

Donna Bassin: The Afterlife of Dolls

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Donna Bassin: The Afterlife of Dolls

by Mary Birmingham

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MONTCLAIR ART MUSEUM

"When Art is doing its job it invites the receptive viewer to enter in, experience and explore with the maker, unresolved personal conflicts, unfinished social tasks, fears, loss, grief and/or moments of rest and beauty. The viewer is a co-creator who completes the work of the maker..."

Donna Bassin

Donna Bassin: The Afterlife of Dolls

Donna Bassin is a grown-up who plays with dolls. A noted psychoanalyst, she has worked and written extensively on gender, female sexuality, grief and mourning. She is also an artist who uses photography to explore issues of childhood, memory and loss. Employing simple pinhole and plastic toy cameras, Bassin photographs dolls, dollhouses and other playthings. The resulting images are often unsettling, with their distortions and hazy focus evoking the ambiguity and impermanence of memory itself.

A collector of contemporary and vintage toys and dolls, Bassin keeps a 1950s dollhouse with figures and accessories in her consulting room. For her series, *The Afterlife of Dolls*, she set up miniature worlds inside the office dollhouse, placed a pinhole camera inside, and opened the shutter for 45 minutes—the length of a psychoanalytic session. This parallel process can be seen metaphorically as a kind of “double exposure.”

The small camera effectively stands in for the adult body that is too big and too busy to go inside the dollhouse. A pinhole camera is a simple box with a tiny hole instead of a lens. The image is projected through this light-gathering hole onto film or photographic paper inside the camera. Lacking a viewfinder, the photographer can only imagine the field of vision. Bassin considers this collaboration between the camera’s point of view and her own artistic intent the “co-creation of a third eye,” with the pinhole camera able to record details not consciously noted by the artist.

Bassin began *The Afterlife of Dolls* to explore and work through her own burdens of memory and loss after the September 11th attacks. She explains, “The work is about adult play therapy—the treatment of the analyst by her childhood artist. My current art practice began as a personal therapeutic play in response to the despair and rage of a terrorized and grieving culture.” Children work through their fears with play, but as adults we are often unable to contain our fears and we tend to forget the importance of play. We often distance ourselves from the experiences and emotions of childhood, essentially minimizing their important effects. Bassin’s work hints at the restorative value of adult play.

Her images remind us of our ongoing (though often unacknowledged) need to integrate these memories and to retake possession of our lost childhood. Her photographs—objects of memory—assist in this retrieval process.

In creating these works Bassin employs a cast of doll-characters, who play and replay scenes within the confines of the dollhouse. One recurring character is a figure Bassin calls “Laurie.”¹ This doll bears a striking resemblance to Laurie Simmons, a well-known artist whose own photographic work since the 1970s has often portrayed dolls, and has addressed issues of individual, cultural and gender identity. Laurie represents, for Bassin, that artist aspect of her own psyche which was silent for so long. In *Dollhouse: Listening to Laurie*, Bassin the adult engages in a kind of play therapy. By placing Laurie on the couch and listening to her own “inner artist,” Bassin the analyst is attempting to recognize and integrate her artist self. A miniature version of Sarah Charlesworth’s *Red Mask*,² (1983), hangs on the wall above the couch in the dollhouse office. The layered appropriation of this image is particularly ironic, since presumably in the analyst’s office, one removes the mask normally worn for the world at large.

A more dynamic scenario unfolds in *Dollhouse: The Wringer*. The humor in this picture derives from the children’s triumphant mischief. The adult caretaker is worn out, literally flattened, but the energetic babies burst out of their carriage. Isn’t this in fact, every child’s fantasy—to break free from the limitations imposed by adults and to upset the balance of power? In play, children often grant themselves (or their surrogates) powers or characteristics they lack in real life. At the same time, this picture hints at adult fears of inadequacy and loss of control. The old-fashioned clothes wringer adds a slightly ominous presence in the corner of the nursery.

After this initial series Bassin began to experiment, moving the dolls outside of the dollhouse and inventing new settings. In *Birdhouse: Couple #1*, two figures pose stiffly in an old

¹ This figure is actually Mrs. Blue-Green, from the “Kaleidoscope House” dollhouse ensemble designed by artist Laurie Simmons and architect Peter Wheelwright for Bozart Toys, Inc.

² Also from the set of dollhouse accessories designed by Simmons/Wheelwright.

wooden birdhouse. Their awkward “body” language suggests the discomfort of being in an unexpected place, of dolls going where they don’t belong. The primary-colored plastic dolls stand out against the worn patina of the birdhouse, its cracked and peeling paint exposing its own layered history. Although the subject of the picture is a couple, the mother figure is placed at the center of the composition, perhaps hinting at the central role of the mother in childhood and childhood memories.

This same mother figure appears as a silent observer in *Dollhouse: Window*. The Laurie doll is outside the dollhouse, and is joined by a male doll ¹ emerging from the window. The use of the pinhole camera, which has no focus, causes objects near and far to appear equally sharp. Consequently, attention must be paid to all the components in these photographs, just as the myriad details of a remembered place or event may prove to be important, or even critical.

