate I could imagine: hallway detention.

Sister Bernie stood over my desk and roared, “Pigs are not purple!” I tried to explain myself. I can only imagine what a flustered 10-year-old sounded like trying to defend her creative decisions. Sister Bernie would hear none of it. She sent me out in the hall as punishment. I stared at the beige concrete wall outside of the classroom, mortified that I'd been reprimanded, and even more mortified that the whole school knew it. I could feel my classmates' eyeballs boring into me as they passed in single file lines on their way to gym class. I vowed never to make the same mistake again: no more purple pigs.

For many years (24, to be exact), I thought nothing of the purple pig. That traumatic day was replaced in my mind by a simple “fact” - I am not creative. I never questioned the statement. I couldn't draw, and couldn't paint. I couldn't sculpt or whittle. The statement seemed truthful enough to be fact. I accepted that fact and went about my days.

I wasn't creative, but soon after the Purple Pig Incident, I discovered an affinity for machines. My dad gave me my first computer at age 10 - a Commodore Vic 20. (Well, maybe he just let me use it - but any good parent knows who wears the pants in the family!) I watched him type commands in bright amber text on the glowing black screen, and thought to myself, “I can't let my *dad* be smarter than me!” I dug into the old (pink) piggy bank and bought a book - “DOS for Dummies.” I learned DOS, and then started learning to write computer programs. By the ripe

old age of 11, I was running circles around my dad on the computer, in an era when my friends didn't even know what a computer was.

Fast forward to 1990. I was 16 years old, and my new favorite machines were cameras. My father was an amateur photographer in the true sense of the word; he loved photography and made it his passionate hobby. I loved his cameras. In acts of trust and selflessness that I've only recently begun to understand, my father let me take his cameras out on various excursions. My best friends played in a band, and I would take my dad's fancy camera with its giant flash out to their gigs and shoot the band. I was the only one of my friends with a camera, and that made me feel like I was performing an important role in preserving those memories. I was the resident shutterbug. I snapped away, and always ordered duplicate prints so I could share a set with my friends.

In 1997, I bought my first digital camera. In 2000, my father died. In the spring of 2007, I decided to keep a part of my father's spirit alive through photography, and bought my first dSLR. That summer, I started taking photography classes. I already had a knack for my father's hobby. Little did I know I'd soon inherit his passion as well.

Sometime in 2008, in the middle of a critique during a photography class, I ran face first into a metaphoric brick wall; I remembered the purple pig. I had repressed that memory for 24 years, and all at once, I heard Sister Bernie yelling at me, and felt my cheeks burning hot with the embarrassment of my hallway detention. I got up and left the critique, feeling as if I was watching a very notable “fact” about myself crumble like a house of cards. The fact that I was not creative was

almost part of my identity. “I’m a programmer, not an artist!” That simple memory, in a single moment, changed everything about who I thought I was. It was just the first in a series of identity revelations I’d have in the next year.

By 2010, I had accumulated 42 college credits in photography – more than enough to count as an undergraduate specialty, in most circles. But to that point, I mostly considered photography a serious hobby. I had just started accepting payment for photography jobs, and those were based primarily on portraiture work (which, to me, was more like “bread and butter” photography than fine art photography).

I wasn't looking for a new career – a new side job, maybe. But as I ran out of photography classes to take at the school I worked at, I saw the crossroads approaching. To me, the crossroads appeared to offer two options:

1. Play it safe and stick with what I knew. I knew how to lean heavily on the “I am not creative” crutch. Wrap up the photography classes and start something new – maybe some courses on nutrition or cooking.
2. Embrace the identity I never explored when I let Sister Bernadette crush my purple pig.

“What's behind Door #2, Alex?”

“A new life!”

I took the summer of 2010 off of school in order to prepare to begin a graduate degree in fine arts. I chose option #2. I applied to the MFA program at Governors State University. I was absolutely terrified as I awaited the response to my application. I'm used to being a straight-A student – but that is based on a history of classes in computer science, programming, and logic. In math, there are right and wrong answers. In art – not so much. I was not at all used to being evaluated subjectively. If the candidate review committee disliked my portfolio, that was it. I didn't tell many people that I had applied, as I was quite prepared for rejection. After all, I was not creative. My friends told me not to worry because I'd always have computers to “fall back on.”

