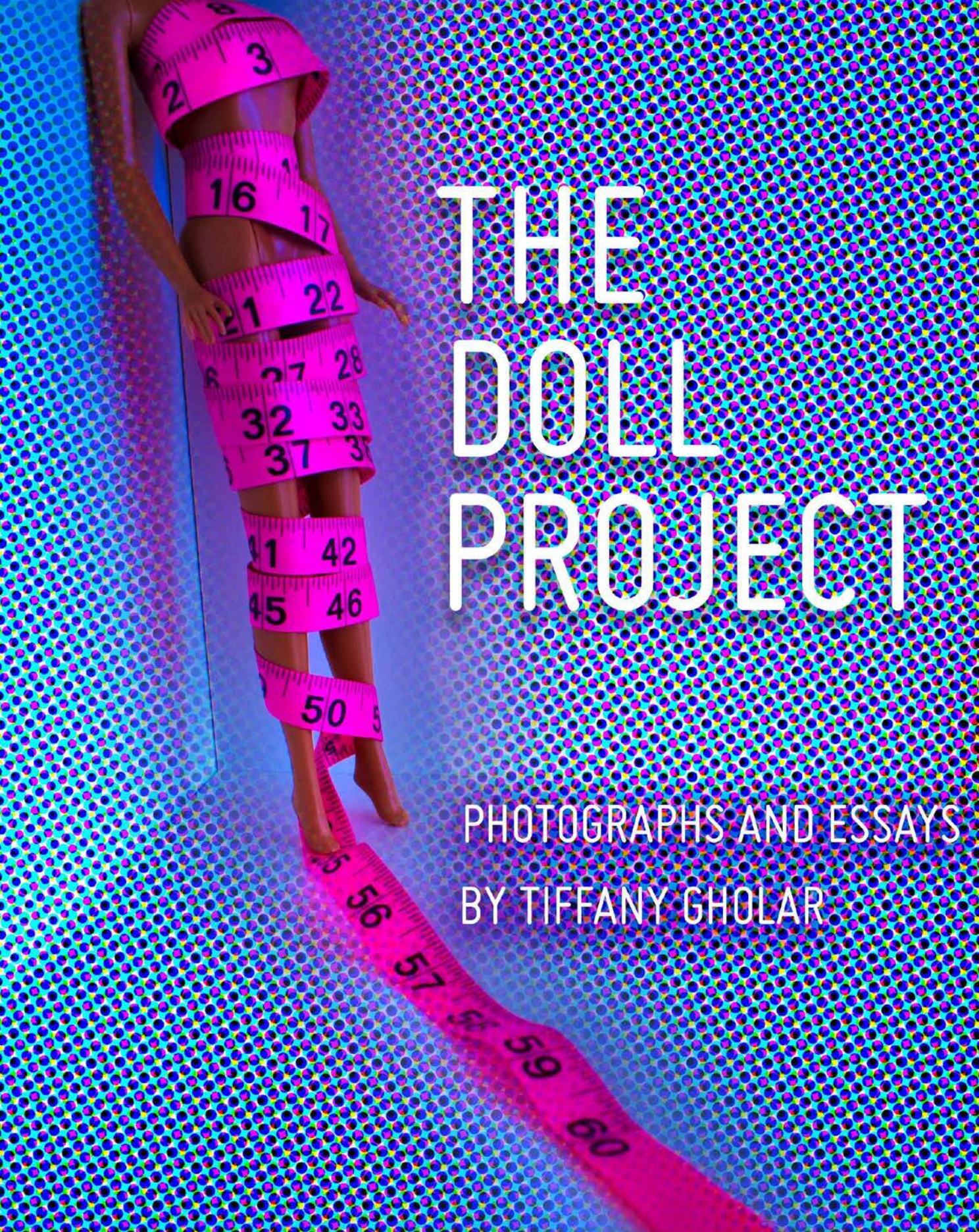


A photograph of a mannequin wrapped in a pink measuring tape. The tape is wrapped around the mannequin's chest, waist, hips, and legs, with various measurements visible. The background is a halftone pattern of small dots. The title 'THE DOLL PROJECT' is written in large, pink, outlined letters on the right side of the image.

THE DOLL PROJECT

photographs & essays
by Tiffany Gholar

A photograph of a mannequin wrapped in pink measuring tape. The tape is coiled around the mannequin's torso and legs, with numbers visible on the tape. The background is a dense, colorful halftone pattern of small dots in shades of blue, green, and yellow. The title 'THE DOLL PROJECT' is printed in large, white, sans-serif capital letters on the right side of the image.

