

EDUCATION

- 2006 School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts*
- spring 2002 Iowa State University, *Bachelor of Fine Arts in Printmaking (with honors)*
- fall 2002 Iowa State University, *Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design (with honors)*

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS

- 2011 *Women in Sports* (working title), Arlington Arts Center, Virginia **(including solo performance** in conjunction with group show)
Do Me, Invisible Dog, Brooklyn
- 2010 *Dug* (a drawn installation), Reception Gallery, Chicago **(solo project)**
Losing Yourself in the 21st Century, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore (traveling exhibition that began at Welch School Gallery, Georgia State University, Atlanta, 2009)
Peer2Peer / Cheek2Cheek, Cherry Blast, Washington, DC (traveling program that also screened at DC Digital Capital Week: 10 days of Creative Technology Events)
Cheat Codes: Lessons in Love, Vanderbilt University, Nashville (traveled to Open Lots Gallery, Nashville, and Antena Gallery, Chicago)
- 2009 *Urban Art Projects Performance Art Festival*, Williamsburg, Brooklyn
Last Stop for Love, Rosslyn Cultural Center, Rosslyn, Virginia
Re:Figure, Glass Curtain Gallery, Chicago
Artist Run Chicago, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago
- 2008 *To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll*, **(solo exhibition)**
 Locust Projects Gallery, Miami
Out of Order, MonkeyTown (collaborative performance for Sam Stalling's, *Into the Woods*), Brooklyn
CHICAGO WORKS video programme in conjunction with Fideofest, Non Grata Art Container, Tallinn, Estonia
Girlish Ways: The Next Generation of Female Artists, Bobby Fisher Memorial Building, Washington D.C.
Bedtime Stories, The Redhouse, Syracuse, New York
Henbane: Dialectics of the Feminine Sublime, Medicine Park Gallery, Chicago
her shorts: 2008 International Women's Video Festival, Dinnerware ArtSpace, Tucson, Arizona with subsequent touring to multiple venues / festivals
- 2007 *Rubber Doll World Rendezvous* (screening at the convention) Minneapolis
Threat Level: An Evening of Queer Shorts, Chicago
Queer Territories, Latitude 53 Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
The Cowboy and The Pegasus, Queer Fest Midwest, Chicago
To Have, To Hold, and To Violate, (live performance/screening) Chicago
Diamonds at Dusk, (screening of Chicago-based Queer filmmakers) Chicago
- 2006 *Soup*, Nova Gallery, Chicago
Reeling: 25th Annual Lesbian and Gay International Film Festival, Chicago
Sanza: Carnival of the Moon, High Concept Laboratories, Chicago
Conversations At The Edge, Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago
Nine Videos from the Feminism? Project, Gallery 2 / Project Space, Chicago
Re-Do It? Re-presenting Bodies in Performance, a two day symposium, Performance Space, Chicago

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS CONTINUED

- 2005 *One Pull, One Yank, Three Jerks*, Gallery X, Chicago
6th Student International Art Biennial, Museum of Skopje, Macedonia
Macerate, Up the Stairs Gallery, Chicago
Selfish, Gallery 2 / Project Space, Chicago
Experiment 400/5, Gallery 400, Chicago
Nippon USA, Nippon, Chicago

RESIDENCIES

- 2011-12 Bolt Residency, West Loop, Chicago
2011 Byrdcliffe Artist in Residence Program, Woodstock Byrdcliffe
2010-11 Residency for NYC Arts Workers, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA), NYC
2008 Fountainhead Residency in conjunction with Locust Projects Gallery, Miami
2007 Vermont Studio Center (on scholarship)

GRANTS AND HONORS

Art Advisory Council, Integrated Studio Arts Program, Iowa State University
City of Chicago Community Arts Assistanceship Program Grant '07&'08
MFA Fellowship Award, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Beresford/Seeds Full Tuition Scholarship
Howard & Ruth Schumacher Tuition Scholarship

