

Hitting Barbie below the bodice



Samantha Humphreys



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She's iconic, which ostensibly makes her fair game. She's been part of our Weltanschauung since 1959, when **Ruth Handler** put a shape and face to some plastic. What emerged were the impossible dimensions of Barbie -- a doll that girls have collected, treasured and presumably tried to emulate and model themselves after for over 50 years.

Over the course of that time, artists have taken pot shots at her as being anti-feminist, unrealistically characterizing and glamorizing the ideal geometrics of a young woman that could never be. As reported by **Rehabs.com**, a website which one uses to locate mental health facilities in the United States, Barbie's body measurements would work out to 32-16-29. That's actually a modest bust size by American standards, which averages women to be in the more bountiful 35" range. But the waist -- now there's a problem of probability. To find a girl with a waistline the size of the Barbie doll (calculated proportionately in scale to the average woman), you would need to search through a bevy of babes -- 2.4 billion women to be exact -- before you could find one with a waist that size.

Because of all the flurry of information about how Barbie would look in real life (and we're going to completely ignore the disturbed woman who has had full body surgeries to try to attain that look), there's been a frenzy of trending initiatives which capitalize on the headline that Barbie is an

unrealistic role model for little girls. This is not a new phenomenon -- but the viral nature of the messaging certainly is.

Do the initiatives that attack Barbie's looks and what she stands for create a positive alternative -- or are they merely riding her glamorous coattails to get traction, attention, and push an agenda?

Perhaps the most arresting offering is from U.K. artist, **Samantha Humphreys**, who has created a Barbie doll art series called, *What If?* which asks the theoretical question, "What if we were to teach our children at an early age about the harsh realities that face some?" The artistic answer for Humphreys is a disturbing photographic essay of ten images that reveals Barbie in less than perfect poses. Given the context of the de-glamoured and art-doctored photos, storylines emerge that transport Barbie into a wicked world she's never before known: a world of cockeyed Ken abuse -- and as the artist notes, a world that "explores insecurity, loneliness, illness and addiction." These are clearly themes that resonate with Generation Like, where heart shapes and thumbs-ups have become currency, ubiquitous trophies of popularity.

Deeper down, below that superficial glory, there's a more haunting thing happening: there's a pretentious reality that is being showcased for the world to see -- a self-sculpted personality that exists only in social media, but not in society. When people see you face-to-face, they see all the faults, foibles and quirks that are edited out on FaceBook postings and Instagram photos. And since the preoccupation with social media often trumps time spent in-person, we catch-up to what's happening with our BFFs via social media, which in turn shows us a stilted, inauthentic version of who we are. That's a powerful theme that Humphreys is drilling down to in her exposé -- indeed, *what* she says about her art is particularly penetrating and insightful:

"Over the last few years we have begun to play out our lives online, documenting what we do, where we go, what we eat and how we look. We seek the world's approval while we do all these things and in addition, the world seeks our approval. But maybe now there is no divide between our online presence and our physical lives, perhaps it has become one reality."

The drama of youthful angst can be casually dismissed by parents and older adults as a teen phase, but none of us have really lived through the barrage and assault one can feel from being surrounded by sculpted perfection, 24-7, all around the globe. We are connected throughout every waking moment with mobile devices that literally alert us when we are liked or ping us when someone else makes commentary about our seemingly perfect lives. Baby Boomers dealt with schmaltzy television and fashion dolls like Barbie -- sculpted and nuanced realities to be sure. But today, kids are out of their doll phase earlier and into social media on a grotesquely habitual scale, liking this, sharing that, and doing so on a scale far grander than reaching out to the kids in the neighborhood for a high five.