THE DOLL PROJECT

PHOTOGRAPHS AND ESSAYS
BY TIFFANY GHOLAR

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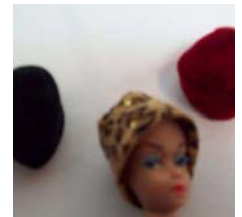


DEDICATION



This project is for all the real Anas, Mias, and Edies out there. I pray that someday you will learn to give yourselves the nourishment you deserve, that you will stop using food (or the lack thereof) as the tool of your own self-destruction, that you will find the strength that comes only from cherishing yourselves, and that you will come to see the beauty within yourselves, which is the only beauty that truly matters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



I would like to thank all the eBay and Etsy sellers who made The Doll Project possible.

“Toys are not really as innocent
as they look.

Toys and games are the preludes
to serious ideas.”

—Charles Eames



ARTIST STATEMENT

The Doll Project is a series of conceptual digital photographs of fashion dolls that embody the negative messages the media gives to young girls. It also explores the destructive influence the internalizing such messages has on body image. Though it would not be fair to blame it all on Barbie, there have been many instances in which she has come dangerously close. I chose to use Barbie dolls because they are miniature mannequins, emblems of the fashion world writ small, a representation of our culture's impossible standards of beauty scaled to one sixth actual size.

Both the little pink scale and the book *How to Lose Weight* are real Barbie accessories from the 1960s. They are recurring motifs in the pictures in the series, symbolizing the ongoing dissatisfaction many girls and women feel about their weight and body image. The dolls' names, Ana and Mia, are taken from Internet neologisms coined by anorexic and bulimic girls who have formed online communities with the unfortunate purpose of encouraging each other in their disordered eating. With each passing era, Ana and Mia are younger and younger, and the physical ideal to which they aspire becomes more unattainable. They internalize the unrealistic expectations of a society that digitally manipulates images of women in fashion and beauty advertisements and value their own bodies only as objects for others to look at and desire.





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TOO!



Can this site teach me how to purge without my parents finding out?

I can't wait to tell the other Anas how many kilograms I've already lost!



My friends online were right, nothing tastes as good as thin feels!

INTRODUCTION

I have always been a Barbie girl. My fondest memories of my childhood in the 80's involve playing with my magnificent three-story Barbie townhouse with the yellow elevator. Between the ages of four and ten years old, whenever anyone asked me what I wanted for my birthday or for Christmas or Easter, my answer was the same: I wanted another Barbie. My numerous dolls, some contemporary, others the formerly beloved '60s- or '70s-era playthings of older cousins, became the cast of characters in my elaborate miniature dramas. They were whoever I wanted them to be, not just trapped in the roles predetermined by the little stories on the backs of the pink boxes they came in. I pretended that my Barbies were doctors, detectives, artists, rock stars, reporters, athletes, actresses, jewel thieves, teachers, social workers, and lawyers. They fell in love, got married, adopted smaller dolls like Strawberry Shortcake and the girls from Rose Petal Place, or teamed up with my little brother's larger action figures to fight crime. My desk became a Barbie hospital where a team of Barbie surgeons worked hard to reattach the heads and limbs of dolls that my cruel or careless playmates had broken and to cure the disease that afflicted the hollow-bodied generic Barbie clones, removing the loose pieces of plastic that rattled around inside them. My middle dresser drawers were Barbie apartments, and the rest of my bedroom was an imaginary Barbie town.

Playing with my dolls was about so much more than fashion and putting together cute outfits. It was a window into adulthood, allowing me to envision what it would be like to have a career and a home of my own. I was never interested in playing with baby dolls because the stories I could tell with them were so limited. But the adventures I could imagine for my Barbie dolls seemed endless.

But as I got older, I felt betrayed by Barbie. Growing up wasn't nearly as glamorous or fun as she and Skipper had made it seem. They didn't have to worry about maxi pads or tampons, which came in hot pink packaging that reminded me of the dolls I used to love. I didn't realize that the big, beautiful Barbie bustline I coveted and hoped to have someday was more than just something to fill out an elegant strapless gown, but also could be fraught with pain and malignancies and could attract lewd comments from boys and inappropriate attention from dirty old men. Their unblemished plastic faces would never get pimples. And Barbie's and Skipper's painted-on smiles did not belong on the faces of women who endured cramps or hormonal mood swings. Barbie's beauty has always been a blessing and not a curse, her hyper-feminine physique an asset and not a liability. Barbie made puberty and womanhood seem so effortless, but after she betrayed

me, I developed an aversion to all things pink. The last toys I played with were Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figures.

