

CHRISTINA A. WEST

WHAT A DOLL

THE HUMAN OBJECT AS TOY

A Southeastern College Art Conference
Artist's Fellowship Project



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Virginia Commonwealth University
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REFIGURING CONNECTIONS

AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
CHRISTINA
A. WEST



Christina A. West is the 2009 recipient of the SECAC Artist's Fellowship Award, and her installation, *What a Doll: The Human Object as Toy*, will be exhibited at the 2010 conference in Richmond.

She is assistant professor of art at Georgia State University in Atlanta. She received her B.F.A. from Siena Heights University in Adrian, MI and her M.F.A. from Alfred University in Alfred, NY.

In February of 2010, she talked with James Boyles about her art.

JAMES BOYLES: *Let's start with a verbal artist's statement and what you feel you're doing, although I know you have stated that you want to shun laying down a meaning on top of these works.*

CHRISTINA WEST: Not really shun a meaning. There are multiple layers of meaning within the work. I think it's easiest to talk about the ambiguity within the work, because that is the overarching content; it's the broadest "meaning." The ambiguity relates to the lack of a specific narrative or single meaning. I try to set up a moment where there are a couple of different ways that people can think about it. Maybe there is one way that suggests that the actions of the figures are less than pure. Or maybe it is completely innocent. All the time, in everyday experience, we catch glimpses or pieces of conversations, little bits here and there, little sound bites. We immediately begin to project from that limited amount of information that we have. I think that's a very intriguing

thing. We catch a glance from someone, which we immediately read, "I think he doesn't like me." We elaborate on that and create a whole idea based on expectations. My installations activate that same kind of projection. I think the tendency with visual art is for people to walk in the gallery and immediately ask, "What does it mean?" as if there was a concise answer or everything could be reduced to symbol or straight metaphor. I just want to confound those expectations a little bit.

JB: *It's open.*

CW: Not to *any* meaning, but to a few different interpretations.

JB: *Play comes into your work in a variety of ways. Play in the sense of fun, play in the sense of experimentation, play with materials, play with references. Your work is "play full." There is a richness to it that the audience can play with.*

CW: It's a richness that probably results from my engagement with the work and the fact that I'm questioning things, setting up problems for myself, investigating as I'm developing an idea and working. I couldn't spend as much time doing what I do if it wasn't fun, at least some of the time.

JB: *Let's talk about a couple of the works, the 2008 Shadows and Fog and, more recently, Where the Wild Things Are. What is Shadows and Fog about? Is it related to the Woody Allen film of that name?*

CW: I love Woody Allen films, but there isn't an overt connection with that piece and his film.

JB: *What I recall about the movie is that it has to do with illusions and circus and magic; and it has to do with people chasing each other and trying to make connections and not making connections. There is something like that in your piece, with the added tension of the figures' nakedness. With their nakedness they are quite open and vulnerable to each other, but they are not making a connection.*

CW: I think that is something that happens in most of my installations. These figures have eyes that are articulated with paint, which creates a sense of interiority for them. It often makes them seem quite introspective. When I am positioning the figures in the gallery, I'm thinking about how the piece will unfold, what people will approach first, and what will be required as people move about the

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space. I am also thinking about where gazes are falling in relationship to each other. I want the suggestion that they are looking at another figure, but the gazes never quite meet; it doesn't quite work. I want that sense of alienation within a social group.

JB: *In Shadows and Fog, the figures have real bodies – these are not gym bodies – and that provokes a reaction in the spectator. These bodies are not protected by idealized beauty.*

CW: Yes. And again, that is something that you will find in a lot of the work. My very first solo show was called "Refiguring the Ordinary." My work with the figure is very much about the ordinary and not the idealized. I want to represent the common person, a more ordinary type of body. That means that I may end up sculpting bodies that go against what the media tells us is beautiful. Yet, when I render those un-idealized bodies, I give them very smooth, simplified surfaces with continuous curves that are exaggerated to some degree. That kind of surface is beautiful. I am not idealizing the form of the body, but I am representing it in a way that is beautiful so that people are compelled to look at it.

