

Death, desire and dolls in Darwin

SUZANNE SPUNNER



Topsy, courtesy of Brenda Croft.

'Topsy was given to me by my mother when I was a little girl. It was her dolly when she was a little girl and she handed it on to me. Although my mother's heritage is Anglo-Australian of Irish, German, English background, being married to an Aboriginal man she wanted to make sure I had a strong sense of cultural identity and so I had black dolls when I was a child even though they were 'mammy dolls' based on African-American dolls.'

Doll a girl's toy-baby; **Idol** an image or similitude of a deity or divinity, used as an object of worship; (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, OUP, 1973.)

Last year the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) in Darwin put on display a recently acquired group of wooden dolls, *warnambilya*, and a bark bone box (for the bones of a deceased child), *warnamaleda*, collected at Angurugu on Groote Eylandt

in the late 1960s and gifted to MAGNT by Professor David Turner and Ruth Charles. The unsettling correspondence between the objects – the similar dimensions and linguistic roots – emphasised that the objects represent a continuum of meaning, and amplified the notion of the fragility and brevity of childhood.

The bone box symbolically represented the deceased baby, and would have remained with its mother until another baby was born, when that child would assume the spirit of the dead child and take its name. The *warnamaleda* would be discarded or destroyed, and the new child would be given a doll – *warnambilya* – to play with until it decayed with use. Thus a memory of the lost child was passed on to the new child.

The dolls are small (approximately ten by twenty centimetres) and flat, with gently rounded sides; there are no facial features or limbs and the demarcation between the torso and the face is suggested by a girldle of

fine bush strings wound tightly around the body, about a third of the way down. A similar band of strings with coloured feather tassels runs around the top suggesting hair and totemic animals or abstract clan designs are finely incised on the front of the body. The bone box comprise two pieces of bark folded over and sewn along the sides like a tiny *tunga* (bark basket) with the slightly larger one fitted over the top of the smaller. Both pieces are painted in a similar fashion to the dolls. Poignant beyond belief, they capture the essentialist function of the doll to stand in place of an absent baby.

The appeal of dolls is ancient and the need they fulfil primary. There is invariably something ghostly and unsettling about an abandoned doll of any kind, as if some spirit remains with it – a memory of the child who played with it, the life that once animated it. Dolls that are still being played with are palpably different; they feel alive and pregnant with possibilities.

Dolls complement the dyadic relationship, and thus it was fitting that a pair of exhibitions that focussed on dolls – *Nice coloured dolls*, curated by Gary Lee and Maurice O'Riordan, and *D-coy* by Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser – were both at 24HR Art in Darwin at the same time last year. The two shows were by two pairs of collaborators – artists and curators, two men, two women, two Indigenous, two non-Indigenous, who pair up across race and gender boundaries.

The *Nice coloured dolls* assembled in this exhibition were collected, borrowed and commissioned from the curators' circle of friends. The show was wide-ranging and eclectic, and included many different categories of dolls such as baby dolls, big sister dolls, home-made dolls, ethnic and souvenir dolls, as well as some idols and effigies.

The relationship between the self and a beloved doll is a primary one; the doll is *me* at an earlier stage of my life, and I am the owner, the mother/primary caregiver, the bringer-into-being of the doll, the puppet master of my alter ego. One looks to the doll to find oneself reflected as 'mini me'. Playing with dolls is a way of exercising power and mastery. The pleasure of the fantasies enacted is the realisation of desire for control – when one babies the doll, one is no longer a baby but the powerful mother; when I dress Barbie and strut my stuff I am all grown up and in charge of my own fate, and the mother is vanquished. We practise and rehearse gender; the little girl does not *mother* Barbie, though she has given birth to her, rather she *plays* her, in dreams of what she herself will become.

If one adds the variable of race to this potent mix the potential of the doll to be a repository of fantasy and carrier of desire is multiplied by an almost infinite factor. Black dolls, brown dolls and coloured dolls represent 'the other' for the white child – the exotic, the un-known, a world yet to be discovered.¹ What are black dolls for the Blak child, what are white dolls for the Blak child, and where *are* the black dolls these were the questions posed by *Nice coloured dolls*. Not to mention, where are the boy dolls and who wants to play with them? There is a polymorphous perversity in doll-dom; everybody loves dolls, it's just that boys are encouraged to find other versions – GI Joes and action figures, that is, little men with articulated and poseable limbs so that they can act and speak for the small boys who engage with them.

Dolls are the perfect partners: they're exclusive and loyal, and blissfully unaware if we are promiscuous



Belinda Simonsen, *Billi – Larrakia doll*.

'My Grandma made all the kids in my family dolls when we were young. These ranged from detailed dolls made to look like their owner to more indiscriminate attempts at animals as she got older and her eyesight wasn't so good. I was fortunate to get a rag doll named Jemima and a sock doll named Looby-Loo. I still have them both. The first doll I made for my daughter was a hand-sewn sock doll.

