



Broad Strokes

Brevig Dolls Make Playtime A Serious Affair; Lange Gets A Haircut

art6's April exhibition presents the eerily fascinating paintings (*Dolls*) of **Lorraine Brevig**—and in the **Upstairs Gallery**, the tonsorial photography of **Jeremy M. Lange**. **April 2-30, Wed.-Sun., 12-4pm.**

The “dolls” of **Lorraine Brevig** reside deep in the subconscious, waiting and lurking in the closed closets and repressed attics of our collective memory. Her subjects and scenes are what Freud and Jung referred to as “imprinted” matter of the mind—rich psychic tableaux, early iconography, first impressions of first experiences. The images are at turns creepy, disturbing, sweet, engaging, and wry—and ultimately, hard to forget. Charmingly and collectively, they seem to capture acute moments of wonder, mischief, contemplation, and concern—and at times, appear to be falling through space and almost taking flight.

Brevig incorporates traditional media and techniques, including oil (on both board and canvas), pastel, gouache on paper, and the sometimes difficult technique of gold and silver leaf. For *Dolls*, Brevig displays her considerable skills and conservator's knowledge in featuring paintings in both oil and egg tempera.

Brevig's brand of ultra-atmospheric narrative painting and sort of “super-realism” is not unlike the mood and menace of a Francis Bacon or Thomas Balthus. One always has to be careful with comparisons and

references, but there is an undeniable and imminent *sinisterism* to Brevig's work, and her use of movement, lighting, and circumstance only heighten these highly dramatic and psychologically provocative works. Brevig states: “The goal [initially] was to take something that was considered cute and make it into something threatening and powerful.”

However, over the years Brevig has scaled down the exaggerated size of the dolls and has more recently treated her subjects with “more of a sense of humor.” But besides the wonderfully mordant wit of the pieces, they also work very well as anatomical studies in motion for the cherubically chubby, still-developing, and otherwise “unhinged” set.

Note *Judith* (an irrefutable reference to the ill-fated *Judith and Holofernes* of the *Bible*) in all her psychotically exacting intent, knife and head in hand. Brevig's twist and difference from the Biblical Judith who gets Holofernes drunk in his tent and then beheads him is that in Caravaggio's famously graphic (not to mention anatomically and forensically exact) depiction of the events, Judith appears a much more appealing and righteous heroine as she figures in this classic example of an allegory-morality struggle—wherein Judith came to represent the strong, forthright woman and the good of Israel triumphing over the evil oppression of the giant Holofernes. But in Brevig's account, a wan Judith, in all her mad indignation and self-righteous fury, is a less sympathetic figure. She looks scary, “mad as hell, and . . . not going to take it anymore.” Or see how *Lewis* doll, in all his pudgy hue and haste, appears to be falling, bolting, or hurriedly trying to get down from his highchair. But what exactly is it that has so alarmed Lewis? And it looks as though the reflective *Siblings* have only rivalry and one another to contemplate and commiserate their plight, whatever that may be. Meanwhile, in *Unbalanced*, the pasty, doughy doll, looking in all his corpulent cuteness and “baby phat” like some mutant, malformed offspring of the *Elephant Man* or *Eraserhead*, teeters dangerously “on the edge”—possibly an apt metaphor for the doll's, its owner's, or *somebody's* tenuous state of mind. And what of poor little *Pickled* doll, who arouses the poignant albeit helpless concern of another. Sadly the little fella looks done for, as he appears to be pushing up formaldehyde. This is a particularly moving and pathetic scene; the work feels like the quintessence of futility, one helpless to help another.