While awaiting my application results, I was undergoing other forms of self-transformation. In November 2009, I did a self-portrait project on what it felt like to live in my body at the time. I was “morbidly obese,” as the medical charts would say. Those portraits never saw the light of day, but by December, the images had shocked and stunned me into action. I spent an afternoon emptying my pantry and fridge of any items that had chemicals or high fructose corn syrup listed in the ingredients. (I donated 12 bags of food to the local shelter). I went organic. I started teaching myself how to cook. In early 2010, I started running and doing yoga and strength training. In March 2010, I went vegetarian. I felt that for the first time in possibly all of my life, I was being true to my most personal beliefs and myself. Humans' relationships with food are very intimate things. My own relationship with food changed drastically in 2010. I adopted a plant-based diet and stopped eating my friends (the animals).

By the time I received that fateful envelope in the mail from GSU, I had lost over 50 pounds. I stood in my kitchen, holding the envelope. I told myself that if I did not get accepted,

it was OK because I had already made some very positive changes in my life. Imagine my surprise when I opened the envelope to find that I was accepted to the MFA program! This new “creative” identity thing was about to become very real.

Doll cackled with glee. She had to. One friend or another had just sliced poor Tonya through the heart, and to sympathize was to be ostracized. Doll couldn't figure out why Tonya was an outcast. Doll herself was a nerd, and her own cast of characters hardly reigned as social royalty – instead clinging to a spot one or two notches up the social totem pole, tops. It made no sense, but what did? Every day seemed to be a minefield of status checkpoints. Funny? Check. Busty? Check. Pretty? Check. Basketball player tucked firmly at one's beck and call? Check. If she couldn't be one of the “popular” kids, at least she could pull rank and file over Tonya.

Creepy Dolls.

My introduction to doll photography came courtesy of one of my favorite professors – a Ms. Carol Thorner. She taught a summer class in experimental darkroom photography, amongst other classes. It was during the experimental class, in the summer of 2008, that I was exposed to

Carol's collection of what she called "creepy dolls." In a visually stunning and fascinating display called "What Will People Think? (And Other Concerns)", Carol's creepy dolls were exhibited at the Center for Visual and Performing Arts in Munster, Indiana. Some of the dolls had suffered various mutilations and misfortunes. Others were eerily normal, hinting subtly at fears and insecurities cast upon them by their viewers. I was hooked; creepy dolls were awesome.

Carol's dolls were not the dolls prized by little girls. They were not pretty princesses or bounding ballerinas. Maybe they once were – but in often shocking and grotesque manner, these dolls portrayed a different sort of beauty – that of the beholder, or that of one who appreciates life for all of its blessings and curses. I found myself casting my own experiences onto the dolls and creating entire stories to explain each doll's depicted circumstance. Though the dolls were unpleasant to look at, I marveled at the depth of narrative that each one invoked. This might have been the first time I was truly moved by works of art.

The use of dolls in photography is not a new concept. Photographer Hans Bellmer used dolls to explore oppression and abuse through narrative images of young female bodies and body parts in the 1930's (Knight, 2011). Laurie Simmons has been photographing dolls in domestic scenes since the 1970's (Laurie Simmons, 2012). One of the more recent photographers to earn notoriety through the portraiture of dolls is Liu Xia, wife of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winning poet and Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo (Link, 2012). Her works depict dolls suffering torture, bondage, and imprisonment with visually descriptive clarity.

Some doll photographs attempt to serve as political commentary. Some works act as psychological explorations. Often, they're used to engage disturbing implications and inject emotional tension. Dolls introduce narrative regardless of what they're depicted as doing. Most people, particularly women, have a natural affinity for dolls. Dolls typically represent the innocence of childhood and invoke sentimental images and memories. Because of this, dolls in general seem to garner attention, even if they are not presented in traditionally safe or emotionally satisfying ways. My own inclination to project emotional circumstances onto Carol's dolls led me to further explore this phenomenon. I stopped by Walmart and bought the biggest doll I could find.