Years later, as a young adult, I revisited my old Barbie collection. I also began going to toy stores again, finding myself wandering through the pink fashion doll aisle I had once so despised. I began to buy new clothes for the old dolls I decided to display in my new apartment. Then, when I got engaged, I bought a few more dolls to dress in wedding gowns and tuxedos, planning to display them at my wedding or reception.

As a young woman dealing with my own issues of body image, I began to look differently at Barbie dolls. I began to wonder whether my re-emerging interest in fashion dolls was a good or a bad thing. And the more I confronted my own disordered patterns of eating and exercise, the more I realized the extent to which societal pressure to conform to such stringent standards was the real issue I was facing.

I began a radically unconventional process to overcome my issues, educating myself as much as I could with thought-provoking books and articles and finding an eclectic group of supporters online. But as I recovered, I was saddened to discover that there was another community online, one that would rather celebrate and encourage eating disorders than fight them.

A few years later, while in graduate school for painting, I took an art history class about Native American work. Learning about the Kachina dolls of the Hopi tribe and how they embody the highest ideals of their society made me wonder what our own modern-day Kachinas would look like. During this time I was also working for a nonprofit that provides mentoring for teenage girls. As I was proofreading the curriculum, a unit on media literacy caught my attention. This collision of ideas led to The Doll Project.

I first became familiar with doll photography as a genre through the work of Gina Gershon and her charming book of pictures of a saucer-eyed, large-headed 1970s fashion doll called Blythe. I also looked at the work of Laurie Simmons. I had on display in my apartment a miniature print of one of her photos, which adorned the collectible Kaleidoscope House dollhouse that she helped design. And I had already begun to follow Flickr groups in which fellow fashion doll collectors were posting their photos. All of these things informed the aesthetic of The Doll Project, as I studied the technical aspects of the photos and considered the approach I would take. I felt somewhat nervous about embarking upon this project because I had gotten such bad grades in the one photography class I took in college. Fortunately, I found digital photography much more forgiving than the 35-

millimeter film I had worked with so many years before.

During my first year as an undergraduate at University of Chicago, I took a humanities course in which we had the option of creating collages instead of writing midterm and final papers about the texts we read. My collages gave me an outlet for my creativity, which I desperately needed since I was not yet enrolled in any art courses. They also helped me hone my skills in creating a visual language and symbolic vocabulary for complex concepts and ideas.

Even then, the pieces that resonated with me the most were those that were concerned with the way women are portrayed. During my undergraduate film classes, I had heard about Todd Haynes's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, a docudrama using customized Barbie dolls to re-enact parts of Karen Carpenter's life and death from anorexia, which I eventually watched while working on this project.

When choosing the dolls I would use for these photographs, I wanted to make sure to include dolls that represented women and girls of various ages and



Venus Hottentot Montage | digital collage | 1998



Traffic in Women Montage | digital collage | 1998

different racial backgrounds. I also wanted to use dolls and accessories that were mass-produced, rather than making my own. The only exceptions are the "Please don't feed the models" and "I am beautiful" t-shirts, which were handmade by two doll clothing artisans who sell their work on Etsy.

In using commercially made toys for this project, I intend to evoke a sense of familiarity and nostalgia in viewers, inviting them to take a closer look. The Doll Project invites viewers to take a closer look at the world around them as well. My intention is not to tell anyone what to think, but to encourage people to think for themselves, question the images they may have taken for granted in fashion and beauty ads, and create their own more inclusive standards of beauty.



THE DOLL PROJECT

(my first blog post about the project)

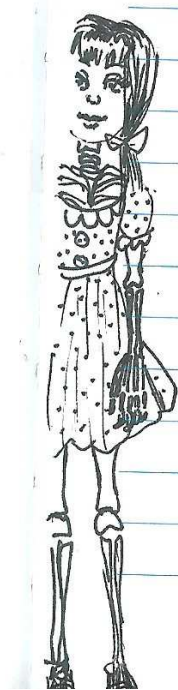
Maybe I am a little biased, but I don't think it's fair to blame it all on Barbie. I feel ambivalent when I hear women blame their low self-esteem and poor body image on growing up with Barbie dolls. Like so many other American women, I have struggled with my own self-perception when it comes to weight and body type, though I don't know if Barbie is entirely to blame. And then there is the fact that I am an avid doll collector. This further complicates my attitude toward fashion dolls. I enjoy collecting them and buying clothes for them, even as an adult.