If there's any doubt this issue isn't significant, one need only watch Humphreys' short video, **Theres No Walls Between Us**, which effectively melds simple board animation with text messaging and an industrial soundtrack and hearbeat to create a powerful and straightforward artistic statement (that frankly is far more mature artistically than her photos of bruised-up Barbie). But Barbie as the focal point of Humphreys' photographic art is doing her double-duty: the photos are getting carriage on aggregator websites like Buzzfeed, thanks to Barbie's inherent popularity and Humphreys' showing at the *Speaking Out Exhibition* at Embrace Arts, University of Leicester. One hopes that Humphreys moves along into other realms of expression, since **Mariel Clayton**, who depicts Barbie as a maniacal murderess guest star on *Law & Order: SVU*, has pushed the envelope with her outrageous artography. The peculiar humor of Clayton is only paralleled with Humphreys because of the in-common use of Barbie. Humphreys goes for the straight dramatic statement; Clayton goes for the jocularly of the jugular. There is a far more profound innocence-lost flavor in the Humphreys photos, whereas Clayton's Barbie tableaux are cleverly crass, acerbically funny, and perversely provocative because they are so over-the-top.

Using Barbie is, well, rather obvious, a trite and easy target, a decades-old trope, given the doll's history and the recurrent trends of going for the cheap laugh or the socio-commentary. Nary a day goes by when someone hasn't picked on Barbie about her unrealistic and unnatural nature. For the record, she's plastic. Barbie has always been plastic. And if she's an unattainable ideal, so what? Boys grow up aspiring to be superheroes. True that there are not yet any surgical procedures that can allow us to shoot silk from implanted spinnerets in our wrists. Perhaps the closer equivalent would be asking the question: "What if we were to use GI Joe to teach boys about the harsh realities of war?" Given my gender, I'd say that boys would welcome such a progressive toy line. But mom would never buy into a GI Joe action figure with blow-apart appendages. Ultimately, toys exist not to make statements -- but to be playthings for kids. Fun stops when reality enters the toy box.

When a boy awakens to the realities of war, playing with GI Joe stops -- and playing **Call of Duty Black Ops II** becomes paramount. For girls, it's a different story --

and it's one that requires lots of psychological inquiry -- far more than allowable on the pages of Examiner.com.

By her own admission, Humphreys' art is not intended for kids. Her use of Barbie is all about bringing attention to domestic violence through the abused imagery of a Barbie doll -- a symbol of perfection. It is fascinating that Humphreys, a citizen of the United Kingdom, turned to the American Barbie as her subject, versus the more Euro-centric Cindy doll. Cindy was marketed as the ultimate housewife. She was content going shopping and cleaning house. But Barbie -- she had dreams, aspirations -- and a car! She could go places. Cindy stayed home. Barbie had a job. In fact, she has had many jobs. And she is into everything trendy. The great irony in the feminists argument about Barbie is that the objections are all about the material girl's appearance, mitigating the fact she is an ever-transforming figure of empowerment, themed with over a hundred professional occupations. Likewise, Cindy also never shared the international laurels that Barbie does. So the photographs become more recognizable on a global scale, since Barbie transcends the States. Indeed, when asked, Humphreys asserted the rationale behind her choice: "I played with dolls a lot as a child; the doll of my childhood was Cindy. I have many happy memories of my dolls -- and yes, Cindy's life seemed much less complicated. I chose to use Barbie as she was always portrayed as perfect in all aspects of life, and I am demonstrating how life, for some, is by no means perfect."

Certainly Humphreys' conscious choice of Barbie over Cindy makes her art all the more significant: the stories evoked by the images of a figure known for her gregarious perfection -- not her averageness -- means that domestic violence can erupt anywhere, in any stratum. Whether Barbie is a doctor or professional photographer, that doesn't stop Ken from taking a swipe at her. It's reality shattering fantasy by a sharp visual statement -- a counterpoint to expectations. What makes Humphreys photographs particularly probing is that they are not obscenely explicit (in the more horrific manner of Clayton's oeuvre). There's a matter-of-fact quality about them, a casualness -- an after-the-fact aspect, which creates an unsettling tension. We weren't there at the moment of the crime, but we experience its effects.