"You're stupid!"

"I'm not stupid! I'm very smart!" Doll dug her heels into the ground.

"Book smarts mean nothing in the real world!"

The real world? As opposed to.....? What's not real about this world?

"Imagination isn't real," Doll thought, as she willed that evil wench to catch fire. Spontaneous combustion! "I'll show her who's stupid! Stupid yellow dress!" Nobody could prove that Doll thought the fire

into existence, and when everybody saw Doll extinguishing the fire, they'd certainly consider her smart and resourceful.

"What a hero!" they'd say.

Scribbles

No, they wouldn't say anything, as Doll was not seeking accolades. Doll wanted people to know that she was smart, but fiercely avoided the spotlight. A nod, a high five – those were appropriate acknowledgements. Anything more lavish sent Doll into awkward fits of discomfort and gibberish.

Doll sighed and shook her head at her friend.

"I'm NOT stupid."

Doll walked away.

Appeal.

One element of "creepy doll" photography that appeals to me is the bit of fearlessness required to create and display such works. I've often marveled at the courage it takes to put disturbing and autobiographical art out into the world. The process challenges me to face some of my biggest personal quirks: an obsessive desire to avoid getting in trouble, and an equally

restrictive sense that I need to get permission to do anything considered “outside the box.” My parents instilled in me a very strong respect for rules – maybe too strong, in some cases. Rules, in my world, end up being more prohibitive than the letter that their laws might state. For example, I once did a self-portrait project that required me to bring a red chair into the middle of a prairie to shoot photographs. I loved the idea but was terrified that I would get in trouble. Why would I get in trouble? (Because pigs are not purple and red chairs don't belong in prairies!) The prairie was a publicly accessible recreation area. I owned the red chair. Photography was permitted there. But – *red chairs don't belong in prairies*. Maybe that rule isn't written in any rulebook, but it certainly felt to me as real as law.

I don't necessarily have a problem with rules. I'm a big fan of rules; I like to know the rules because they define expectations, and I like to meet or exceed peoples' expectations of me. I have more difficulty with permissions. I feel like I need permission to do something out of the ordinary (like bring a red chair into the middle of a prairie). I need permission to take someone's photograph. I need permission to go into that building to shoot pictures. I need permission to set up my tripod on that street corner to shoot panoramas. I need permission to dunk a doll in the pond and photograph her. If I don't have explicit permission, I feel like I'm doing something wrong – and if I do something wrong, I might get in trouble (and getting in trouble is just about the worst possible thing in the world!) Ironically, for as much as I value logic, this might be the most illogical aspect of my entire personality.

Shooting images of Doll forces me to face these quirks and work past them. I typically have to bring Doll into places where dolls might not normally be seen. I often get strange looks from

the people around me as I pose Doll and take pictures of her. “Look, mommy – the dolly is in the lake!” Yes, yes she is. While the attention tends to make me uncomfortable, and my fear of getting in trouble is ever-present, I find ways to push my own boundaries to follow my muse.

Displaying images of Doll also forces me to face the uncomfortable circumstances of judgment and exposure. Upon seeing my Doll images, I have had friends suggest that I am crazy and need therapy. I’ve had others describe the nightmares they anticipate as a result of viewing the images. I’ve seen shock, horror, and disgust in the faces of viewers. This is a far cry from the looks of admiration or appreciation that I might normally strive for in other activities in my life. Additionally, since so many of Doll’s circumstances are at least metaphorically autobiographical, I feel as if I am exposing rather private parts of myself through the images. Those aspects, too, become fodder for judgment. It’s difficult for me to put myself out there, but I accept the challenge head-on.

“Hey there, Rabbit.”

“Well, hello, Doll. You startled me.”

“I’m practicing un-loneliness.”

“I’ve certainly never heard of such a thing. Carry on, then.”

Hmmm. How could Doll practice un-loneliness if Rabbit wouldn't play along? It seemed such hard work, not being alone. Finding others to not be alone with required planning and intention and most alarmingly, interaction. Not being alone was exhausting. But, Doll supposed, it might be nice to find a friend. She continued her practice.

