

BARBIE

March 2009

For the last 50 years, Barbie has been a constant presence in the lives of American girls and doll collectors alike. While today she represents the caricature of an idealized blonde bombshell, complete with a wide-eyed vacant stare, vapid smile and a figure that has inspired more than one breast augmentation surgery, when she was originally created, Barbie was something more — she was a pint-sized reflection of society, modeling the hairstyles and fashions of the late 1950s and early 1960s. She was Audrey Hepburn, Jackie Kennedy and Grace Kelly, and she was all the grace, glamour and style they represented.

The Barbies featured in Larry Torno's photos come from Frank Chross's extensive collection, which includes more than 200 dolls released during the Golden Age of Barbie, between 1959 and 1972. Chross's collection represents far more than blonde clones in themed clothing, with elegant brunettes, fiery redheads and platinum blondes sharing the stage in a nearly endless fashion show of the era. The sheer number of fashionable clothes and elegant hairstyles in Chross' collection, enough to fill several fashion magazines, beg for documentation. Torno rose to the occasion, although the end result is a far cry from a Barbie clothing catalog.



Torno's photos of Barbie remind us of Barbie's high-fashion beginnings, despite the fact that the camera not once focuses on the fancy trappings; indeed, none of his portraits show an entire ensemble and fashion is completely absent from his smaller series of Barbie nudes. By experimenting with diffused lighting, elevated angles and extreme close-ups, Torno shifts the focus from clothes to the dolls wearing them and forces us to see each doll as something more than a molded piece of plastic. In Torno's photos, she is no longer a child's toy or even the miniature mannequin of her early days.

His portraits find the personality in each doll, putting the focus on her sidelong glances and bouffant hairdos rather than her stunning figure. Through his photos, we see the early evolution of Barbie as her face becomes thinner and her molded-plastic eyelashes are replaced by more realistic fiber lashes. (Later, Barbie's eyelashes would be painted directly onto her face, the ultimate in false lashes; thankfully Torno's photos don't take us that far into Barbie's evolution.)



The Barbie series began as a yearlong challenge Torno gave himself — to take an everyday object and strip away our understanding of it; to test the limits of Barbie as a model not by simply moving her arms and legs

(there is certainly a finite number of possibilities of positions for the doll), but by throwing away his own assumptions of her and testing the limits of his mind's eye. By doing this, Torno has changed the way we see Barbie. What Torno has done is bring her to life, giving each doll a unique identity. There's the socialite out on the town ("Black, White and Blonde"), the shy schoolgirl ("Big Bangs Theory"), the teenybopper on spring break ("Frankie, Annette and Moondoggie"), the starlet seeking an under-the-radar trip to the market ("Paparazzi"), the 1950s housewife hosting a dinner party ("Bric-A-Brac and Pearls on a Summer's Evening") — look at them long enough, and you forget they're plastic playthings.

—Kara Krekeler

Kara Krekeler is a writer and art critic. She is the Arts Editor for *West End Word*, St. Louis, Missouri. She lives and works in St. Louis. This essay is one in a series of the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.

Images:

Larry Torno. *Close Encounter*, 2008-09, Edition of 6, Water-based pigments on paper, 12 x 18 inches

Larry Torno. *The Cat's Meow*, 2008-09, Edition of 6, Water-based pigments on paper, 12 x 18 inches

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The editors of the St. Louis Magazine awarded the Gallery: *Best Gallery in St. Louis* in 2008. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

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