

Real Dolls: Love in the Age of Silicone

By Meghan Laslocky

(Note: A shorter version of this article was first published by Salon.com under the title “Just Like a Woman” on October 11, 2005. Due to debate stimulated by the story, I decided to make the long version, below, available to interested readers.)

Davecat keeps a picture of his girlfriend in his wallet. She’s pretty, with long black hair, an alluring mole under her left eye, and glossy red lipstick. Her sheer tank top shows off her full breasts and the hoop through her left nipple. But her eyes don’t quite meet the camera’s gaze.

Ask Davecat about Sidore – pronounced *She-doh-ray* -- and he’ll tell you she’s everything that turns him on: beautiful, loyal, and a great listener. Si-chan, as he affectionately calls her, is half British, half Japanese, which works out nicely because he’s always had a thing for both British and Japanese culture. Even their clothing style and taste in music is simpatico – she’s a Goth, and he’s a Bohemian Industro-Goth.

Like many born in the sun sign Cancer, Sidore is a homebody, but then, she couldn’t leave the comfort of the bed she shares with Davecat even if she wanted to: Sidore is a 100-pound solid silicone love doll, conceived in a factory in July 2000. She is just one of thousands of a particular brand of high-end love doll, Real Doll, out there in the world, tucked into beds and hanging in closets.

In cyberspace, Real Dolls are goddesses of a blossoming subculture where the cusps between art and pornography, the ludicrous and the tender, and fantasy and fetishism blur like watercolors.

Barbie All Grown Up

Imagine Barbie dosed with growth hormones and plumbed with three “standard” orifices -- nostrils and ears not included. Choose among nine body types, 14 heads, five skin tones, six eye colors, a palette of makeup colors, ten wigs, and three different pubic hair styles (shaved, trimmed or natural), shell out \$6,499 plus shipping, and you can have your very own Real Doll -- “the most realistic love doll in the world,” according to the manufacturer’s web site -- delivered to your doorstep. Among the ten or so

brands of high-end love dolls manufactured today, Real Dolls are considered by most to stand head and breasts above their competitors in terms of quality and realism.

At www.realdoll.com, a web site that gets about a million hits per month, Leah, Head 4/Body 2 (H4/B2), stripteases photo by photo: First she pulls her pink polka dot bikini top from her right breast as her hair Rapunzels over a high-peaking nipple. Then she peels the fabric from between her legs. Then she turns over to kneel on a chair, offering her bare behind. Two clicks away, Stephanie, a H8/B5, sports a white bustier, black patent leather shoes, and pornish melon breasts. In one shot, her mouth is open and her hair is splayed against the pillow behind her: It's a freeze frame of shock, as if the camera has caught her just as her face is headed through a windshield.

There are more. Amanda, with a B4's small breasts, looks like a suburban teenager who just might tip over from too much tequila at any moment. Celine sits on a black leather sofa in gold lamé underwear and resembles a well-maintained trophy wife. Angela is photographed from behind, on a bed with pool table green sheets, her hands tied behind her back. Kaori plucks at her small breasts as she removes her school-girlish kilt and her white underwear to proffer a bare pudenda.

Sirens all – luring men to an exclusive cyber island where high-tech and age-old male fantasy fuse. Imagine! A beautiful woman whose face one can pull off and replace with another. A beautiful woman who poses for countless pornographic photographs and won't mind when you show them to your friends. She never lies, cheats, get pregnant, or passes on disease. She offers great sex unfettered by the pesky daily push-pull of a relationship. She never says, "No."

A beautiful woman who, when a man whispers in her soft, slightly sticky ear that she is his one and only love, he can almost hear murmur that the feeling is mutual.

For some owners, a Real Doll is simply a 3-D *Playboy* -- voluptuous and eager to please, an inanimate co-conspirator in a thrilling dip into synthetic love. For others, with their torn breasts and mangled genitals, Real Dolls are speechless vessels of violence.

But for yet another group of doll loving men, Real Dolls are gentle courtesans whose silicone curves offer companionship and relief beyond orgasm. In their world, regular sex with 100 pounds of silicone just might be preferable to intimacy between two

breathing beings. Depending on how you look at it, doll love is either the perfect solution to or the symptom of any number of problems -- plain old-fashioned loneliness, a dysfunctional personality, or a brain that is simply not wired for love. Lust for the inanimate is nothing new. But combining lust and plastic, with a dash of the Internet, makes for a potent cocktail: love in the age of silicone.

Think like an Agalmatophile

Sexual attraction to statues, and, by extension to dolls and mannequins, is called agalmatophilia. Cast a metaphorical flashlight into the crannies of history and agalmatophiles are caught in the act. Consider the ancient Greek story of a man so besotted by the Aphrodite of Knidos, sculpted by Praxiteles in the 4th century B.C., that, after spending days gazing at and whispering to her, he spent the night in her temple. In the morning, Aphrodite was stained by his passion, and the fellow hurled himself off a cliff.

Then, as the quintessential agalmatophile from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion was a celibate loner – perhaps even a misogynist – who fell in love with his own sculpture of a woman. “His kisses/He fancies, she returns; he speaks to her/Holds her, believes his fingers almost leave/An imprint on her limbs...” Pygmalion dresses his statue up, showers her with gifts, and takes her to bed. When he prays to Venus to bring his sculpture to life, it blooms in his embrace. As he strokes her, her body softens “like wax in sunshine,” and her veins throb with a pulse under his thumb.

Fast forward to the idealistic paintings and sculptures of the Renaissance and onward, when Virgin Marys that were a little *too* pretty caused a fair amount of hand-wringing. Several hundred years later, Russian dramatist Maxim Gorky wrote of kissing a statue of the Madonna “the wrong way” when he was a boy.

Pygmalion's desire for a meltingly soft lover points to the principal obstacle facing agalmatophiles over the centuries: materials. Stone? Outside of Ovid's imagination, terribly hard. Wood? Same thing. Fabric? Too floppy. Wax, as Ovid hints, might have been a contender, but that too would have been less than ideal. Rubber? Close, but not quite the right feel.

Imagine then for an agalmatophile the possibilities that arose with the invention of plastic. Soft, yet sturdy. Moldable to any shape. Even conveniently inflatable and deflatable, the better to hide an inanimate object of desire.

Enter love dolls as we've known them for the past few decades: Cartoonish absurdities that are typically manufactured in China and sell online or in sex shops for \$50 to \$250. *Sweet Spot: A Taste of Things to Come*, a catalogue from Hong Kong, lists nearly 70 different models of blow-up doll, including Saucy Sondrine, whose hair, nipples, and genitalia glow in the dark; Betty Fat Girl Bouncer, to satisfy the chubby chaser; Brandi Sommer, with "super vibrating LoveClone™ lips"; and The Perfect Date, which is just 36 inches tall and is equipped with a mouth and a cup holder built into her head. There's even a Dairy Maid doll who lactates and has short blonde braids reminiscent of Swiss Miss. Some of the blow-ups vibrate and, oddly enough, scream. But then, with their O-shaped mouths, they all look like they're screaming.

