

NEW



ESTABLISHMENT

LIANE LANG

Liane Lang grew up in Germany but trained as an artist in Dublin and London, where she is now based. Her practice—in which she scrutinizes the politics of the body, and specifically our ritualistic relationship with the figure as object—revolves around mesmerizing tableau-style photographs of eerily lifelike dolls in a variety of highly significant contexts, ranging from Budapest parks filled with disused communist statuary to the hallowed walls of Eton College.

Words: Muriel Zaghera.



ALL ARTWORK IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST

How did you come to make dolls?

I never remember not being interested in making images. I made my first puppet-like sculpture aged 16, out of a face cast of myself and some dried roses I'd collected during my teenage years. Later on when I went to college [at Goldsmiths] I made animations with clay figures doing very physical, human things—giving birth, having sex and masturbating—which was wildly unfashionable. What was problematic was that I became pigeonholed in the pornographic animation corner, and it wasn't where I wanted to be. I wanted to make work where

I could talk about the world more. Things changed when I went to the Royal Academy to study photography and started working with lifelike figures, life casts made of rubber: now I could have a single image where the figure would be alive and not alive.

Are your dolls all women?

They're not *all* women, but they are mainly women because a lot of my work is about the absence of female figures in sculpture, so I'm reinserting them into these grand monumental contexts. The majority of female statues are of saints,

which is very telling. The primary reason for this is that female legacy tends to be obliterated. So we have statues of these women and all we know is how they died, or how they are supposed to have died, in these very grand, morbid, highly visual symbolic ways. So how these women came to be prominent, to be Christian leaders, to be influential, is completely unknown, and that was interesting to me.

What about the series Galatea, about fictional animated dolls from Hoffmann's tales, etc. The word that comes to me there is 'uncanny'.

Is that an area of interest for you?

The question around the figure is central to my work. It does different things in the different places where I take it. It started with a fascination with the figure in sculpture, because no other object has such ambiguity. We don't feel ambiguous about aliveness in any other object: you know it's a dead thing. But the figurative sculpture somehow manages to get in there and create this ambiguous space. What interests me is that we imbue it with so much special power. In Budapest Cathedral, the wooden box in front of the statue of Saint



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Elizabeth—the patron saint of unhappy marriages—has two knee-shaped worn-down holes from 200 years’ worth of unhappy women kneeling there, hoping for help. That for me is the power of the figure and also the hideousness of it, the way it’s been abused by regimes.

I’m interested in the series you made in Budapest and in Germany, with female ‘interlopers’ among monumental male statues. Did growing up in Germany make you sensitive to this sort of ideological representation early on?
My father was from East Berlin, so there is a family connection, but actually I came to the socialist statues completely sideways, when

I was doing works with sculptures at the Royal Academy in London and met a Hungarian curator who offered me a residency in Budapest. Often people interpret those images as being very negative about communism, but actually the point for me is that once the ideology has left them, these hideously enormous statues become these monoliths, weird objects that aren’t even art—almost scrap.

Are the drawings I see on the walls of your studio preparatory studies for photographs or new artworks?
I only very recently started to do this: drawing and painting on prints. All of these works were done at Eton College, where I was particularly

interested in the school’s graffiti, which is universally dynastic. Nobody puts: ‘I love John.’ It’s always the family name. Eton is 500 years old, so generations of boys have scratched their names into these walls, trying to leave a mark when you almost haven’t got the chance to leave any kind of mark. There is something sinister and very gothic about the place, but the way it takes you over the whole arc of British history is also wonderful.

What are you going to show as part of the group show at the Griffin Gallery?
An animated film called *Winifred in the Well House* that I made in a

chapel in Wales. St Winifred rejected a romantic suitor—a common story with saints—and he chopped her head off. Then her uncle sewed it back on, it reconnected miraculously with her body and she went on to be a preacher. The chapel is very old, and it’s in the woods, so it was a really atmospheric and strange and haunted little place. Those stories are horrifying, but the interesting thing is that, in a sense, the narrative is about a woman taking control and being punished, but also considered victorious in her own terms.

‘Perfectionism (Part III): The Alchemy of Making’ runs at Griffin Gallery, London until, from 4 October to 18 November.

Opening spread
Winifred in the Rafters (detail)
From *Saints*
2015
C-type print

Previous pages, left
Laocoön
From *Casts*
2006–07
C-type print

Previous pages, right
Portrait by
Benjamin McMahon

Opposite page
Poster Boy
2010
From *Monumental*
Misconceptions (ongoing)

This page
Broken Lenin
From *Berlin*
2015
Red granite jesmonite