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2010 'Beyond Fake': Real Dolls™ and the Posthuman Troubling of Femininity and Desire by Jennifer Dawn Whitney, Cardiff University
"Art Workers of the World Unite" Abbe Schriber for *artcritical*, Dec. 12, 2010
"Women In Art: Conversation with Amber Hawk Swanson" by J. Rosel Kim for *kickaction.ca*, November 7, 2010
"Defining Women: Group show one element in a broader cultural discussion about gender" by Alex Ebstein for *Baltimore City Paper*, March 17, 2010
Artist Profile for *Closer Magazine* (UK) by Andrew Woods, February 2010
"The Art of Losing Yourself in the 21st Century, by Naomi Gassel for *Radar Redux: Baltimore Arts and Culture*," February 22, 2010
"Decoding the Cheat Codes: 'Lessons in Love' at antenna" by Tobi Haslett for *Chicago Weekly*, January 22, 2010
2008 "An Interview with Amber Hawk Swanson" by Nicole Pasulka for *Diet Newsletter* in conjunction with Diet Gallery, Miami, June 2008
"Pleased to Meet Me" by Daria Brit Shapiro for *Map Magazine* Issue 05, June 2008 pg 70-71
"Amber Hawk Swanson" review by Daria Brit Shapiro for *Flavorpill Miami* June 17, 2008
"Scanner Nicole Interviews Artist and Real Doll Owner Amber Hawk Swanson" Q&A by Nicole Pasulka for *Nerve.com*, June 11, 2008
"The Sex Doll Diaries: Artist brings her silicone twin to town for one last romp." by Janine Zeitlin for *Miami New Times*, May 22, 2008
"Interview between Lori Waxman and Amber Hawk Swanson" by Lori Waxman for Locust Projects (on the occasion of solo exhibition)
"Locust Projects: Amber Hawk Swanson and Matthew Sutton" *MAG: Miami Art Guide*, May 2008

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY CONTINUED

- 2008
 cont. "Henbane: Dialectics of the Feminine Sublime" by Alicia Eler for *Time Out Chicago*, Issue 163 : April 10–16, 2008
 "Screening is believing: Two ambitious film events add artistic diversity to the community" by Alicia Eler for *Time Out Chicago*, Issue 163 : April 10–16, 2008
 "Art Break: The Stinking Nightshade" by Kelly McClure for *Newcity Chicago*, March 25, 2008
 Artist Profile television segment, *SexTV*, produced and directed by Tanya Spreckley, February 2008
- 2007 "Artist sees lines between genders blurred in new piece" by Gilbert Bouchard for *The Edmonton Journal*, November 09, 2007
 "Lars movie shines light on RealDolls," by Sandy Cohen for the Associated Press, multiple publications including *Yahoo News* and *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2007
 "Doll Life" television segment, *CurrentTV*, produced and directed by Joseph Varisco and Ian Slarsky, October 2007
 "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate," broadcast piece/live interview by Robin Amer, *Vocalo.org*, aired August 31, 2007
 "When Amber Met Amber: An artist's complicated relationship with her look-alike sex doll," by Kelly McClure, *Chicago Reader*, August 3, 2007
 "Anatomy of a Punch," *The Obscure News* podcast, issue 13, March 2007 re-aired on Chicago Public Radio's *Re:Sound* program April 14, 2007
 "Doll for Adults," by Zeynep Guven, *SABAH*, a daily Turkish newspaper, March 18, 2007
- 2006 "Guys and Dolls," by Kelly McClure, *Chill Magazine*, December 2006
Metromix television program, aired November 1, 2006
 "School of the Art Institute 2006 MFA Graduate Exhibition," by Terri Foster, *Urban Pollution*, May 2006
- 2005 *6th Student International Art Biennial Catalogue*, published on the event of the exhibition by the Museum of Skopje, Macedonia, 2005
Macerate Catalogue, published on the event of the exhibition curated by Currency Exchange, Up the Stairs Gallery, Chicago, 2005

LECTURES / PANELS / GALLERY TALKS

- 2011 **Keynote Address** *(Dis)embodied Feminisms: New Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality and Identity* Conference, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
- 2010 *Living Dualities: Artists as Workers*, Panel Appointment, *For the Artist of the 21st Century* series hosted by CUE Art Foundation and the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, NYC
 CUE Art Foundation, Artist Talk in conjunction with *Making Five Minutes* Last lecture, NYC
Mistresses and Dolls: New Performance Art, Artist Talk and Panel Appointment at the *Performing Feminism(s): Gender and Sexuality on Display* Conference, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
 East Carolina University Visiting Artist Series, Greenville, North Carolina

LECTURES / PANELS / GALLERY TALKS CONTINUED

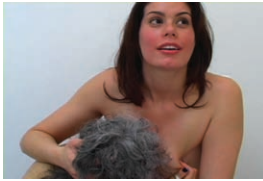
- 2010 cont. Hunter College MFA Visiting Artist Series, NYC (two lectures, one in Studio Arts Department and another in Film & Media Department)
- 2009 Emily Hall Tremain Foundation Fall 2009 Board of Directors Meeting, Yale University
Society for Photographic Education (Mid Atlantic/Northeast Regions) Conference, Montclair, New Jersey
Video Symposium, School of Visual Arts Photography Department, NYC
Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) Photography Department, NYC
- 2008 Private Opening Lecture Event, Locust Projects Gallery, Miami
The Problematic, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) Photography Department
- 2007 Visiting Emerging Artist Program, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin
Exploratory Media, SAIC Photography Department, Chicago
Do I Dare? Law and Ethics for Artists, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) Photography Department, Chicago
- 2006 *Feminism and Gender Identity Panel*, Reeling Festival and The Institute for the Study of Women and Gender in the Arts and Media, Chicago