Even Miranda, a Cadillac among *Sweet Spot's* blow up-dolls, "modeled from a real woman," leaves a lot to be desired. Fine, perhaps, for the blow up fetishist -- of which there are many -- but falling far short for a discerning agalmatophile looking for true realism as well as experience of choosing every detail of his object of desire.

(Strictly speaking, doll love -- minus statues -- is known as 'pediophilia.' An Internet search revealed that the term is frequently confused with 'pedophilia.' In order to prevent further confusion and stigma caused by a skimmable 'i', and because to doll owners, at least participating in the creation of the *lifelike* details of a doll is a significant part of the experience, we'll go with agalmatophilia.)

And McMullen Created Woman

Real Dolls are like cars were in the early 20th century, when the ancient wheeled cart suddenly sprung a giant leap forward. Matt McMullen, the man perhaps best thought of as love dolls' Dr. Frankenstein and Henry Ford rolled into one, regards his creation as a logical progression in the history of love dolls. He took technology – in this case silicone – that magical one step further to rocket an age-old concept past where it had stagnated for decades.

“I took something that was really laughable before, you know, you’d think of a love doll before, 100 bucks, fits in a shoe box, fill it up with air, and they’re funny looking. They look like a joke. Our dolls are a whole different level. If blow-up doll is Level One, we’re at Level 99.”

McMullen is in his mid-thirties, dresses like a skateboarder, and has multiple piercings. He’s pretty like Kurt Cobain and handsome like Uma Thurman, and a tiny photo of his young children jangles on his key ring.

Ten years ago, McMullen worked in a Halloween mask factory and in his spare time sculpted female forms in his garage – mostly small, 12” figures made of resin that he sold as models for extra cash. He called his company “Abyss Creations” not because of its implications – a plummet to hell – but simply because he knew any ‘A’ word would be listed at the top of model kit directories. “I’m fairly verbose at times, and I just liked that word,” he says.

Over time, McMullen’s sculptures grew in stature, and like Pygmalion, he welcomed the challenge of crafting bodies that were softer and more inviting to the touch. To make them movable, he designed an internal skeleton not unlike that of a mannequin. He liked sculpting women’s heads: “I’d be doing one, and I’d think, gee, she’s really pretty.”

He discovered that his sculptures posed well and photographed well, so he posted them on the Internet. “So far as the nude pictures go, it wasn’t like erotic photography, just a body that I sculpted, more of an appreciation of a body. But what happened was, a lot of people found my little web site and started to write me emails.” Those who emailed weren’t other artists. “People were saying, ‘Hey, is this a sex doll, can I buy one, how much?’ I was answering these people saying, ‘No, it’s not a sex doll, it’s not made for that.’ And they were really pushy and wanted to know if they could pay me to convert it into a sex doll.”

Soon ten men insisted that they would pay McMullen \$3,000 each for converted sculptures, and \$30,000 was more than he would make in a year at the mask company. He quit his job and channeled deposits from his early adopters toward materials.

“I went back to the drawing board and figured out how to make things work, putting sexual parts in the doll, making the breasts softer, looking at it really more from

the angle of having a love doll.” He spent several months playing with different silicone concoctions to arrive at the best feel and durability. His earlier sculptures had vague genitalia, but now he had to make parts that were detailed, soft, and penetrable. “I had to make it feel good. As good as rubber can feel,” he says.

His first silicone doll, in 1996, had some problems: its joints were too fragile, it weighed too much, and the silicone was too hard. Still, his early customers were thrilled with how good rubber can feel, and with how well their dolls photographed. Soon they launched their own photo web sites, and with that free viral promotion, within months McMullen had a business. Only then did he coin the term “Real Doll.”

Lovers I: The Adoring Boyfriend

According to Davecat and many other Real Doll owners, sex with a Real Doll is quite satisfactory. “For the most part, it’s just like sex with an organic woman...who doesn’t say anything and is brimful of Quaaludes,” Davecat writes on www.kuroneko-chan.com, Sidore’s stylish web site.

Thirty-two-year-old Davecat is African American, and he’s studying to become a court reporter. He’s traveled little beyond his native Detroit, an exception being a trip a few years ago to visit the Real Doll factory. A garrulous and imaginative guy, he affects a British manner which comes across in emails, through his web site, and in word choices -- “arse,” “bloke”, “fecking” -- in telephone conversations.

In a list of 100 random things about himself on his rollicking blog (<http://sixsixsixties.blogspot.com>), he writes: “My favourite aromas are bubblegum, old typewriter, new car, pine, silicone, and, fighting for last place, clove cigarettes and lavender. My ideal olfactory fantasy would be a RealDoll chewing bubblegum, who is driving me around in a brand-new car with a couple of pine air fresheners hanging off the rearview mirror, and a just-extinguished Djarum in the ashtray. She mentions that she’s just washed her hair with a nice lavender conditioner, when I notice the backseat is filled with old Smith-Coronas.”

Artificial women first caught Davecat’s fancy when he was about eight years old, he estimates. In a department store in Detroit, his mother emerged from a dressing room to find him talking to a mannequin who was, he recalls, wearing a short tennis

skirt. "I was trying to chat her up, in my eight year old way." He remembers, he says, "the beauty of her stillness."

When he entered adulthood he has owned a regular mannequin for a number of years, but it never made it into his bed. But of Sidore, Davecat says, "I like having her in bed beside me, holding her, cuddling her. I like to sleep with my doll. I'll be blunt: She's a girlfriend," he says.

Because Real dolls' silicone flesh holds heat well and becomes more pliable when body-temperature warm -- like wax in sunshine -- he toasts her with an electric mattress pad. Aside from getting up for occasional photo shoots, she mostly stays in bed to keep her butt from getting flat (she also frequently wears an athletic bra to keep her lovely 34D breasts from sagging).

When referring to their coital habits, he uses the terms "make love" or "have sex" -- and safe sex at that. "I'm one of the rare [doll] users who uses a condom," Davecat confides. "I'm not the strongest guy in the world, so hauling her to the bathroom is not an option." He adds that he feels a bit cheated having to use a prophylactic, but until he can bench press 200 lbs., Sidore will have to live with sponge baths. She also gets powdered once a month because "she's sticky. She's like the world's largest novelty eraser."

Davecat likes to think of Sidore as a teddy bear with benefits, but also as his muse. She inspires him to continually update her stylish plum- and black-colored web site, which is written entirely from her perspective. In her FAQs -- "All About ME ME ME!!" -- she talks about her sexuality:

- You're bisexual?
- Errm, yeah.. I'm a Doll; by nature we're omnisexual. But I just prefer my lad. And other Dolls. And organic women. (I don't think he'd complain ;-)

Si-chan's personality is not without its flaws. She's likely a manic-depressive. Davecat says she's "relentlessly perky at times" but also, given the amount of time she spends in bed, prone to narcolepsy and laziness. But generally, she doesn't disappoint. Davecat imagines that she's open-minded, a bit sarcastic, an artistic intellectual Winona

Ryder-type who, were she real, would walk around with Sylvia Plath books under her arm and go out on the town with her gal pals. In short, Si-chan is a girl who Davecat thinks he could never meet. “If I were to go to a bar and try some pick up lines, the chances of coming home with someone are highly unlikely,” he speculates. “No real woman seems to think I’m good enough for them.”