"Hey there, Turtle."

Inspiration.

My first-ever favorite photographer was Richard Avedon, a contemporary fashion and portrait photographer. I was drawn to his portraiture because he was less seeking to make his subjects appear lovely and more to capture raw emotions. His images speak volumes of the psychological states of his subjects, but Avedon was known to project his own psyche into his work. He maintained that in every picture he was photographing himself (Horyn, 2009).

Like creepy doll images, Avedon's images were not always pleasant to look at, but they compelled viewers to consider the backstory and imagine the circumstances surrounding the image. As I started working with Doll, I wanted to create images that gave viewers the opportunity to imagine Doll's circumstances. What happened in the moments prior to the image capture? What followed? Did she do it? Does she live? Does she die? What is she thinking?

I hope to appeal to peoples' internal dialogues. I want to inspire the same self-reflection that I myself feel when viewing images of Doll, where emotions surface and draw forth memories buried and lessons learned. Doll's stories are really my stories and your stories. They're our stories.

The sun faded from view as Doll inched deeper into the woods. Once upon a time, the woods were made for exploring. New adventures awaited just behind the lush gateways of the forest. More recently, though, the woods became a means of escape, where Doll could mingle with her beloved woodland creatures. It was the one place Doll felt that she belonged – that she was part of something good. It might seem lonely to those that hadn't befriended trees and flowers and birds and squirrels. But Doll felt more in common with the woods than with the world at large.

“Have you ever been out walking in the woods? If you'd ever been out walking, you would know.”

Creation.

My Doll images start out organically. I choose a location and set out with Doll and camera in tow, but rarely have actual shots composed in mind. I recall advice from an English professor I had during my freshman year of college. He lamented our poor observation skills, noting that most

of us had driven to campus that morning via the same route as every other morning, and in the process, had failed to notice countless instances of brilliance and beauty and novelty in the world around us. Zoned in on one activity, driving, and one goal, getting to school, we neglected the myriad of moments between there and here. He implored us to set our consciousness free from habitual planning and preoccupation with what's to come, and instead focus on now - this moment. I think of this lesson quite often, and usually consider it as I set out on an adventure with Doll.

Most images I make with Doll don't involve pre-conceived messages. As I walk through various environments with her, I scan the horizon for interesting things and curious vantage points. Every few moments, a new storyline begins in my mind. Sometimes, the storyline meshes with a visual and I discover a place Doll can interact with. Other times, the storyline fizzles into the ether, and a new storyline begins. These stories might be recollections of experiences I've had. They might be remnants of memories from some movie I saw or story I read. They might be visualizations of hopes or fears. Real or fictional, hypothetical or imaginary, these storylines inspire Doll's reality as captured on sensor.

I speak of Doll's reality as if she's real, and in a way, she has become real. I often laugh while explaining that if I had known that Doll would take on such a life of her own, I would have certainly dressed her in a better outfit! (Pink is my least favorite color). Make no mistake; Doll is not just "a doll." I hesitate to say that she is me, because I certainly do take some creative liberties in the situations I place her in. At the same time, most of Doll's shenanigans can be traced at least metaphorically back to something autobiographical in my life. It is my hope, though, to present

Doll in such a way that viewers can interpret the situation through their own filters and in their own contexts.

To that end, I prefer to present Doll free of digital manipulation. Scenes are shot in as natural a way as possible. Doll has not been composited into environments. The forest is real. The fire is real. The ocean is real. Doll is not the most cooperative of photographic subjects I've worked with. She doesn't like to stand still, and she has an affinity for laying down on the job. In most instances, I've had to fight the elements of earth, wind, water, and fire to accomplish a captured frame. Countless images have been captured mere milliseconds before Doll performed dramatic tumbles or unceremonious face-plants. Her nose and cheeks have grown scuffed, her hair disheveled. Still, I wouldn't trade her for the world.

Stories.