The window is often used as a metaphor for a pathway of vision, a way of gaining insight. Perhaps the camera’s tiny pinhole of light can be considered a window in this sense. The actual window in the photograph is both a means of escape from the dollhouse and a way to see inside. The opened window frames the mother’s face, but also acts as a barrier separating her from the other figures. *Dollhouse: Window* is a pivotal work. As Bassin literally moves the dolls out of the confines of the dollhouse, her photograph raises issues of mother and child separation, artistic liberation, and their corresponding anxieties.

Vacations are especially conducive to the visualization of childhood memories; sometimes our most vivid memories arise when we revisit significant places from our past. Also, like holidays, vacations are often the most carefully documented events from our childhood. When Bassin took her annual summer trip to Cape Cod in 2002, it seemed appropriate to bring her dolls along. She was literally carrying the “baggage” of childhood with her—something most of us do only in a figurative sense.

¹ This figure is Pee-Wee Herman, a child-like character created by Paul Reubens, who inhabited his own television “playhouse” during the 1980s.

The House that Ezra Built: Jane Sees the Light is a powerfully iconic image, full of mystery and melancholy. Jane, a plastic figure in a first communion dress approaches a fort made from the classic toy, Lincoln Logs. Bassin's teenage son, who built the fort using a popular toy from his mother's childhood, becomes an active participant in the layering of childhood memories. The spirit of place is also important to Bassin; the setting is a beach in Truro, Massachusetts, where the artist Edward Hopper summered. In fact, the moody quality of the light and the quiet isolation of the figure display an affinity with Hopper's work. The quintessential pinhole features—the soft focus, wide angle of vision and infinite field of depth—enhance the dreamlike quality of the image.

Bassin's work often relies on the importance of scale for the retrieval and possession of memories. Her large format photographs enlarge the miniaturized world of the dollhouse and its inhabitants, and close-up views make the dolls seem larger than life. Things (and memories) are not always as they appear. Our eyes, like our imaginations, can play tricks on us. The little girl in *Hopper's Beach: Olivia #2* is in reality a very tiny doll—less than three inches tall. The pinhole camera's infinite depth of field helps create an ambiguity of scale between the foreground figure and the background dollhouse. We are unsure of how to "read" the image, but the initial impression is that of a small child standing alone in front of a life-sized beach house. In case we have forgotten, Olivia reminds us what it is to be small.

For all of the photographs in this exhibition, Bassin constructed scenes using inanimate objects. These objects are quiet presences, reminders of the past. Some of the scenes have an ethereal, dreamlike quality while others look like freeze-frames from an action movie. But in these pictures there is always a feeling of arrested movement, a hint that what is silent and inactive was once alive. Through the use of our imaginations we can reanimate these scenes, and access the memories they arouse. Capturing the mood of memory, they provide a way in to the past, making childhood memories and their subsequent emotions accessible. We, the engaged viewers, provide the afterlife of dolls.



Dollhouse: Listening to Laurie, 2001



Birdhouse: Couple #1, 2001



Dollhouse: Window, 2002



Dollhouse: The Wringer, 2001



The House That Ezra Built: Jane Sees the Light, 2002



Hopper's Beach: Olivia #2, 2002

Donna Bassin

B I O G R A P H Y

For the past twenty years Dr. Donna Bassin has been part of a group of analysts revising the psychoanalytic theory of women and the meaning of gender in psychoanalytic theory and practice. A licensed psychologist, she is a member of The International Psychoanalytic Association and faculty of the Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, where she is a founding member of the Doris Bernstein Memorial Section on Gender Issues in Psychoanalysis. She is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology in the Department of Creative Arts Therapy, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY. Bassin has authored numerous papers and reviews on gender and female sexuality, as well as more recent work on memorialization, rituals and mourning. These have been published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, *Gender and Psychoanalysis*, and *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, among others. Bassin has co-edited *Representations of Motherhood* (Yale University Press), edited *Female Sexuality: Contemporary Engagements* (Jason Aronson Press), and is currently working on a book entitled *What Remains: Memorialization and the Working Through of Mourning*. Her recent artistic efforts represent a shift from her writing about loss and trauma to exploring grief, despair, mourning and rage through photography.

E D U C A T I O N

BA in Sociology, University of Michigan, 1971

MPS in Art Therapy and Creativity Development, Pratt Institute, 1975

Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, Union Institute and University, 1985

Certificate in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, Institute of Psychoanalytic Training and Research

S E L E C T E D G R O U P E X H I B I T I O N S

2002 *Into the Light*, Photo District Gallery, New York, NY

2003 *Time, Light, Space*, New Century Artist Gallery, New York, NY

2003 *Three Twins*, The Arts Guild of Rahway, Rahway, NJ

A W A R D S

2003 Mental Health Association in New Jersey, Golden Bell Leadership Award for contributions to mental health through the arts



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