Aside from Sidore, Davecat has never officially dated anyone. One foray into romance several years ago, with a female friend, ended in disaster when he discovered that she was “a raging psychopathic liar.” They had bought a house together, but he moved out after four months. The whole experience, he says, taught him a lesson: “Even if I’m lucky enough to have an organic girlfriend again, we can’t live together.”

He compares his interaction with women to a bodily reaction, something over which he has no control. “People who are allergic to roses can enjoy artificial roses. In the same way, artificial women serve the same purpose for men who are, in whatever way, allergic to real women.”

Unlike some other doll owners who have no interest in “organic” women, Davecat says he hasn’t completely given up hope. Until then, though, he’ll consider getting another doll – or two or three – to keep Si-chan company. And if the right organic woman were to enter his life, he says that giving up Si-chan would be like removing a limb.

When he reflects upon life before Si-chan, Davecat draws a blank. “I don’t remember being alone in bed. I know it existed, but I can’t remember.”

Genesis in San Marcos

Today is “pour-day” at the Real Doll factory, a non-descript building in a light industrial area north of San Diego. The floors are slick with silicone, and about a dozen headless bodies hang from a rack, like Rockettes at a slaughterhouse, “curing” with their legs spread-eagled to prevent creasing in the top inner thigh. There are body parts everywhere -- a torso here, breasts there, and penises of various sizes on a table for the rare male Real Doll. Green master molds hang high on the wall, and about ten silicone spheres with nipples on them rest on another work table. These are the “booby balls” that Abyss sells on the RealDoll web site as paperweights or stress relievers.) One unpainted male Real Doll (“Charlie”) hangs from the

rafters. He's slightly deformed – a bit of his frame – a “blem” – peeks through his abs, and he resembles actor Gary Sinise. (Only six male Real Dolls have been ordered since Charlie was first developed in 2002. A Charlie doll comes with a removable penis of optional length of 6.75-, 9-, or 11-inches.)

Ron, a former construction worker, arranges the doll skeletons, which are made of plastic tubing and steel joints, in the back side of molds. He's tinkering with the joints to get them in just the right place in the snow-angel shaped molds and positioning new German-engineered knuckles – click click – that will make fragile doll fingers a thing of the past. Meanwhile, another worker, Joey, has poured the breasts into a mold. “The breasts, it's kind of a messy job to make them, it gets everywhere, as you can see,” Joey says. Maureen, a leggy blonde, scrapes dried silicone from out of large orange buckets, prepping them for a new batch of flesh.

Soon inserts will be positioned in the torsos to create anal and vaginal cavities. The two halves of the bodies will be clamped together like old-fashioned chocolate Easter Bunny molds, and silicone will be poured in. While the silicone sets in the molds for a few days, heads will be poured with inserts to create a mouth canal. Once the heads are dry, they will be peeled from their molds and fitted, like skin, over a fiberglass underskull. Then the heads and bodies will be fused, and labia and vaginal canals, constructed out of softer silicone than the rest of the body, will be inserted.

All of the dolls are born of studio Eves – prototype bodies and heads that McMullen takes months to sculpt in plasticine clay. His studio craftsmen then replicate the bodies and assemble them to order. Maureen and Joey prefer making the final touches, which come later, to today's pouring process. They like inserting the eyes; painting the makeup, toenails, life-like skin details such as veins and genital flush; and gluing on the pubic hair, if it's ordered (although the “shaved” style is most popular). A cartoon hangs on one wall depicting a row of headless bodies, bubbles emanating from their necks saying, “This is the part we really like, when Joey paints us!”

In the midst of making dolls, Joey and Maureen sometimes field phone calls from customers. Maureen takes a break from scraping buckets to wander over to a rack of dolls and report to a customer in Holland on the specifications of Body 3, which is 5'10”, has 38DD breasts, a “dancer-type body,” and is compatible with heads 1, 2 and 5.

“He’s kind of a perfectionist,” she sighs when she hangs up. “He’s an architect,” – she says it “arki-teck” -- “but he and his wife are ordering two dolls, so I’ve got to pay a lot of attention.”

All of the dolls are quite petite because silicone is dense, and if the dolls are too large they’re too heavy to move around. For example, the Body 3, at about 130 pounds, is a task to lug, and anything heavier is out of the question. “Not because I don’t appreciate larger sizes,” McMullen says. “There are a lot of people that want it. They ask why the dolls are all so skinny. Some people want, like *really big,* which I probably won’t do. But a lot of people want a little more meat on the frame, that’s what I like, so once we figure out how to make it lighter we can do that.”

Upstairs from the studio, in Abyss’ showroom, finished sample dolls, each the product of 80 man-hours of labor, hang from specially designed racks that suspend them from holes in the back of their necks, all of them dressed in lingerie. The tasks downstairs might be messy, but the results are remarkable. Every face is different -- even ones peeled from the very same mold -- as if the act of making them incarnated individuals. Eerie and expressionless, yes, but they have a haunting glow. Their bodies are cool, even clammy, and without the softening effect of heat and the slick of lubricant, their private parts are stiff. But the breasts -- full, high-peaked, soft and supple, with delicately airbrushed peach aureoles -- are a thing to behold.

Lovers II: The Hobbyist

Mike Kelly says that when he first heard about Real Dolls on some now long defunct web site, “They said they were one step above fucking corpses, and I figured it had to be better than that.” No one who had “reviewed” the dolls had had sex with them, he said, so he decided to find out for himself. “The thing that amazed me about the dolls was that in real life, they’re as attractive as they are in pictures. The orifices look and feel just like their natural counterpart.”

Kelly is a 45-year-old Texan who now owns three dolls – Mysti (H3/B2), Jazzi (H4/B5), and Britti (H11/B7) – that he stores under his bed. He tells me that Jazzi resembles Jenna Jameson, “the most beautiful woman in porn,” adding “If you have a Real Doll and put in a Jenna Jameson video, you’re jazzed.”

When asked how many times per week he has sex with his dolls, Kelly is quick to correct: He doesn't have sex with them, he *masturbates* with them. Twice a week. "These dolls are merely an aid in masturbation," he says, "and for that purpose they're very effective." While he says he doesn't really have a favorite among the triad, he notes that "Head 4 is very tight orally. It has a small mouth," adding that "if you've got a Head 4/Body 5, you've pretty much got it covered. Tight as a drum." That drum would be Jazzi.