Play With Me

This image was created during my very first outing with Doll. I had been training for a half marathon, and while out on one of my long runs, I happened down a trail that led to an area of urban industrial ruins, the Joliet Iron Works Historic Site in Joliet, Illinois. It seemed like a bizarre place to find a doll, and therefore an excellent shooting location. I did not expect to find *another* doll there! But there she was – limbless and smiling, sitting on an old iron ledge. I made several images of Doll interacting with her newfound freakish friend, but did not adopt the limbless doll. She scared me.

In “Play With Me,” Doll offers a swivel of her hip and a casual indifference toward the limbless doll. It reminds me of my junior high days, when the popularity pecking order seemed to be the most important thing in the world. Kids can be cruel. I was no exception, unfortunately. I had not yet grown comfortable my own skin.

Dust to Dust

This image was also shot at the Joliet Iron Works site. I climbed past the safety rails (out of frame) and placed Doll at the edge of the ravine. My original intention was to shoot Doll looking down over the edge, but when I saw how deep the crater was, I didn’t want to risk dropping Doll

or falling into the hole myself. Regardless, I still find myself, when looking at the image, wanting to creep closer, wondering what's over the edge. The answer, as I know it: certain death.

We're All Mad Here

Curiouser and Curiouser

After presenting my Iron Works shots of Doll in one of my IFDI class critiques, the class started offering ideas for crazy things I should do to or with Doll. Someone yelled, "You should light her on fire!" It was a wild idea, and I don't think anybody expected that I would do it. I knew I was on to something with Doll, so I did not want to destroy her, but surely I could light another doll on fire. I enlisted the help of my cousin, Kevin Schuster, to serve as my pyrotechnics coordinator. We confiscated one of his daughter's dolls and set up the scene.

The soon-to-be victim was secured upright with some wire ties, and the garden hose was secured to Doll's hands with fishing wire. We used tiki torch fuel to accelerate the burning process. I knew this would be a one-shot deal, and sought to get as many shots from as many different angles as I could in the short time it would take for the doll to burn beyond recognition. From start to finish, the actual shooting took no more than 30 seconds. It was over very quickly. I had no idea if I'd have any usable shots, but as I reviewed the series in-camera, I was excited. The shots were creepy as could be.

A majority of the people I've shown these images to think that Doll started the fire. I find this interesting, because the literal interpretations of each image depict Doll extinguishing the fire, not starting it. I wonder what it is that makes people think Doll is responsible for harming her friend as opposed to saving her. As a side note, for those with young children, you might take some comfort in the fact that dolls are pretty hard to burn. They seem to have some sort of flame-retardant properties.

This series of images reminds me of a movie I saw as a child called "Firestarter," where a young Drew Barrymore was able to start fires with her mind. She could sometimes will them to cease by chanting, "Back off! Back off!" When I imagine the backstory of this set of images, I see a very angry Doll willing the fire to start, just like the Firestarter. The story's conclusion has different endings, depending on my mood. Sometimes, Doll sees the error of her ways and puts the fire out. Other times, Doll's wielding of the water hose is more for show than for rescue purposes, implying a deeper sense of evil.

Who Am I, Then?

Once the fire was completely extinguished, my cousin and I inspected the damage. The victim doll was a mess, but not nearly as destroyed as we had expected her to be. I set up a few scenes of Doll comforting her wounded friend. The never-changing smile on Doll's lips can read in many ways. Most of the time, it seems to me that Doll is hiding something beyond the portrayed concern for her friend.

The other angle I sometimes see in this image is a bit more pure. I see Doll, who looks pretty as always, showing the same affection for her friend that she would have shown yesterday, before her friend was disfigured. It shows an unconditional love and acceptance between friends. In a less dark and twisted world, this image might actually be hopeful.

Where Childhood's Dreams Are Twined

Just to Say Hello

These images were shot in the remains of an abandoned building near the Joliet Iron Works site. The building boasts a series of concrete archways in various states of disarray. This was the first time I introduced a second character to the scene – Rabbit. The layout of the building offered many different walls, and as I started peeking around them, hide-and-seek seemed a natural activity for Doll and Rabbit to partake in – or, rather, sit-and-be-stalked. I placed Rabbit out in the open, with Doll sneaking around to spy on Rabbit.