The negative messages girls receive these days come in a variety of guises and packages. I chose dolls to illustrate these messages because they can not only depict them, but embody them.

The idea for The Doll Project came to me while I was brainstorming ideas for *Worth Waiting For*. I imagined a skeletal doll standing on a scale with a speech



Worth Waiting For, or True Love Waits, maquette for an installation inspired by a very long engagement.



Sketch of Ana, 2008.

balloon over her head with the caption "I just need to lose 5 more pounds." I would create professional-looking packaging for the doll and label it "My First Diet." At first I thought of using a skeleton around 11.5 inches tall, which is the height of a Barbie doll. But as I considered the origins of eating disorders, I thought it would make more sense to portray a teenager, someone Skipper's age, perhaps. But with more and more girls doing things at younger ages these days, I thought that using a Stacie doll would be more appropriate.

Instead of a skull with hair on its head, which was the original plan before I was outbid on a Barbie-sized wig on eBay, I decided the doll needed a normal-looking head. There were many to choose from. I chose Stacie because of the expression in her eyes. No one can paint expressive doll eyes quite as well as the people at Mattel. I guess that's the doll collector in me talking. If I hadn't gotten Stacie, I may have used Licca, a beautiful doll from Japan. But price was an issue. I just couldn't justify spending that kind of money on a doll to dismember. Being a collector who, even as a child, was careful with her dolls, I had a hard time disassembling dolls to make this project. Fortunately, the doll I chose was inexpensive. And that sweet, expressive face makes Ana a sympathetic character, despite her disturbing skeletal body.

That's another thing I wanted to avoid: ridicule. I had no wish to belittle my subject matter. I wanted to treat it seriously. I considered each detail very carefully, from the clothes to the accessories to the hairstyle. But in the end, I wanted Ana to be an archetype of how girls used to be portrayed as dolls: pigtails and bangs, in a knee-length, A-line dress with a cute pattern. Her blonde hair and blue eyes fit the fashion doll tradition of the blonde as main character with redheaded, brunette, and occasional "ethnic" friends. Sadly, this is a pattern most manufacturers continue to the present day, with a few slight modifications—but that could be the subject of a whole new doll project, and maybe I'll do something with that concept in a future project.

Anyway, back to Ana. I named her after Internet shorthand amongst eating disordered teens. They call anorexia "Ana" and bulimia "Mia," as if they are two classmates they know from school. The sad thing about Internet communities is that they allow like-minded people to congregate even when the thing that brings them together is their own self-hatred and self-destruction.

Next in the series came Mia. As I gathered the accessories for Mia, who represents, as her nickname suggests, bulimia, it occurred to me that no fashion dolls have any problems with food. Barbie's refrigerator contains a vast array of items from all parts of the food pyramid. She isn't afraid to be around it. Among her many professions (well, before she became a butterfly fairy princess

mermaid) she has been a pastry chef and has even flipped tiny burgers at her own little 1:6 scale McDonald's. It appears that in her world there are no "bad" foods, and she does not diet. Nothing I know of (though I could be wrong) encourages that kind of play. So where are girls getting all this lipophobia from? Their mothers, of course. And big sisters. And fashion magazines. And diet ads. Think about it: Next to some of our top runway models, Barbie looks overweight. The *Top Model* Barbies are more than likely curvier than the actual models they represent.

In Mia's world, there are bad foods. And unlike Ana, she cannot be a "good little girl" and forbid herself from partaking of them. But she cannot gain weight either, so she purges. Ana and Mia are two sides of the same irrational extreme. They remind me of the kind of disordered logic exhibited on the covers of magazines targeted to middle-aged women: a big glossy photo of a decadent, elaborately decorated cake while the text superimposed above it heralds the discovery of a new way to lose weight. So, for many, having the cake and eating it too—and still being able to wear a size zero—ultimately means forcing oneself to vomit the cake back up. How could there not be bulimic people in such a society? Extreme thinness in a land of plenty practically demands it.