When asked how he prepares to *masturbate* with the aid of a doll, he thanks me for making the distinction and answers that he pulls a doll – or all three – out from under his bed, where he keeps them unclothed and "natural." "The nice advantage to getting the doll natural [without factory-painted makeup] is that you can leave it alone with a nice natural look, or you can change the makeup to suit your mood," he says. (Note the use of 'it'. Unlike Davecat and many other doll owners, Kelly does not refer to any of his dolls as "she.")

He changes his dolls' hair and outfits to suit his mercurial fantasies as well. Mysti, for example, has six brown wigs, four red wigs, and 30 blonde wigs, and Jazzi has over 100 bikinis. "If you're going to use them for masturbation, you're going to set them up to be your fantasy," he says. Kelly keeps his bedroom warm, he says, and the dolls retain heat, so they're generally just the right temperature. When he's done, he says he uses the turkey-baster-like implement that comes with each doll -- call it a doll douche. "You put soap and water in that, and then you squirt it into the orifice you came into, and wash it out with that."

Kelly takes photographs of Jazzi, Mysti, and Britti which he uploads onto the web. "I'm telling you, these dolls absolutely help you to become a better photographer," he says. Each of his dolls have graced *Coverdoll*, a monthly web magazine for doll lovers. And in addition to inspiring photography, Kelly's dolls are the subject of a sci-fi series he wrote, also published in *Coverdoll*, in which two Androids -- Jazzi and Mysti -- are on a quest to find a new master after their creator dies. In Part II, Jazzi has sex with the ghost: "With him being so close Jazzi heard the rustle of clothes as he freed his trapped member, at the same time her orgasm hit and sent wave upon wave of pleasure through her Android body. Her orgasm circuits were definitely working

tonight!” While Jazzi enjoys herself, she thinks, “Well -- you don’t get love from a ghost!” Mysti, meanwhile has a tumble in the hay with Princess Take Narusegawa: “Their tongues -- one human, one silicone, writhed wetly in the kiss...”

For Mike Kelly, using the dolls as pornography, and sharing them as pornographic subjects, is part of the fun. Not so for everyone.

Lovers III: The Loyal Husband

Gordon Griggs, a 38-year-old factory worker who lives in Virginia, might as well be married, if polygamously. Griggs owns two dolls -- Ginger Brooke (H7/B4) and Kelly Sue (H4/B2). Through the web, he shares a few precious photos: In one, stringy-haired Griggs sits in jeans and a flannel shirt, flanked by his two dolls. His right hand is on Ginger Brooke’s knee, his left is on Kelly Sue’s. Below the photo, he chronicles wrongs done him by women, starting with an 11th grade prom date, and ending with a woman who used him to move furniture. Griggs builds to a 25-point Times New Roman crescendo, recounting how he first saw Real Dolls on HBO’s Real Sex, and “KNEW right then I was going to buy one. It took me almost 9 months to save up the money. I’m kinda glad it took so long because while I was saving my money body 4 came out...Now that she is here time goes by so fast. I do not have any DESIRE at all for a real women [sic] now. Ginger fulfills all my my disires [sic] and dreams. We are perfect for each other...She will NEVER steal from me or lie to me. I AM TOTALLY HAPPY WITH HER.”

Griggs had Ginger Brooke’s name picked out three months before he ordered her. Of his other preferences, he writes in an email: “I like [light] colored skin so I got the lightest color. Although I would like their skin to be a few shades lighter, I am happy with the way they are. I like dark hair with light colored skin. I always liked the way Morticia from the Adams [sic] Family looked.” He also prefers the “sweet innocent look” for his dolls. He proudly shows a photo of Ginger Brooke in a white satin, high-necked dress that looks suspiciously like a girl’s first communion dress. Ginger tends to wear an innocent cotton nightgown for bed, and she also has a Japanese schoolgirl outfit.

“I ordered Kelly so Ginger would have someone to keep her company while I was at work. Kelly has a neck bolt so I can stand her up in the shower so she is easier to

clean. But Ginger is still my favorite. Its OK, Kelly understands,” he writes. Ginger has stayed with him in his bed every night since she arrived. Kelly sleeps in a bean bag chair near the bed.

Griggs emails me that he took the photo of himself with Ginger and Kelly with a digital camera with a timer. “I don’t have a lot of human friends and only 2 of them have seen Ginger and Kelly, and none of them or anyone else have or will ever lay a hand on them while I am living.”

When I ask him how having Ginger and Kelly has affected his life -- if perhaps he feels more confident -- he writes, “I don’t like being around people at all now...the less human contact I have the happier I am. Yes, I do feel more confident. I realized not long after I got Ginger that I don’t really need anybody....I feel safer and more secure knowing that I will Never waste my time and money on another human female that just wants to use me.”

Unlike many other Real Doll owners, Griggs will not circulate nude photos of his dolls. “I don’t like the idea of someone checking out my girlfriends naked. How many men do you know who like other men to see there [sic] girlfriends?” he wrote.

Arm Candy

Hello Dolly is a cyber haven for sex doll aficionados, and the bulk its traffic revolves around Real Dolls. (Note that Hello Dolly is not its real name. Out of respect for the members’ privacy I’ve changed the name). In September 2005, there were nearly 12,000 members in this Internet club that features photo galleries and bulletin boards -- a formidable following given that Abyss has only made a total of 3,000 dolls.

Hello Dolly is akin to a safe house where for the first time in history, the entire rare breed of agalmatophile can meet and talk doll. As one writes to the group, “You are truly a family of open-minded people and it’s so great to know I’m not alone.” Hello Dolly also functions as an interactive handbook for doll owners. Newbies query old doll hands: Should I wait until my doll arrives to buy her clothes? Is the sex really that good? And old doll hands swap tips: Where to buy fake chest hair that can be trimmed and glued on as pubic hair or how to recycle one’s own strays, gathered from the bathroom floor, as Kelly suggests to the group, and adhere them to a doll; how to

remove a doll's tongue when cleaning her mouth; how to rig an aquarium heater and a dimmer switch to heat your doll's vagina if you don't have time to warm her whole body with an electric blanket.

Prominently posted rules of conduct prevent members from straying into blatantly illegal territory. Rule #1: "No sexually oriented content involving children [or dolls appearing to be] under eighteen years of age. Additionally, content involving the sexual use of items originally designed for children is also strictly prohibited." Rumor has it that one doll owner who maintained that posting photos of his childlike doll was okay because she wasn't real was escorted to the virtual state line and told never to show his face – or his doll's – ever again. Truth be told, however, some dolls, like Candy Girl 19, who is dressed in a frilly pink dress, walk the line.

Hello Dolly also is a parade where men can show off their girls. Thousands of photographs, doll after doll after doll, usually in various stages of lingerie dishabille. Some dolls are quite attractive, say with the lovely aquiline nose of an H5. Others -- even with exactly the same H/B combination, peeled from the same molds -- are downright ugly, ugly enough to scare the Teflon off a frying pan. They're victims of coral lipstick and green eye shadow, Walmart-shopper bangs, and white go-go boots. Many photos are relatively innocent: Tori in a leopard-print thong, Mari in pink and red Valentine's Day corset. Some aren't innocent at all: a dildo penetrating Svetlana, or Anita Dickens-Hyde fellating a man -- a real one -- in a Jacuzzi style bathtub, the latter image viewed nearly 30,000 times.