BIOGRAPHY

Amber Hawk Swanson (b. 1980, Davenport, Iowa) is a video and performance artist living and working in Brooklyn and Chicago. Recent exhibitions include Locust Projects (solo, Miami), Non Grata Art Container (Estonia), Invisible Dog (Brooklyn), Georgia State University (Atlanta), Rosslyn Cultural Center (Virginia), Maryland Art Place (Baltimore), and The Redhouse (Syracuse, NY). Recent residencies include Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (NYC), Woodstock Byrdcliffe (NY), Bolt (Chicago), Fountainhead (Miami) and Vermont Studio Center (on scholarship). Recent visiting artist appointments include McGill University (Montreal), East Carolina University (Graduate Program, Greenville, NC), Hunter College (Studio Arts and Film, NYC), and Fashion Institute of Technology, FIT (Photography, NYC). Her work is included in the permanent and MPP collections of the Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago) and has been profiled and reviewed in Map Magazine, SexTV, The Associated Press, Time Out Chicago, and Flavorpill. Hawk Swanson holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (Studio Arts, 2006). Notable projects include "The Feminism? Project" (2005-2006) and "Amber Doll" (2006-2008). Notable projects include "The Feminism? Project" (2005-2006) and "Amber Doll" (2006-2008). Always performative, ideas surrounding agency and objectification are often questioned in her work as are ideas surrounding the interplay between repulsion, desire, and surrender.

amberhawkswanson.com



What People Went Through to Get to Where They Are Today, 2:28min (2006)



The Making-of Amber Doll (2007)



To Have: eXXotica (2008)



Source Image: Tilkum (2010)

STATEMENT

FEMINISM? AND AMBER DOLL PROJECTS, FORTHCOMING WORK

The Feminism? Project

Since my series, "The Feminism? Project" I have positioned my performative work at the interplay between repulsion, desire, and surrender. "The Feminism? Project" (2006) compiles ten video reenactments scripted from interviews on the topic of feminism with women across my homestate of Iowa. Their responses range from naïve surprise to composed discourse and become flip one-liners and ironic ramblings delivered in my valley-girl intonation and enacted in provocatively sexual contexts.

The Amber Doll Project

After completing the project—lonely and seeking the companionship of a girlfriend but not yet out as queer—I discovered an online forum maintained by a community of primarily hetero-outsider men who own life-like sex dolls, RealDolls, made of a PVC skeleton and silicone flesh and penetrable in three ribbed orifices. Aware of my own failed attempts at dating real women (termed "organics" on the forum), I felt an affinity with a subgroup of the community who described themselves as "doll husbands," and considered themselves partnered with their RealDolls. Inspired by the fulfillment they found in their relationships with what they termed "synthetics" over "organics," I ordered a RealDoll of my own. I acquired Amber Doll, herself a literal object, as a prop for my work and academic interests but also to become the companion I desired in my personal life. After completing, "The Making-Of Amber Doll" and "Las Vegas Wedding Ceremony" (both 2007) I planned performances that questioned the success or failure of negotiating power through my own participation in a cultural narrative that declares women as objects.

I abandoned Amber Doll in a wedding reception, a roller-skating rink, a football tailgating party, a theme park, and an adult industry convention where the impulses of curiosity, hostility, and self-assessment were magnified. I allowed strangers to explore her materiality and sexual availability—often violently—without stepping in. The possibility of peril combined with my lack of intervention pushed the limits of the social codes of each space.

Impossible to keep my personal relationship with my doll separate from my interest in using her as a prop, "The Amber Doll Project" became a lived-performance with two categories of output: 1.) the raw snapshots, video diaries, and correspondence that documented our falling into and out of love alongside the growing difference in our bodies as I gained weight and she remained the same. And 2.) our collaborative conceptual photographs, video vignettes, and interactive installations questioning agency and objectification.