With the title of this piece, *Shadows and Fog*, the word "shadow" resonated with me because, to a certain degree, I think of a shadow as an

abstraction of a person. It's a representation of him or her without literally being the person. A shadow can startle you if you glimpse it out of the corner of your eye and that happens with my figures – they have that kind of presence. I also saw a connection with the idea that voyeurism is something that happens in the shadows. From your darkened apartment you peer through your neighbor's window. Because of their unclad state, and sometimes vulnerable positions, my figures set up a situation that can make a viewer feel voyeuristic.

JB: *I think of voyeurism in particular with the one guy who is looking around the column. There is something about that isolated, lonely figure who is intently looking.*

CW: In a sense he is mimicking that gaze that visitors to the show direct upon him. His gaze is directed toward one of the painted figures on the wall, a female figure. Again there is this idea of shadows and layers and levels of realism. There are figures fully in the round and then the flat figures, two dimensional, but sort of projecting off of the wall. They could be considered shadows of the sculptures.

The man also acts as an indicator of sorts. Viewers see him looking and want to see what he is looking at. This is a kind of strategy that I have used in a few different pieces. I also like the way he is behind that pole and looking around it. He seems more vulnerable because he's quite exposed, even though he appears to try to contain himself behind it.



JB: *Lucy Yau in her article on Shadows and Fog mentioned “free-floating anxiety.” There is this anxious quality that hovers, but I also wondered about “free-floating,” which seems very different from anxious. There is something liberating about your work, about these real bodies engaged in sometimes foolish activities. They manifest real human qualities, in that I don’t have to live up to some beautiful, ideal sculpture.*

CW: I think this goes back to the implications of representing ordinary or un-idealized figures in a beautiful way – and maybe more so, to the purposeful ambiguity that is embedded in the work. I’m not offering any kind of negative critique, just putting the image out there. In a sense, I’m suspending judgment and handing the situation over to the viewer to deal with. You could say that I’m empowering the viewer in that regard.

JB: *Although there are similarities, Where the Wild Things Are has a very different feeling from Shadows and Fog. There is also its medium, play-dough.*

CW: The title for that piece came from Maurice Sendak’s children’s book, *Where the Wild Things Are*. Often in my work there will be a reference to another work, whether its art or pop culture or something, but the resulting work usually doesn’t have a tight connection to that reference. It’s more like a nod to that original work. It is a jumping off point for me. It gets the wheels turning. My titles commonly are borrowed, as are some poses. There is a figure from *Where the Wild Things Are* that is lying flat

on his back, looking upward. I think of him as the fallen figure in Caravaggio’s *Conversion of St. Paul*. I did a ceramic version of that one as well. In *The Sleep of Reason* there is a female who I think of as the *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. I usually don’t mention the small references like that because they end up becoming such different things – taking on such different meanings – within the contexts that I place them.

JB: *But, your art does talk about art. You are in this discussion about art, as well as about human interaction.*

CW: Yes, I definitely agree with that. That makes it a complex process for me and for viewers. It’s important to me that there are many layers to the work.

JB: *You’re having a conversation with the reference.*

CW: Sure, a collaboration over distance and time. I had read the book [*Where the Wild Things Are*], of course, but it was mainly the title that resonated with me. I started imagining how that could play itself out in a format that is typical to my work. I imagined figures searching, looking around for something. “Where are the wild things?” Then I wondered, “Who are the wild things? Are they looking for the wild things or are the figures themselves the wild things?” The nudity, or nakedness, could be construed as a more primitive, or wild, or less socially acceptable state of existence. I liked that question: who are the wild things?