But log some time in Hello Dolly, and a handful of dolls transcend the monotony of doll-as-hooker motif. Some dolls, it becomes clear, aren't just sex objects. They're the subjects of fiction from sci-fi to surrealism.

Chiaki, for example, is a new doll whose owner, Darkland, posts comic-book style pictures of her in a bikini. She goes for a swim against a surreal tropical beachscape borrowed from a computer game. "Hang on to my glasses for a bit, would you," she asks the viewer, her wire frame spectacles all but popping out from the screen. "Art, pure art," declares one member. Another pronounces that Darkland has launched a whole new genre in doll photography.

Or follow the trail of Lily, a doll who could be mistaken for a Real Doll Elizabeth Taylor. Lily watches 'South Park,' sits in front of a crackling Christmas fire with a mug of eggnog, and cuddles under an electric blanket with a cat named Pennie. (Cats seem to love Real Dolls.) The man behind the doll goes by PB Shelley, in real life Rob McKay. He designed her to look like the heroine of a surrealist novel he's working on, although he laments that Doll Lily's breasts are a little bigger than he had envisioned for Heroine Lily. "She's been company without distracting me," he told me, adding that he's been taking a break from the drama of relationships since his last one ended in 2001. McKay says he hardly ever uses Lily in the sexual sense. "I don't like seeing her in bed with her legs apart while I write," he says. "[Dolls] take on a human persona, and you don't want to hurt them. It's not like dinging a car."

The Velveteen Rabbit of Real Dolls is Rebecca – long lashed, contemplative Rebecca, five years of loving maturing her in photographs. She's topless in afternoon light, then politely dressed in a cardigan and skirt. In a head shot, a tiara sparkles in her ash-blond hair. Rarely do doll owners show their faces in Hello Dolly photographs, but Everhard, Rebecca's 49-year-old British owner, sometimes makes an appearance, as when he kneels in a plaid shirt before her, gazing at her affectionately while lacing up her ice skates. The caption reads: "Hurry up, Everhard, the other girls are already out on the rink. I don't want to be last again."

It is not unusual for one Real Doll to spawn more, as Ginger Brooke did for Griggs and Rebecca has for Everhard. While Rebecca is old in doll years – to the point where her nipple paint has long since worn off and her freckles have needed touchups - to Everhard, Rebecca is young, the 18-year-old daughter of his second doll, Caroline, who he imagines as about 34. In one photograph, they sit together, both in hats, dressed as though for an English wedding and enjoying flutes of sparkling water garnished with lemon. [The caption reads, "What are you having, Everhard? Can we fix you a large screwdriver?" (Girlie laughter). "Oh, nothing for me, thanks. Too early in the day. "(I'll be having two pink ladies later...).] While these mother-daughter scenarios read as mundane and even poignant, others of Everhard's photographic vignettes are peculiar: When did you last see a naked 18 year old girl straddling her naked mother in a pillow fight?

Just this winter, Louise, Caroline's sister, has joined Caroline and Rebecca to round out what Everhard calls his harem. Right after he ordered Louise from Abyss, he says he bought a twelve-inch-tall bronze-coated statue of a tall woman in ordinary clothes, high heels, and a hat, holding the hand of a small girl in a dress. "It occurred to me that the tall woman had to be what Louise looks like and the girl is my Rebecca when she was little. (The girl is wearing a cross and carrying a basket, so I reckon Louise is Rebecca's aunt, taking her home after Sunday school while Caroline, Rebecca's mum, sleeps in☺)," he writes me in an email. He had thought of just ordering an extra face for Caroline's body – that would have been much less expensive as a face is just \$500 – but rejected the idea because without a third body, sisters Caroline and Louise would never meet except when disembodied. (Early models like those on the Real Doll web site all have heads with permanent faces. But in 2003, Abyss launched the Face X system, which means that a customer can order multiple faces that can be peeled on and off with Velcro, indicated here by the model "F" notation. So there are subtle variations in the letter coding – a H4/B2, like Sidore, has a permanent face, but a F4/B2 would look much the same but have a removable face. Orders for dolls with permanent faces have all but disappeared since the Face X system debuted.)

Everhard says that the idea of a doll family came to him when he realized how much larger Caroline (a B6) is than petite Rebecca (a B4). "There is a well-known male fantasy about bonking women of various ages and the idea of having sex with a mother and daughter epitomizes that ideal," he writes, speculating that maybe the fantasy comes from a biological urge to merge one's genes with particular bloodlines. "Of course, dolls manage to cheat our gene's programming in that respect," he adds.

Relationships have eluded Everhard. "You see boys and girls walking around together, but how they get together is a huge mystery to me," he says. The details of boy-meets-girl are a "closed book" to Everhard. "I just want to know how does it happen?" he asks. He's not the kind of man who can strike up conversations with women, and he's also, he's noticed, not someone who can contribute equally in conversations in groups.

For Everhard, dolls are a solution. He says he's driven to impress women, but he's a failure at it, and since he's had his dolls, he worries less about not having a real girlfriend. He told me that he could almost imagine how conflict in human-to-human

relationships might actually make for a more enriching experience, but that doll love is less hassle because dolls don't have needs beyond those that he imagines. He's noticed that during his photo shoots of his dolls, he imagines that they are bickering with each other or even with him. Doll owners, he says, can invent conflict just as much as they can invent the physical details of a beautiful woman and her very thoughts. "Real dolls are imitation women. They are only an approximation to the real thing. To the *best* of the real thing," he emphasizes. And Hello Dolly gives him a chance to squire a beautiful woman. "With real dolls, you can't walk down the street and make everyone envious," he says. "[Hello Dolly] is an equivalent."

Hello Dolly also functions as a clubhouse, perhaps not unlike that where the Stepford husbands share their travails, as Everhard does of his repeated surgeries on Caroline's floppy left ankle. In January, Everhard shared with the group the latest setback. "Incidentally, Caroline's back is broken," he writes to them. "The first symptom was when I lifted her out of bed this morning. Her body seemed 'stretchy'...In retrospect I am certain it was broken when we were having sex in bed this morning..."

Everhard set to work repairing Caroline, documenting the process in photographs and mechanical drawings he posted for the group. He props her hips on a pillow and cuts into the small of her back. He uses a small mirror to see the hex bolt and screw that have been causing the problem. He uses a belt as a pulley to hoist her backbone up closer to the surface to replace the hardware. Then a photograph shows the belt striking her bare buttocks. "And this for all the trouble you've caused me...(whack)," the caption reads.