**STATEMENT CONTINUED
FEMINISM? AND AMBER DOLL PROJECTS, FORTHCOMING WORK**

The ultimate object of desire and repulsion, Amber Doll showed physical signs of the abuse she endured by the time our collaborative conceptual work culminated in our solo exhibition "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" at Locust Projects, Miami (2008). With torn silicone and broken joints I laid her out in a surveilled casket as part of a funerary installation surrounded by fresh flowers. The live-feed surveillance footage was viewable on a monitor on the other side of a wall that separated the visitors interacting with Amber Doll from visitors monitoring their actions. One of the most overtly aggressive acts I witnessed against Amber Doll happened during the opening night of the exhibition when a young man wound up and forcefully punched her in her face tearing both corners of her mouth as I watched on the other side of the wall through the monitor. By the exhibition's end Amber Doll's nose had been cut off and the tears in her face had grown deeper. Further damage to her face and body occurred after the exhibition during shipping leaving her nearly destroyed.

Sex dolls and online communities such as the doll forum where I met the doll husbands are examples of simulations that are commonly thought of as substitutions for real things. The multiple meanings to be made of such cultural products and activities, however, far exceed what is often interpreted as their surrogate uses. By finding companionship with the community of doll husbands and experiencing romantic expectations (and eventual disillusionment) with an inanimate object, I embrace other meanings and uses for substitutes and acknowledge their value.

Tilikum

To further explore ideas surrounding the substitute, my forthcoming work with Amber Doll involves transforming her severely damaged silicone flesh, PVC skeleton, and steel-infused joints into a to-scale replica of the bull orca, Tilikum, who lives in captivity at SeaWorld Orlando and has been involved in the deaths of three people.

Tilikum recently made headlines after a February 24, 2010 incident when he killed Dawn Brancheau, a 40-year-old trainer with sixteen years of experience at SeaWorld. The trainer was drowned following a popular "Dine with Shamu" show while twenty tourists looked on from above a whale tank and from an underwater viewing area.

I will conduct the Amber Doll / Tilikum transformation during a two-day live performance. The performance will incorporate a projection of Skyped instructions from a "doll doctor," as well as live-feed video documentation of actions performed. My doll's skeleton will become Tilikum's skeleton and her mouth, tongue, and labia will become his very large mouth and tongue. Other of Amber Doll's parts will be used as non-equivalent parts of Tilikum resulting in an assemblage maintaining a reference to its materials. Her silicone breasts for example, will become his characteristically large dorsal fin. The replica will be painted to mimic Tilikum's markings.

My set will include an above-ground pool and a doll disassembly / whale assembly work station. Music referencing Sea World's show, "Believe" will play and occasional calls for participation will occur. After completing my two-day "Tilikum" performance I will begin work on a series of videos starring my whale, several of which will involve our swimming in the ocean together.

**STATEMENT CONTINUED
FEMINISM? AND AMBER DOLL PROJECTS, FORTHCOMING WORK**

The rebirth of Amber Doll into a replica of a mammal that is easy to sympathize with as a captive yet easy to blame as a violent killer references the love/hate tension in my doll's and my existing relationship. The continued cultural domination of images of the subjection of women along with images of women gaining power by participating in their own subjection requires a feminist dialogue. My work involving Amber Doll's destroyed body modified into a replica of a captive killer whale unflinchingly addresses the necessary dialogue through a complicated feminist lens.

Fit

Simultaneous to my work transforming Amber Doll into Tilikum I am currently working on "Fit" a series of durational performative videos. "Fit" involves regularly digging chest-deep holes for time inspired by fitness methodology and cult-like online community, CrossFit. Along with my community at CrossFit South Brooklyn, I enjoy combining powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting, sprinting, and gymnastics along with functional fitness activities. My interest in CrossFit, along with the long list of the functional fitness tasks my grandfather assigned my father beginning when he turned age eight, has led me to assigning myself the weekly digging of chest-deep holes for time. I have completed over a dozen holes in a variety of locations ranging from the beach (digging in wet sand) to abandoned city lots (digging in hard clay with concrete chunks). As my CrossFit training and hole-digging further improves my strength I will tackle other of the long list of functional fitness tasks that my grandfather assigned my father beginning at age eight. I am currently working toward fireman carry sprints. As a variation on the assignment I will conduct my sprints with queer women who identify as butch.

INVENTORY OF WORK SAMPLES
PHOTOGRAPHY WORK



HawkSwanson_Amber01.jpg:

Title: To Have, To Hold, And To Violate: Amber and Doll (Funerary Installation)

Date: May 2008

Medium: Funerary Installation - RealDoll commissioned in the artist's exact likeness, casket, flowers, surveillance camera & monitor, seventeen photographs, & three videos

Dimensions: approx. 41 ft. x 31 ft.