I particularly love sock dolls because no matter how much you dress them up they always retain their basic utilitarian nature. They are a simple approximation of a person, and yet always have a lot of character of their own. I spent a long time looking for the right pair of socks to make this doll. They had to have the right feel and colour. I would have liked them to have been second-hand as sock dolls are great recyclers and make good use of what is at hand. Unfortunately with the time constraints I had to buy the socks, but I think I got the right ones. This was the first time I have made an anatomically correct doll, but I think the medium of sock lends itself well to the task.'

and keep other dolls elsewhere. They're always available, never rejecting, always up for new games, uncomplaining if badly treated and forgiving if we forget them. No wonder real partners, not to mention actual children, can be so disappointing by comparison and lead us to wish to recapture that adoring relationship where all desires are



Melanesian dolls, courtesy of Tony Albert.

'I bought this pair of dolls from the 'smelly shop'. My sister and I grew up going to second-hand shops, or, as we called them, 'smelly shops'. We would always be asking Mum to take us there – it was so exciting. I think this is where my passion for collecting began. Recently I salvaged this pair of dolls from a basket of old toys and stuffed animals. I haven't named them and I am yet to display them. I just like to look at them once in a while.'

satisfied. Maturity demands that we put away our dolls and be glad that they served their purpose taking us through the transition from child to adult. They assist us in the task of growing up, which is why Hetti Perkins refers to the dolls she lent to this show – the black Barbies called Cathy Freeman and Flo Jo, which belong to her daughters – 'working dolls'.

Baby dolls often end up in our old baby clothes or in miniature versions of what we wore as babies. Brenda Croft's doll Topsy wears a pastel hand-knitted and crocheted matinee jacket and gown embroidered with rosebuds. It is of a kind of black baby doll that is actually a generic (white) baby doll coloured black, like the classic Pedigree doll from the 1930s lent to this show, which is identified as 'exotic' by its colouring and its earrings.

Ethno-dolls are literally a breed apart, exemplars of race and culture, representing frozen moments of cultural representation. There were many examples of ethno-dolls in *Nice coloured dolls*, including Maori dolls with tattoos, Melanesian dolls wearing miniature tapa cloths, beaded Zulu dolls, and Hopi Indian dolls carved from wood and decorated with feathers and pearl shell. Ethno-dolls may be merely a souvenir display of culture, with costumes, artefacts and skin colour grafted clumsily

onto a standard white doll, while others have more authentic origins.

Home-made dolls are potent individuals that often possess an extraordinary presence. Belinda Simonsen's *Billi – Larrakia* doll is a tribute to the rag and sock dolls that her grandmother made for her when she was a child. *Billi* is a beautiful boy doll, anatomically correct and fashioned from a pair of brown socks. He is fine-limbed, with velvety brown glass eyes matching tiny bead nipples, and has wisps of dark curly hair. Simonsen makes clever use of the contrasting smooth plain woven sections of the socks with the ribbed sections; that fine softer skin on the inside of the arms was made from the smooth weave and the reinforced and turned sections from the heel and toe made the hands and feet.

Warramungu artist Joan Stokes made a clay play set, *The poor kids' toys*, a complete replica

world comprising a family and their animals. The dolls are the simple forms she learnt from her mother, made of mud sourced from the dam and worked into star shapes with no head or face. They have accessories – the men are distinguished by their big drovers' hats, and the babies are asleep in the coolamons. The drovers and their wives sleep beside the campfire and nearby are the Brahman cattle: cows, calves and a bull. At some point these home-made or artist-made simulacra merge into Spirit dolls that are closer to idols or effigies than toys.

Teen dolls, or, as they are called in the trade, big sister dolls such as Barbies and Bratz, should not be confused with the *Tiwi sistagirls* made by Darwin artist Franck Gohier. His doll contraption consisted of three mechanised Jumping Jack Flash Blak girls at the Throb nightclub, men-as-women-as-dolls, in bright patterned shifts with red painted lips and finger nails; one says 'It's raining men' and the other replies 'I'm going to get absolutely soaking wet'. Wind them up and they dance. For Lee and O'Riordan, dolls are 'bound to notions of gender, ethnicity, domesticity, spirituality and art; (and) entertain a tangled treasure-trove of meaning'.

Disinterred, dismembered and deconstructed dolls have long been present in Destiny Deacon's photographic and film work, so much so that it is difficult to look at black dolls now and not think of their reconfiguration at her hands. In *D-coy*, Deacon showed a dozen large format light-jet prints made from Polaroid images and three videos, featuring black dolls and children, and referenced popular culture, from Melbourne's Moomba Festival to *The Wizard of Oz*.