Thinking about the reference to the children’s book is partly what led me to the material choice

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of play-dough. It typically is thought of as a children’s toy and I had been fascinated with it as a material. The figures are rendered at a scale that is similar to the actual size of a child. There are those connections here and there that pull it together. Some of the figures are searching for something, such as the couple that is crawling around, looking into the distance. There’s a woman listening into the wall; there’s a guy kind of sniffing the floor. Their activities are child-like; they are not very rational for adults. An adult male sniffing around at the floor is not a rational thing, but a kid might do that; but it is also a form of looking or searching for something. That all lends itself to that playfulness that you’ve talked about – the poses, the primary colors, the relationship to children, the material.

JB: *People have brought up Ron Mueck.*

CW: Yes, I have looked at his work since I was an undergrad student. I show it to my students all the time. I think it is totally amazing. People often bring up his work in relation to mine in terms of hyper-realism, but my work is not hyperrealistic. There is a high degree of realism, in that I carefully observe the structure of the body and the way the flesh sits upon an accurately rendered skeletal structure; but I am not rendering any surface details that are common to that type of hyperrealism. There are no pimples, pits, hair, anything like that. I think of my surface treatment as relating more to classical sculpture. These are very simplified surfaces. I focus on continuity of curves. . .

Where the Wild Things Are is a slight exception to this, of course. Because of the inherent properties

of the material I was using, I thought it seemed appropriate to leave my touch, the suggestion that it is in progress, that it is malleable, that it is in flux. I took a traditional play-dough recipe and altered it so that it would be oil-based. This means that it does not dry or harden and is permanently malleable. Conceptually, I like the idea that those figures are never fixed, unlike my ceramic work, which is fired to give it permanence.

JB: *Another person who comes to mind when looking at your work is Kiki Smith, because of her figures. She deals with abjection, which I don’t sense in your work.*

CW: No. I think there is a vulnerability to my figures. I think that the most realistic thing about my work is the psychology of the gestures. I am a people-watcher and sensitive to people around me. I take note of those kinds of things. They work their way into my pieces in small ways. Vulnerability is there, but it does not manifest itself as abjection.

JB: *There are these references – to films, to other artists, to toys – that never settle easily into imitation in your work. As soon as I see one thing, then I go off in another direction.*

CW: That could partly be the result of the way I work. Things evolve as I work. I am very open to rethinking things as I go along. I also enjoy complexity, or layers of meaning, within a seemingly simple or straightforward image.

JB: *You are a very good drawer. Do you start with a live model that you draw, then work in clay?*

CW: It's a funny thing that drawing doesn't work its way into the process of the sculpture. They feel like very different processes to me, and are always kept separate. When I do a drawing, I think of it as its own separate thing. I love being very finicky and obsessive, working with very tiny marks for hours. They are all very tiny drawings, in the 8 x 10 range, with the figure being maybe four inches.

To create the sculptures, I have a model come in and I take pictures of various poses that I think will work in an installation. As I am working, I have these pictures laid out on the table around the sculpture for reference. That is how I capture nuances that give the work the level of realism that is there. I could render a convincing figure without them, but it would be much more simplified, much more generalized.

JB: *Is there any sort of feminist element in your work? Maybe I'm being male-sensitive.*

CW: Well, that question comes up from people from time to time. People have mentioned that my female figures are dominant. But, I'm not consciously inserting a feminist agenda.

JB: *The men seem to be more frustrated, more anxious in some ways, and often the plumpest.*

CW: I am trying to mix that up more. People were asking why I always sculpt overweight people or heavy people. Well, I don't necessarily. Partially, what it comes down to – and this is not a good answer – but thinner, more fit women are more eager to model, whereas men don't care so much. Women tend to be a bit more insecure about their bodies. If they are not as fit, then they are less likely to do it. That is not a wholesale theory, but in general I have noticed

this. In general, I sculpt more men. I like the tension that is created when there is a mix of men and women. When there are more men than women, it increases that tension in some way.

JB: *There seems to be a better mix in Where the Wild Things Are.*

CW: There are three women and four men. In *Shadows and Fog*, there are three sculptures of men and one woman.