I imagined a backstory where Doll marveled at how different and beautiful Rabbit was. She followed Rabbit with intense curiosity. Rabbit was blissfully unaware of Doll. In some circles, Doll's curiosity might resemble stalking.

Of Cabbages and Kings

No One Invited You

Some Dance to Forget

These three images continue the Doll/Rabbit saga, with two different endings. In “Of Cabbages and Kings,” Doll and Rabbit come face to face for the first time. Doll reaches out in a friendly gesture to Rabbit.

In “No One Invited You,” things go terribly wrong. Doll’s friendly gesture was a ruse, and her curious stalking was fueled by jealousy. Rabbit, unaware of Doll, pays a terrible price. Blood drips from Doll’s hands as she looks over her kill.

The “blood” in this scene was children’s finger paint. I tried to find a paint that would be non-toxic to the environment and that would wash off of doll’s hands easily. The paint was indeed non-toxic, but Doll’s hands, under close inspection, show traces of pink from this little excursion.

In “Some Dance to Forget,” the tables are turned on Doll. After her encounters with the limbless doll and her fire-injured friend, Doll has shown a pattern of passive-aggressiveness. What happens, then, when her opponent fights back? We can only speculate on how this scene came to be, but it is apparent that Rabbit had the upper hand, as Doll lays sprawled on the ground below.

This shot was actually an accident. I was shooting “Of Cabbages and Kings,” and Doll tumbled off the wall to the ground. With the exception of the fire scene, I don’t use any sorts of

restraints or supports to keep Doll standing, and in this case, the wind caught her, and she fell a few feet to the ground. I ran to pick her up, and this image made itself.

Not Today

This image was one of the first I shot after moving to Virginia. It is set on a contemporary bridge in an urban complex in downtown Harrisonburg. I liked the contrasting lines of the floor and the wire railings in this scene. In my mind, Doll imagines jumping from the bridge, though she would never actually do such a thing. The close crop leaves ambiguity as to what lies beneath the bridge.

My Toys

Where Your High Top Sneakers Sneak

Grow Away

Sentence First, Verdict Afterwards

These images were shot in downtown Harrisonburg, Virginia. They depict scenes where Doll is considering her past, present, and future. In “My Toys,” Doll is reaching for toys that she cannot have. She could have just walked past the toys and kept her desires to herself, but in a moment of immaturity, she flails for them and causes a scene.

In “Where Your High Top Sneakers Sneak,” Doll is making friends with a little bird, but the bird does not respond. Of course, the bird is not real, but Doll does not know this. She sees this as a rejection, and spirals further into frustration and solitude.

This image was shot outside of a café called the Artful Dodger. The exterior wall has some great murals, and an area for visitors to contribute their hopes and dreams to a chalkboard collection of thoughts.

In “Grow Away,” I imagine that Doll is begging to be picked up by her parents. The retro floor is a throwback to her childhood home, and she has thrown her arms up in a desperate cry.

In “Sentence First, Verdict Afterwards,” Doll considers paying for her sins. Or, maybe Doll is innocent. Has she been wrongfully imprisoned? Or is she simply a prisoner in her own mind?

This image was shot in the window wells of a downtown building. There was just enough room to squeeze Doll between the bars, and just enough daylight left to catch this shot.

Seasons Don't Fear

Everything Would Be Nonsense

These images were shot outside of a church in downtown Harrisonburg. While exploring the city with Doll, I happened upon a funeral. I did not want to be disrespectful, but could not pass up the

opportunity to shoot Doll in this scene. I kept a decent distance, and ducked behind a tree every time a funeral-goer stepped outside to use a cell phone or smoke a cigarette.

In “Seasons Don’t Fear,” Doll observes a hearse outside of a funeral procession. Most people who have seen this image tell me that Doll is attending her burned friend’s funeral. When I first saw the image, though, I was thinking more of my father, who I lost in 2000 to leukemia.

In “Everything Would Be Nonsense,” Doll is shown outside the doors of the church. Is she choosing not to go inside, or has she been locked out? This image is a bit autobiographical for me, as I spent much of my childhood waffling back and forth with religion. At one point, I believed I wanted to be a Catholic nun. Later, I called myself an atheist. Then, I studied Wiccan culture, and then considered Buddhism. Some people have an innate ability to demonstrate religious faith. For others, a more challenging battle ensues.