When it comes to pure opportunism, though, the most recent example of using Barbie to market your own concept comes from Pittsburgh artist, Nickolay Lamm, with his so-called *Normal Barbie* -- or the less litigious name, The Lammily Doll, as it's been dubbed. Lamm's creation utilizes the average female dimensions (according to the Center for Disease Control) to bring his "average is beautiful" doll to life. If one doubts that Lamm's effort is not opportunistic, just cruise over to his [website](#), which has convenient links to his crowd-funding campaign; at this moment, the drive has attained more than \$425,000 and is 447% overfunded from his goal of \$95,000. Over 11,000 backers stepped up to his plate of platitudes to jump on the bandwagon and provide girls with an alternative to the unattainable perfection of Barbie.

Being in the toy industry for over 25 years, I can tell you firsthand that there has not been one Toy Fair that hasn't had an alternative Barbie offering presented to the trade. From entrepreneurial start-up companies to medium-sized manufacturers to the giants of the toy world, Average Barbie as a concept has always been there. The problem is the retailers have never believed in the idea that little girls want Average Barbie -- and that comes from research and study groups, not just visceral reaction. Little girls, so they have believed, want fantasy play, not reality play. Even sports reality is better sold when there's the fantasy of pretending to be a sports star or Olympic hero.

What hasn't been part of the equation most recently is the popularity of crowd-funding projects. Couple that with the ability to viralize a simple message -- Average Barbie (or Normal Barbie) -- and a rising trajectory of internet sales channels -- and you've got the stuff of an old idea coming alive with a breath of fresh air. Further enhance that with the barometer of the Center for Disease Control being the arbiter of what the average 19 year old girl looks like dimensionally, and you've got yourself a Lammily doll. That is, if he takes the money and does the honorable thing. Having previewed the crowd-funding video, one wonders what future generations of girls who play with the Lammily doll will turn out like.

Here's the question we must pose, to blend back in Samantha Humphreys to this issue: "What if little girls play with a stylistically boring doll?" Not just any ol' doll, but a doll "made according to typical human body proportions" that is championed by the inventor with the declaration: "Lammily is fun. She has articulated elbows, hands, knees and feet." Wow. Really? Maybe little girls will be further excited by Lammily's super cool outfit, consisting of a blouse, denim shorts, and white sneakers. That's right! *White* sneakers. Personally, watching the video pitch is a *bête noire* to me. It smacks of such banality and blandness -- but hey, the time may be ripe for such an offering into today's world of regurgitated entertainment. Clearly there are 11,000 people who think this is a great, groundbreaking idea. It's just a guess, but the demographics of those who backed inventor Lamm are probably moms who didn't see the aspirational beauty of Barbie when they were little girls. To each her own.

But let's be fair: hitting Barbie below the bodice is just too easy. And it's done all the time, especially in art and politics. Cheap shots. Barbie may be partially responsible for creating an unattainable image to impressionable young girls, but there's been plenty of accomplices along the way -- all far more powerful than Babs on a toy shelf. From box office blockbusters to titillating television, marvy magazines to mesmerizing models, the world has presented a veritable cornucopia of curves that are the stuff of not just the fantasies of little girls. We can give the artists who show Barbie in a lurid light this much: the stuff, though derivative and tawdry, at least engages one's perception, creates a stir, evokes discussion. Getting people talking about domestic violence is a good thing. On the contrary, the vapidity of Average Barbie is -- well, meh.

Let's be brutally honest: Barbie is not the problem. The people who feel victimized by what Barbie projects are far more lethal to the susceptible minds of young girls -- because they corrupt impressionable minds into thinking that a piece of plastic is the devil incarnate. Nor is Barbie a **Stepford Wife**. She is an empowering figure who has been virtually every positive role-modeling profession one can think of -- from astronaut to president. No, the real snake in the grass is not Barbie (or slithering girlfriend-beating Ken) -- it's the uninspired creators who provide anemic realistic playthings at the expense of imaginative fantasy toys, which evidently serve to perpetuate the sense of victimhood to which our culture is now addicted. Shouldn't we, as a society, try to keep reality out of the toy box and allow kids a sanctuary to discover their imaginations? As a now tired, old internet celebrity might have decried, "Leave Barbie alone!"

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