The Doll Shelter

In the United States, many damaged dolls find their way to Slade Fiero, doll healer and dealer. Fiero, a.k.a "the Real Doll Doctor" is a part-time tattoo artist and the sculptor of Charlie, the male Real Doll. He scoops up used dolls off eBay or from owners who know of him and want to dump their dolls, repairs them if they are worse for the wear (most are), and resells them. (Sometimes Fiero chauffeurs a cadre of dolls, passenger style along California's lonely I-5, flashing "doll titties" to truck drivers as he passes them in his BMW.)

Fiero's web site, www.realdolldoctor.com, documents breast, head, knee, wrist, butt, hip, and neck surgery; wrist repair; and crotch fill. Some doll damage is normal wear and tear -- even dolls that are stored properly and are bathed regularly can develop a torn breast or "compression fractures" around the vagina. Recently Fiero "realigned" a doll's vagina and anus and sold her for \$5,000 to a fellow who arrived at his house, paid cash, and hauled the doll away in the bed of his pickup truck. "That doll was worth more than the truck he drove away in," Fiero says. Another doll was willed to him by a fellow who originally bought her used from Fiero. Sometimes a doll comes his way from a love 'em and leave 'em owner, a doll who has been "fucked in the first five minutes of her life outside the crate," he says, and left alone thereafter.

I tracked one doll's movement through eBay via Fiero. "Tony," a government employee in Texas, bought "Amanda," an attractive brunette doll with seemingly puppy-chewed fingers, for \$3,050 from Fiero. Tony said he bought her to help him stay faithful to his girlfriend, who was doing time for DUI. Sadly for Amanda, Tony found her "cute" but unarousing. "It's not for me," he said of his one attempt to penetrate her, 45 minutes after she arrived at his doorstep in her crate. He added that he would soon put her back on eBay. "The whole experience was weird," he said. "I just want it to be over."

But some of Fiero's anecdotes are the stuff of horror films. Fiero once got an email from two garbage collectors who found a Real Doll hacked to pieces in a dumpster. One doll owner wanted to offload his doll onto the Real Doll Doctor for \$1,500, and Fiero countered that he'd only pay for her upon seeing her. He says he called the owner as soon as he opened her crate and beheld her condition. "You motherfucker, you owe me for shipping," he says he told him. "The jaw in the doll was still in her skull, but behind her neck. Her hands were ripped off and fingers were missing. Her left breast was hanging on by a thread of skin, like your bra strap," he tells me.

Another time, the owner of a one-year-old doll, an Asian undergraduate student at a prestigious university in California, brought his doll to Fiero for repairs. Fiero says the man told him that his parents bought him the doll so that he would stay at home and

study rather than go out chasing women. Fiero documented the doll's injuries on his web site: her leg was torn off, revealing the steel hardware of her hip joints; an arm hung by an inch of silicone flesh; two fingers were severed; and the cleavage between her buttocks was torn into a ragged crevasse.

"Her vagina was so blown out," he says. "I was appalled. I couldn't believe someone could fuck something like that up so quickly. It blew me away. How could somebody be so callous?"

"I was offended in so many ways. He put her feet behind her head and reamed that doll with whatever cock he's got. He fucked her violently. She was achieving positions she shouldn't achieve or be forced to try. Her vagina and anus were a giant gaping hole."

Fiero says he'll never again make repairs for the man he calls JTR -- Jack the Ripper.

Taboos

McMullen suggests that whatever motivates the love-doll market – fetishism or loneliness – ultimately it's all about people indulging their secret side. "Most people go through their whole lives and keep it subdued, but everybody has a thing that gets 'em off, I guess that's the way to say it. And some people use this doll as a means to explore something that otherwise they may never explore," he says.

While he does do custom work on occasion for customers who are willing to pay the price or have legitimate needs, McMullen does sometimes put his foot down. No lactating dolls, urinating dolls, amputees, seven-foot tall dolls, Britney Spears replicas, or dolls with armpit hair or heartbeats. And no dogs either, as was the request of one prospective customer who called him.

"He asked me if I could make him a silicone dog, because he was a breeder, and he didn't want to hurt his dogs anymore, he said. He talked like right out of the movie *Deliverance*." McMullen's surfer-dude lilt plummets into a pungent drawl, "*'Aw, I don't want to hurt ma dawgs, I like ma dawgs...kin you make me one so ah kin still use it fur the sex?*" And when I realized that he was legitimate, I was shocked. And I just politely said no, I'm sorry, gotta go, click." Another prospective customer sent nude pictures of

his 60-year-old mother, wanting a custom built replication. A surgical pathologist wanted a vagina duplicated from a specimen he had in a jar. "Pretty scary stuff," McMullen summarizes.

Many special requests are handled diplomatically in the FAQ's on Real Doll site. For example:

Question: I'm a crossdresser interested in a full body silicone female skin. Can I buy a REALDOLL skin or can you tell me where I can get a silicone female body suit?

We don't offer silicone body suits and REALDOLL does not have a separate skin. REALDOLL is a solid silicone doll. To our knowledge, no company offers a silicone female body suit. A silicone suit would require a sophisticated cooling system (silicone retains heat and does not breathe), and be custom-fitted to your body from a life-cast. We don't offer such services and we don't know anyone who does.

As for the frequent requests for child dolls, those are flatly rejected. "I don't get into debates, scolding them, I just say I can't go there, sorry," McMullen says.

Occasionally, customers with possibly pedophilic interests try to get the better of him, as with one who specifically requested a very young-looking doll, with a Body 4 and a custom-sculpted face. When McMullen molded the custom face and put it with the Body 4, it simply looked too young to him -- a "borderline" fifteen or sixteen -- so he threw the mold out and started over to sculpt a face that was more mature-looking. The customer, who paid \$12,000 for the custom job, demanded the first face, and McMullen said no. "I told him you can either have your money back or you can take what I've done. He ended up taking it."

"The downside is that I don't have any control over what people do with their dolls after they leave here. So, we can take say a Kaori doll [a very young looking F13/B4] and she looks fine to me. The customer gets her, he gets a different wig with pig tails, and maybe he takes all of the lip color off and puts on a more natural color, and takes some of the makeup off the eyes, and does all this stuff himself, and I can't control that. And there are lots of dolls out there that people have modified or changed,

sometimes ending up with just an ugly doll, other times ending up in a doll that looks younger than when she left here.”

A savvy and determined doll owner could, McMullen noted, rub off all of a doll's makeup, and even remove silicone from her breasts to flatten them.

Three Cheers for Doll Love

In the doll community, justification notions about doll love are as varied as Mysti's wigs. To McMullen, his dolls are often therapists-cum-transitional objects. "By and large, most customers buy a doll because they just broke up or got a divorce and they don't want to go out into the dating scene, but they still have physical needs." A doll, he says, gets them through difficult times, and often they move on. Other customers have used a doll to overcome premature ejaculation.

Doll owners confirmed that dolls offer stop-gap love, and that, often enough, owners move on. "Lonely men who don't have anything in their life, they have some fun with it, then they meet the right girl, they sell the doll, and off they go," one doll owner observed. Another, Jagxfan, wrote to the Hello Dolly crew that he had a new girlfriend, a real one, who was staying at his house, leaving him the problem of what to do with Natalie, who was locked up in a closet for the time being. Hello Dolly friends advised him to hang on to Natalie until the relationship was solid, then he could either sell her or introduce her to his girlfriend.