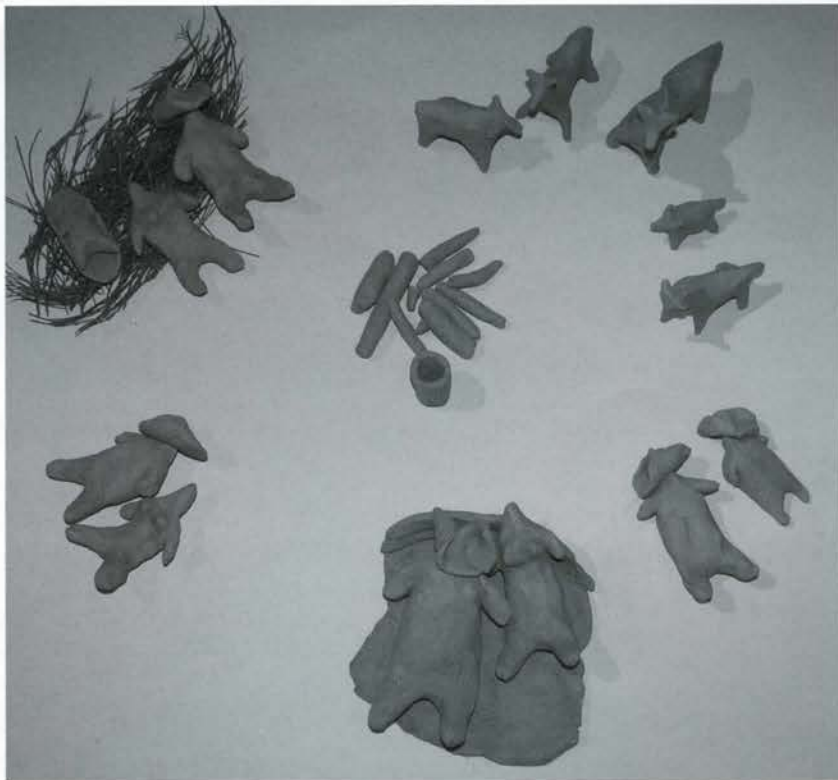
Deacon and Virginia Fraser, who have collaborated over a long period, made the film *Forced into images* together in 2001. Shot on Super 8 and transferred to digital video, it has a much more painterly look to it than the other videos, and is more consciously arty and disciplined in its structure. Its stars are two Aboriginal children (Deacon's nephew and niece) who begin by responding in an apparently natural way to the camera, but become more and more aware of their performance for it, acting up and acting out as it progresses. In a dolls' house they find photographic masks which cover their foreheads and eyes leaving their noses and mouths free and exposed. The masks are adult sized with adult faces, so disturbing incongruities are instantly established.

Disentangling and reading the installation created in the gallery window by Deacon and Fraser related to the light-jet print, *D-coy A*, in which a black baby crawls across a field of fake jungle fur fabric dressed in a camouflage-patterned jump suit. The innocence of the baby is fashioned and fetishised, in the commodification of war, thus birth and death lie in each other's arms. (It is interesting to note that it was artists enlisted in the war effort who originally invented camouflage, the science of deception.)

The window installation referenced the overt military presence in Darwin and the passion for gung-ho military exercises held in the jungles of the Top End. It drew out connections and connotations of ideas about black dolls and the jungle as the place from where Blakness emanates, and the jungle as the place of hiding – of camouflage – where jungle gear and the jungle style has become the combat style, the guerilla style. The black baby doll in the camo jumpsuit crawls along the jungle floor, a fur rug, past the soft toys mutated into the animals hunted on safari, fake fur creatures with zippered muzzles who witness evil and are powerless; a wide eyed, blue eyed, white doll looks on, sadly regretting its pedigree.

Notes

- 1 *My own coloured doll stories:*
- i *Trying to do the right thing I found a black boy doll for my son, but they failed to bond and he subsequently fell for Kermit, a stuffed green frog, and has remained loyal to him ever since.*
 - ii *As a child I was very serious about my dolls, investing them with inviolable personhood and when I played with my black dolls I made a special world, or rather I put them in a place that I thought was closest to what I imagined was their home*



Joan Stokes, *Poor kids' toys*, 2004, clay doll diorama. Courtesy of Karen Brown Gallery, Darwin.

'These were the toys made by our mother and father for us. As my parents couldn't afford toys for us, my mother would take us to the dam to collect the damp mud, then she would show us how to roll the mud to a big ball. Soon as we get back home mother would start making the figures for the boys, then she would make the coolamons and mud dolls for us girls.

We would play with our toys under the shady tree all day then pack it away in the box and put it away at night. The other destructive children would walk by and start destroying the figures. When we come home we see the toys scattered everywhere and this would make us very angry and sad.

The toys are star shape – no head, no face. That's how our toys were; to look the best we would dress them up.'

– a lush paradise around the tank stand where the constant dripping water created a greener, brighter, cooler, shadier, hidden place, and to it I brought brilliant red geraniums from the dry dusty parched parts of the yard.

Nice coloured dolls and D-coy were at 24 HR Art, Darwin, from 14 August to 11 September last year.

Suzanne Spinner is a playwright based in Melbourne, who lived in Darwin for ten years until 1996. She is currently writing a book on art in the Northern Territory since Aboriginal Land Rights.