Beyond

Home to Your Skyscrapers

These were the final two images in the downtown Harrisonburg series. Both deal with the concept of “leaving,” something that has proven to be a recurring theme in my life. In “Beyond,” Doll is standing on the roadside, waiting for the bus. I was having trouble shooting this scene. A woman stepped out of the barber shop across the street and yelled to me, “You should try shooting

her from this side! She looks cute!” While “cute” wasn’t exactly what I was going for, I took the woman’s advice, and indeed, Doll looked better from the other side of the street.

In “Home to Your Skyscrapers,” Doll waits for a train. Maybe she’s planning to take the train out of town. Maybe she’ll just watch it go by. Either way, her placement on the track hails back to my own childhood, when my dad and I would walk along the train tracks behind my great grandmother’s house. We’d walk the tracks for what seemed like forever. I grew up next to train tracks and heard the horns of the commuter and freight trains day in and day out. An 8th grade family vacation involved taking a train from Chicago to Washington, DC, and then to Florida, and when I was a bit older, a friend of mine would meet his end on the same tracks I lived by as a child. Trains have always held significant meanings for me, and likewise, it seems, for Doll.

He’s Gone

Oh Dear, Out Here

Devil’s Only Friend

Don’t Bother Waking Me Today

I Will Do the Right Thing

These images were shot along the wooded trails of the James Madison University Arboretum in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The first image, “He’s Gone,” reminds me of my father. He was a fisherman, and we spent a lot of time near the water. Doll could be reflecting on anything, and I invite viewers to draw their own conclusions.

“Oh Dear, Out Here” is an ode to all of the time I have spent running through the woods, training for races since 2009. Doll could be setting out on a great adventure, or escaping her own reality.

“Devil’s Only Friend” shows Doll affectionately hugging an angel – her angel. It could be her mother. It could be her father. It could be a friend. It could be God or the Devil. I suppose the personification of the angel depends on how the viewer has written Doll’s story to this point. It also offers viewers another opportunity to consider religion and spirituality through Doll’s actions.

“Don’t Bother Waking Me Today” shows a peaceful-looking Doll laying in the woods. The texture of the wood chips and the color and structure of the green leaves appealed to me for this shot. Doll is actually laying at the feet of the angel statue in “Devil’s Only Friend.” Some friends have suggested I call this piece “Shallow Grave,” and again, the interpretation lies with the viewer. Personally, I don’t think she is dead!

“I Will Do the Right Thing” depicts Doll as a bit of a warrior princess. In this scene, the wide-open space surrounded by giant, stately old trees drew me in. I wanted to shoot Doll from a low perspective to illustrate the expansive space without losing Doll’s scale. I had found Doll’s walking stick earlier in the day and grew attached to it. It became the stake by which she laid her claim to the land. This image was titled in honor of the doubters that think Doll is evil or ill-willed. Redemption will be hers!

You Called Me Sugar

If I Listen Real Hard

These images were shot along the oceanfront at Virginia Beach, Virginia. Doll is visiting the ocean as her own sort of therapy. In “If I Listen Real Hard,” Doll draws energy and calm from the waves and is reminded of her very, very small place in this big world. Her visit to the beach is entirely autobiographical. The ocean plays that role in my own life.

In “You Called Me Sugar,” I was shooting Doll at the edge of where the tide was rolling in. She was not originally in the water, but one particularly powerful wave crashed behind me, and I knew this was going to be Doll’s last hurrah. The surf barreled up the shore and reached well beyond Doll. Water climbed up her legs, and I braced myself to shoot as the tide pulled back out. Sure enough, as the water retreated, it pulled Doll down with it. I did capture quite a few amusing shots of Doll’s fall to remind me of the debacle. I spent the rest of the evening washing sand from Doll’s hair.