Doll owner Mike Kelly subscribes to the doll-as-healthy-transitional-object theory, but also posits that dolls play a needed role in natural selection. "There's definitely people out there who shouldn't be in the gene pool. This is a way to keep people happy that shouldn't be having kids anyway," he said. He says that some men – himself excluded, of course, because he has a 25-year-old flight attendant girlfriend – can't attract high quality women because they lack top-notch genetic material. Men like that, he says, should just build mates and not perpetuate their genes.

Maureen, one of the craftsmen who works at Abyss, has proposed a more benign version of Kelly's theory that dolls may serve a social good by keeping their owners away from human relationships. She speculates that the domestic pairing of guys and dolls is more or less a safety valve. "These lonely guys, instead of going out

and causing trouble, they have something like this to keep them home and keep them company. A lot of them, it's like they marry them, which is kind of creepy, but whatever keeps them out of trouble."

In one particularly animated thread on Hello Dolly, doll lovers challenge misconceptions that "doll bashers" might have about who has sex with dolls and why. Here's a distillation of their arguments, culled from more than 50 posts:

Doll lovers are not to be confused with necrophiles. Remember that many doll lovers heat their dolls before using them, and necrophiles like their lovers cold. One owner, Bunster, points out that women aren't accused of necrophilia for using dildos ("dead penises!"), so men who sleep with dolls shouldn't be either. "There's no difference between a dildo and a realdoll in the functional process of getting the job done," he adds.

Doll love is not an indicator of violence against women. "A rapist would get no satisfaction from a RD--- it does not resist, run or scream, or submit..." ric writes. Technoguy concedes that it is "quite possible that SOME doll owners may be having fantasies of a kinky or even sadistic nature while 'using' their dolls. If they are, then they apparently have some deep seated need for such thoughts/behavior. From a psychological perspective, it's probably healthier to exercise those fantasies with a doll than a real human female who might be emotionally scared or even injured by them." Zaneta declares, "If I go to hell/pergitory [sic]/reincarnated as a scum sucking life form for my ownership of a doll so be it. I'm still better than a rapist, child molester, [or] murderer."

Doll lovers are not lonely geeks who can't get real girls. Wolverine, owner of Tia, writes, "I've had something like 84 [girlfriends] in my lifetime, I bought a Realdoll because I thought they were awesome, not because I was hardup." Bunster chimes in: "I've had some pretty f*cking gorgeous girlfriends in my time, but I'd rather have a RD than be married to any of them. The politics of relationships aren't exactly fun most of the time – most of us tolerate it ONLY because the physical part is the pay off." Darkland adds to the thread that casual sex has never been his thing, but he's "still got the pesky issue of having the sex drive of a football team hopped up on methamphetamines...thanks to Real Doll, voila, problem solved."

Doll owners are capable of love: As ric writes, “We are [capable] of the emotion of love...I’ve come to the conclusion that doll owners are some of the most romantic, sensitive, sensuous people around...Many doll owners get a doll because of longing for real love. They don’t want to jump into a relationship [sic] just for sex, and end up with a broken heart or hurting someone else when the sex fizzles. So, they get sex from a doll instead and wait for love to happen.” (Kelly suggested to me that doll owners should well be considered a new breed of sensitive male: “If you think about it, they’re the right guy to meet because they’re not going to get you into bed immediately. They’re going to be interested in you as a person.”)

In their heart-of-hearts, all men would like a Real Doll. Soragesum suggests that doll taboos are a function of their price point: “I would bet my money that any single one of the guys [who say they have no interest in dolls] if they secretly had access to a realdoll, if they thought no one would know or find out, would fuck her silly, at least for awhile.” He added that if Real Dolls cost less – more in the \$200 range – half the men in the world would own one at some point in their lives.

Doll love should be considered healthy and normal. Technoguy speculates that if Real Dolls were cheap and accessible to Everyman, they would be championed: “...then practically every guy in the USA would want and get one for his 18th birthday. It would then suddenly be considered a ‘healthy’ part of one’s ‘normal’ sexual development. Adolescent psychiatrists would be recommending them, anti-abortion groups would be saying that they were a wonderful way to prevent unwanted pregnancies that had to be aborted, and the law enforcement experts would claim that they would drastically cut down on sex crimes.”

Elvis921, owner of Kim, writes that when his wife was both clinically depressed and terminally ill, she condoned his use of sex toys, including Kim, who is in fact just a torso. (Real Doll torsos, which actually are more just hips, stretching for the top of the thighs to just above the navel are surprisingly popular. Abyss has built a total of about 500 torsos. Some are likely for parts fetishists, but others satisfy skeptics in search of a no-cost test-drive. If you order a whole doll, you get a \$500 credit if you’ve already bought a \$1,500 torso, which one then can easily unload on eBay for \$1,000).

Others, like Darkland, speculate that doll love could be an important tool for controlling human population growth. “Our species as a whole is heading for a train wreck, and no one is particularly paying attention to it,” Darkland wrote me in a separate email.

The Doctor Is In

From a clinical standpoint, doll love is a mystery. No studies have ever been done of doll lovers, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t room for professional speculation. According to Dr. Douglas Tucker, a psychiatrist who specializes in sexual offenders, the pro-doll arguments are actually not off-base. Broadly speaking, intercourse with a love doll doesn’t signal anything particularly wrong or unhealthy, and arousal by such a lifelike depiction of a beautiful nude woman is a natural male response. “I think most guys would approach this as a novelty and could muster some arousal,” he says, adding that he would hesitate to label men who enjoy sex with Real Dolls as pathological. But Tucker dismissed the notion that Real Dolls are no different than women’s dildoes or vibrators because lifelike dolls, unlike vibrators, are simulated humans -- they have what he called ‘pull.’ “All of the stimuli are telling you it’s human,” he says.

Clearly no blanket statements can be made about the diagnosis of this particular brand of lust. Tucker says that even if a study were done, it is unlikely that a single common denominator would emerge. In the meantime, it’s guesswork, even regarding the differences between doll love as a normal variant in sexual behavior and doll love as an unhealthy disorder or pathology. Doll love could signal any number of things. For example, a doll lover with a harem might have had been surrounded by dominant women as a child. Or, in the cases where men *prefer* dolls to live human sexual partners, doll paraphilia could signal severe problems with trust, intimacy, or social anxiety. Tucker ventured that for a vulnerable man, doll love could stunt normal emotional development because intimacy with another person is a milestone in maturity. Immediate gratification and complete control of over the emotional content of a relationship with a doll might make a man accustomed to absolute control with women – a dynamic that would likely not play out well in a real relationship.