JB: *When I first saw photographs of your work, there were no people walking through them. Are people reluctant to break the space, to go into the installations?*

CW: It depends on the audience. I've had a lot of different reactions to that. Some people are very tentative to go within, to break that space. I've also seen people who, much to my dismay, don't hesitate to put an arm around a figure as someone takes their picture with it.

JB: *You talked about the gaze, one figure looking at another, and we are looking at them. There is also the possibility of someone looking at me looking at that figure. That's a little like Ron Mueck, like his Dead Dad. It's voyeuristic. You don't want to stare, but you have to in order to activate the work.*

CW: That definitely is something that I hope happens in my work.

JB: *Your figures are more open to us. Mueck's are on pedestals or hung on the walls, separated from us. Yours are down on the floor with us.*

CW: I did use pedestals in *No Exit*. That was a piece I did between *Shadows and Fog* and *Where the Wild Things Are*.

That had a lot of pedestals in the room and a couple of figures were on pedestals. One figure was leaning against the wall, with his foot resting on the pedestal. I was thinking about ways to use pedestals to contribute to the narrative of the installation without having the isolating effect that they usually do. I had the same number of pedestals as figures, but they weren't always on them. The pedestals were usually lit to suggest that the sculptures were supposed to be on them.

JB: *What a Doll, the piece you are going to do for SECAC, pulls up themes you have already talked about: child-like qualities and toys, though done in a larger scale than we might expect.*

CW: They are the size of a child, so definitely larger than what we expect a doll to be. This piece is a bit of a departure. There definitely will be similarities. It will make sense within my overall body of work, but it's the most different. I am making figures that reference a specific doll genre. These dolls are made with cloth torsos and porcelain limbs. I am sculpting the limbs with the typical realism that I normally would, but I am making molds of those

and I am slip casting them in porcelain. The torsos are going to be a decorative fabric that's primarily pink. The torsos will be much more simplified, but they'll have details such as bellybuttons and genitals. Because the torsos are going to be stuffed cloth, they are not going to be rigid like the ceramic pieces. These figures will be limp. I am imagining piling some of them up or having them lie across pedestals. I might fabricate a couple of doll stands so that they can be vertical. I will be thinking about similar things when I get into the space . . . composing them so that there is a sense of interaction or relationship among the figures. But it will be quite different because they won't be pre-posed. The heads will be individualized with different expressions. I think the head or face is the most important part in creating an image that people can empathize with. I've been thinking a lot about material for this one, so that is why I am putting an emphasis on it here. My use of ceramics up to this point has been a way of drawing in three dimensions. It was almost a non-material in my work. So, as I had used the play-dough in *Where the Wild Things Are*, I wanted to use a material that contributed to the content of the piece. It made sense to use ceramics for this piece.

JB: *You did go to the great "clay school," Alfred University. That's the center of the universe for clay. You're not anti-clay, but...*

CW: No, not anti-clay at all. I love clay and ceramic traditions and ceramic processes. I just understand that the work I have done up to this point doesn't firmly situate itself into ceramics. I am embraced by the ceramics community, but there was always this insecurity for me because I felt that the clay wasn't contributing to the content of the work in any way. Maybe that's because the issue of material has come more to the forefront of discussions on contemporary art and craft and I have become more aware of it.

Not to make it sound like a totally new discussion . . . When I was at Alfred, they gave all the grads baseball caps that had the phrase "Material Matters" embroidered on them. My attitude about material partly comes from simply not wanting to be pigeon-holed as an artist who only works one kind of way or only uses a certain material. Certainly the figure will always be a part of my work, so visual cohesion over the years is inevitable, but I'm excited about all the possibilities and potential within that broad boundary.

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1000 W. Broad St.,

Richmond, VA 23284

Gallery hours: M-F, 9-5

Opening reception:

Wednesday, October 20

from 6-9 pm.

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