The Moon Follows

One Last Thing

These two images were shot at the lake in front of the JMU Arboretum in Harrisonburg, Virginia. This scene is one of the few scenes that I preconceived in the Doll series. I knew very early on in the shooting process that I wanted to end the series by shooting Doll underwater in

some sort of drowning scene. I planned to shoot this scene last, as I knew it had the potential to ruin Doll with the mud and water. It took some time to find an appropriate location, but the Arboretum lake was shallow enough to be safe to work near and allowed easy access to the shoreline. It was also appropriately muddy and mossy – a look I was going for.

I purchased a “landing net,” typically used by fishermen to scoop caught fish out of the water. I decided to keep it on hand in case Doll started to float out to sea, so I could scoop her up. One challenge I had not anticipated, though, was that Doll was buoyant. She would not sink! Her body is soft fabric, but her head and limbs are plastic, which made her float. I was shooting Doll alone, so I did not have an assistant to hold her beneath the surface of the water. My early shots in the series were dismal failures, as I tried to use the fishing net to hold her down with one hand while shooting with the other. I nearly gave up, but instead decided to try to find another location that was a little deeper. That way, I wouldn’t have to reach so far from shore to get Doll completely submerged. This ended up working well, and I tucked my left hand under Doll’s shirt to hold her down and shot with my right hand. Of course, this entire process was risky in that I’m a clutz, and my camera could have easily ended up taking a swim with Doll.

In “The Moon Follows,” Doll is completely submerged in the murky water. The scene does not indicate how she got there or if she gets out, but the next shot serves to shed light on the latter. I imagine Doll bursting through the surface of the water, coming back to life, so to speak, and gasping for air. The way the action of “One Last Thing” speaks to me, I feel that I must be remembering a scene from a movie, but I can’t put my finger on it.

Long Drop From a High Place

I Hated You

These images were shot immediately following Doll's drowning scene, at the Woodbine Cemetery in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Her hair and clothes are soaked and remnants of pond scum cling to her. After a brush with death, Doll considers her own mortality.

Imagery



Play With Me



Dust to Dust



We're All Mad Here



Curouser and Curouser



Who Am I Then?



Where Childhood's Dreams Are Twined



No One Invited You



Just to Say Hello



Of Cabbages and Kings



Some Dance to Forget



Not Today



Sentence First, Verdict Afterwards



My Toys



Where Your High Top Sneakers Sneak



Everything Would Be Nonsense



Grow Away



Seasons Don't Fear



Beyond



Home to Your Skyscrapers



He's Gone



Oh Dear, Out Here



Devil's Only Friend



Don't Bother Waking Me Today



I Will Do the Right Thing



If I Listen Real Hard



The One That You'd Regret



The Moon Follows



One Last Thing



Long Drop From a High Place



I Hated You

Appendix of Works

| Title | Year | Size (WxH) | Medium |
|---|------|------------|---------------------|
| 1. Play With Me | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 2. Dust to Dust | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 3. We're All Mad Here | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 4. Curiouser and Curiouser | 2011 | 20x20" | Digital photography |
| 5. Who Am I, Then? | 2011 | 20x20" | Digital photography |
| 6. Where Childhood's Dreams Are Twined | 2011 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 7. No One Invited You | 2011 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 8. Just to Say Hello | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 9. Of Cabbages and Kings | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 10. Some Dance to Forget | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 11. Not Today | 2011 | 20x30" | Digital photography |

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|---|------|--------|---------------------|
| 12. Sentence First, Verdict Afterwards | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 13. My Toys | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 14. Where Your High Top Sneakers Sneak | 2012 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 15. Everything Would Be Nonsense | 2012 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 16. Grow Away | 2012 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 17. Seasons Don't Fear | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 18. Beyond | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 19. Home to Your Skyscrapers | 2011 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 20. He's Gone | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 21. Oh Dear, Out Here | 2012 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 22. Devil's Only Friend | 2012 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 23. Don't Bother Waking Me Today | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|------|--------|---------------------|
| 24. I Will Do the Right Thing | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 25. If I Listen Real Hard | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 26. You Called Me Sugar | 2012 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 27. The Moon Follows | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 28. One Last Thing | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |
| 29. Long Drop From a High Place | 2012 | 20x30" | Digital photography |
| 30. I Hated You | 2012 | 30x20" | Digital photography |

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