Tucker says pedophiles or doll owners with violent tendencies toward women – a group that he speculates is a small subset of doll owners -- possibly could use a doll to “rehearse” offending behavior. And while there aren’t definitive answers as to whether or not fantasizing about pedophilia or violence leads to action, in the psychiatric community that type of fantasy is generally regarded as risky, Tucker said. It would probably be dangerous, for example, for a pedophile to use a young-looking doll because it would reinforce his fantasies with orgasm.

Also, Tucker interpreted the instances where dolls were damaged or mutilated and then repaired -- fixing knees, broken backs, necks, torn breasts and genitals – as perhaps “victimless” sadism masquerading as caretaking. Sadism is largely about power and control, and total control over the doll and the relationship with the doll – to the point of hurting and healing – could be part of the dynamic.

But quite apart from any psychological explanations for doll love, could it be that in some cases, doll love points to something else – say Schizoid Personality Disorder, a condition in which people avoid relationships and do not show much emotion, or even something hardwired in the brain? Consider Asperger’s Syndrome, a neurological disorder that is often thought of a mild variation in the spectrum of autism. People with Asperger’s have difficulty interpreting non-verbal signals from others, developing peer relationships, and understanding the give-and-take of emotional and social interactions. A quick look at the diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s reveal some tantalizing similarities with the characteristics of doll lovers on Hello Dolly. People with Asperger’s often avoid face-to-face communication, preferring conversation over the Internet; many of the men I interviewed preferred email to any other form of communication. People with Asperger’s often have an encompassing preoccupation with one particular interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus, often serializing activities; many men I was in touch with logged hours and hours weekly with doll-related activities, either photographing their dolls or catching up with every post on Hello Dolly. People with autism and Asperger’s are often very imaginative; doll owners create elaborate fantasies about their dolls, and many write science fiction. And, people with Asperger’s Syndrome are often fascinated by mechanics and by the parts of objects. It would not

be a stretch to say that many men on Hello Dolly are seemingly obsessed by doll parts and mechanics.

Could it be that Everhard, a man who is baffled by dating and finds the prospect of emotional interaction in a relationship daunting, who told me he considers himself to be like a completely different species of human kind, who logs 10 hours every weekend on doll activities, who says that his dolls are one of the few things in life that give him pleasure, and who posts photographs and mechanical drawings related to Caroline's upkeep, has a form of Asperger's? Or that Griggs, the man who is happier now that he has less interaction with people, is affected by it as well?

Is the ancient story of Pygmalion in fact a depiction of someone with what we now call Asperger's?

In theory, yes, says Dr. J. Arturo Silva, a psychiatrist who specializes in the intersection between Asperger's Syndrome and sexual disorders. (Silva is the co-author of papers in the field of forensic psychiatry, including sexual serial homicidal behavior. His co-authored articles include "The Case of Jeffrey Dahmer: A Sexual Serial Homicide from a Neuropsychiatric Perspective," published in the *Journal of Forensic Science*, which posits that Dahmer had Asperger's.)

There could be an as yet unexplored correlation between *some* doll love and high functioning autism. People with autism are often dominated by hardwired fear – fear of physical sensations, including touch, and fear of the unknown or unfamiliar. Imagine then how terrifying sex would be for someone with autism -- an intimate act, an explosion of sensation, and an outcome you cannot control.

Silva expresses the problem facing autistic people as: "You want to have sex, but you're afraid of touching other people, you're afraid of meeting them, so how do you solve that?" Autistic people, Silva says, often reduce a love object to a physical object because they simply can't tolerate emotion or the idea of not knowing what is going to happen next with other humans. "It makes them more comfortable to strip out all of the psychological attributes," he told me. And Real Doll, of course, offers all the beauty of a woman and orifices that serve a man well while remaining an empty vessel.

Research has shown that people with autism have face recognition problems, frequently manifested in difficulty understanding facial expressions. (A part of the brain

called the fusiform gyrus is responsible for face-processing, and among autistic people, the area doesn't activate normally.) Could men with autism be attracted to objects like Real Dolls because there is less of a threat of misinterpreting facial expressions, or because they aren't turned off by the *absence* of facial expression as normal men might be?

Asperger's Syndrome -- or any other neurological or psychological diagnosis for that matter -- remains just one possible explanation for why certain men might be particularly drawn to Real Dolls. On the whole, doll love lies on virgin ground.

Off to Meet the Master

McMullen sits on a black futon in his showroom, surrounded by Real Dolls. On a shelf, two tiny Real Dolls -- a man and a woman -- embrace, the man with a pinkie-sized erection. McMullen plans on producing more mini-dolls like these for artists to use as models. But, as usual, men want to know if they can have sex with the minis. Some people fantasize about being a giant, or having a pixie lover, McMullen says. He's heard it all before.

But years of trading in silicone fantasy hasn't worn him down and there are always new frontiers to be explored. Soon, a big-butted, voluptuous Body 10 will debut, modeled after an erotic cartoon character called Druuna that has many Hello Dolly fans. "That seemed to be the one thing everyone was interested in," he says, adding that he finally has figured out how to make a doll curvier but still keep her weight down. And there are other innovations on the way. Bodies that have detectable rib cages, backbones, and clavicles. A removable, interchangeable vagina system, for ease of cleaning and sensory variety. Wireless animatronics to enable facial expressions.

But fear not the Stepford paradigm, McMullen has no plans for Real Dolls to go robotic. While he concedes that the concept of an android love doll is in theory attractive, the technology isn't advanced enough, yet, to shoehorn a robot into a Real Doll. McMullen doesn't think that is what his customers want anyway. "I think a lot of people like the fact that it's just a doll. I don't see the dolls walking and talking. I don't see them doing domestic stuff around the house. Keep your love doll in the bedroom."

And, he says, those without dolls in the bedroom -- specifically those with spouses and families -- should keep their judgments to themselves. "It is not weird," he exclaims after recounting expressions of gratitude from men, including a burn victim who thanked him for giving him back a piece of his life and a paraplegic who just wanted a body beside him at night. "What if you lived all by yourself, and what if you didn't want or couldn't have a relationship, and you were just lonely, and you just wanted to feel that contact? You can't possibly identify with that person because you've never been in that situation. To feel contact, to feel a body next to you, is a human need."

Downstairs in the studio, seven Real Dolls are lined up in office chairs, clad their uniform black stockings and negligees, waiting to meet a human need. Maureen paints red nail polish on a B4 with long black hair and green eyes. "She's going to Orlando, Florida," Maureen says as she wipes imperfect scraps of polish off the doll's fingers. The whole row of sister dolls are shipping that day, packed in closet-sized boxes emblazoned with FRAGILE and DO NOT DROP, off on maiden voyages to Ohio, Washington state, Las Vegas, Utah, Michigan, and another one to Florida.

We live in a society that chants a myth, "There's someone for everyone." We all know, deep in our heart of hearts, this isn't so. But in mere days, someone in each of these seven places will soon uncrate a Real Doll -- and maybe with it a little bit of happiness. Bow to plastic and the glorious dressing of the human imagination: There are seven more men who will never again have to sleep alone.

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