It is undoubtedly all too easy to look at the sinister aspect of the dolls. However, many of them seem inscrutable or may, in fact, be completely neutral or antithetical to any evil reading, depicting a wide-eyed innocence and wonder not yet subverted or made cynical by what life holds in store. Brevig puts the onus on the viewer to inform meaning and does not bludgeon with didactic or a single, literal meaning. How pleasant, nightmarish, or neutral the viewer's response to the “dolls” depends greatly upon

individual association and experience. But with their cracked, crackled little visages and preciously skewed countenances, in various states of desuetude and decay, Brevig's little monsters, miscreants, and anomalies may ultimately represent a natural degeneration of all things—some even displaying a *hubris* or *vanitas*. It may just be that this mixture of the sweetly serene and innocent, the unfortunate naive, and the malevolent malcontent, have simply run the course of their tragic, wondrous, and sordid little lives. They've been played with too little, too much, or not at all—but probably for the last time. Yet they live on and linger hauntingly in the viewer's psyche. Like some mutinying little army or “*Chucky*” doll on the rampage and wreaking all variety of havoc, Brevig's plump and portly little predators rummage restlessly about our mind. It may be that these images are what we imagine dolls and playthings do when we are not attending to them or until we take notice. That is, they have no other choice but to contend themselves with their own affairs, thereby imbuing the dolls with a purpose, personality, and *raison d'être*. We all played with these dolls and knew these kids—diminutive Everymen depicting every disposition and humor. The doll-kids may even resemble what Jonathan Swift satirically envisioned in his *A Modest Proposal*—plump, succulent little rump roasts and butterballs intended for the utility and service of man. In the end, the pieces are as morbid a curiosity as any, and we find it hard to look away.

Ultimately, even as these autonomous little beings (often seeming more like dolls come to life, recalcitrant children, or resolute little leprechauns) appear caught up in the wonderment of their own self-discovery and capabilities, Brevig's subjects may just as well represent our own impulses, egos, and longing for forbidden abandon and “acting out.” With their collective “glaze” and other-worldliness, the dolls seem to depict the darker, more *sublimated* side of our most rapt moments. In a broader sense, this may all reflect a *capacity* or *predisposition* for a particular *behavior* or *preoccupation* with something later in life, however *latent* or *manifest* that ends up being.

These paintings are for me some of the more challenging and metaphorically rich works I've had to review. Brevig's images are so psychologically and rhetorically loaded and charged with import and myriad meaning that it is difficult to give a definitive reading. One can convincingly make cases for psychoanalytic, existential, feminist, biblical/mythological, and other critical interpretations, not to mention the inherent nursery rhyme/morality tale aspect of the works. There is also a tendency to have compassion and concern for Brevig's little foundlings and urchins. Essentially, Brevig's work can run the gamut from the *horrific* to the *idealized*, making it resistant to easy labeling and all the richer.

This all speaks volumes for Brevig's brilliance in giving her work a timeless, open-ended, universal

quality. By artfully straddling a tone that is simultaneously playful, nostalgic, and ultimately haunting, Brevig earns resounding kudos for creating these outstandingly powerful, profound, and even *pitiful* images.



If both Lorraine Brevig's and **Jeremy M. Lange's** work share a vague or remote nostalgia, they are of a different ilk. Lange's strangely gratifying black and white images are centered around a broader theme of scenes from *Mr. Green's Barber Shop*.

Lange uses his training and experience as a documentary photographer to archive something as mundane as “getting a trim,” and in the process he creates something voyeuristic and sublime. In shooting the shearing and the shorn, Lange has achieved the kind of feeling we got from *Floyd's Barber Shop* in *Mayberry*, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, and our own experiences in just such a setting—as Lange puts it, “a place where you can sit for an hour, leave for a year, and all has stayed as it was.”

Lange further: “*Mr. Green's* is a place that stands for something more, something that when it is lost, it will seem is the soul of this country.” He also describes *Mr. Green's* as “a shop with a soundtrack of opera and a cast of characters to beat any show on Broadway.” And if this is opera, it's *Figaro* and *Seville* updated and brought to small-town America.

Lange's series is outstanding and remarkable, especially given the maturity and technique that belie his relative youth. It is hard to find fault with these images, Lange's eye, or the appropriate quality and tone of the prints. In particular, the manner in which Lange keeps one subject still while giving another the appearance of movement is amazing. It's as if a customer is getting his hair cut from a spectral, fleeting figure . . . barely there. It is also interesting compositionally the way the shop's patrons and appurtenances compose and break up the picture plane. But perhaps above all else is the fact that much of the work has a feel of disorientation, of being dizzyingly spun around and then pushed into *Mr. Green's*. Run don't walk to see this most impressive dual exhibition. **TMH**

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