Description: Installation Image of solo exhibition at Locust Projects, Miami - the exhibition included surveillance of visitors' interactions with Amber Doll as she was laid out in a casket. The live feed footage was viewable on a monitor on the other side of a wall that separated the visitors interacting with the Doll from visitors monitoring their actions.

All Images Below

Medium: large format c-print included in installation (image 01), RealDoll commissioned in artist's exact likeness

Dimensions: 30"x40"



HawkSwanson_Amber02.jpg:

Title: To Have, Cake Cut

Date: 2007

Description: Documenting the performance, *Amber and Doll, Wedding Reception* in which guests were invited to interact with Amber Doll during a cake cut, a first dance, a garter toss, and a bouquet toss. Many attendees also opted to pose mimicking "doll face," as imaged in this portrait.



HawkSwanson_Amber03.jpg:

Title: To Violate, Tailgate

Date: 2007

Description: "To Violate, Tailgate" (Bears v. Saints) depicts the artist abandoning her identical RealDoll during a rowdy Chicago tailgate party.



HawkSwanson_Amber04.jpg:

Title: To Have, Rollerrink

Date: 2007

Description: "To Have, Rollerrink" highlights Amber Doll's posable skeleton, stretched to it's maximum in a "splits" position that the artist herself is incapable of performing.



HawkSwanson_Amber05.jpg:

Title: To Violate, Tailgate Face

Date: 2007

Description: "To Violate, Tailgate Face" (Bears v. Saints) depicts the artist abandoning her identical RealDoll during a rowdy Chicago tailgate party.



HawkSwanson_Amber06.jpg:

Title: To Hold, Pinball

Date: 2008

Description: Based on the barroom scene of the film, *The Accused*, "To Hold, Pinball" is the artist's gesture toward embodying victim and victimizer in the same frame.

INVENTORY OF WORK SAMPLES
PHOTOGRAPHY WORK CONTINUED

All Images Below

Medium: large format c-print included in installation (image 01), RealDoll commissioned in artist's exact likeness

Dimensions: 30"x40"



HawkSwanson_Amber07.jpg:

Title: To Violate, Girls Gone Wild (eXXXotica)

Date: 2008

Description: "To Violate, Girls Gone Wild (eXXXotica)" depicts the artist abandoning her identical RealDoll during the eXXXotica convention in Miami which takes place at the same venue as Miami Art Basel.



HawkSwanson_Amber08.jpg:

Title: To Hold, Queer Wedding Portrait

Date: 2007

Description: Documenting the performance, Amber and Doll: Wedding Reception in which guests were invited to interact with Amber Doll during a cake cut, a first dance, a garter toss, and a bouquet toss. Many attendees also opted to pose mimicking "doll face," as imaged in this portrait.



HawkSwanson_Amber09.jpg:

Title: To Have, Cake Face

Date: 2007

Description: Documenting the performance, Amber and Doll: Wedding Reception in which guests were invited to interact with Amber Doll during a cake cut, a first dance, a garter toss, and a bouquet toss. This photograph documents Amber Doll post-cake cut.



HawkSwanson_Amber10.jpg:

Title: To Hold, Bibbidi Bobbidi (After)

Dimensions: 30"x40"

Description: The "after" image from Amber and Doll's makeovers at Disney World's Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique for little princesses.

All Images Below

Medium: c-print, RealDoll commissioned in artist's exact likeness

Dimensions: 26"x17"

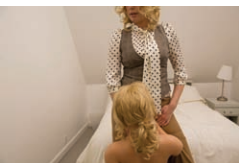


HawkSwanson_Amber11.jpg:

Title: Doll as Puppet, *Irreversible* Costume Sketch

Date: 2007

Description: Based on a scene from the film, *Irreversible*, "Doll as Puppet, *Irreversible* Costume Sketch" is a photographic sketch for a video.



HawkSwanson_Amber12.jpg:

Title: Doll as Puppet, *Brown Bunny* Costume Sketch

Date: 2007

Description: Based on a scene from the film, *Brown Bunny*, "Doll as Puppet, *Brown Bunny* Costume Sketch" is a photographic sketch for a video.

INVENTORY OF WORK SAMPLES

2005-2008 VIDEO



Feminism? Project (Ten Videos, and Compilation) **viewable here: <http://vimeo.com/album/1458954>**

Titles From The Feminism? Project:

- 1.) Feminists People, 1:32min
- 2.) What People Went Through to Get to Where They Are Today, 2:28min.
- 3.) Not Really, But Kind of a Feminist, 1:23min
- 4.) Other Things to Do, 1:00min
- 5.) Women Who Don't Take No For An Answer: Girls Gone Wild, 3:31min
- 6.) That's Deep, 4:23min
- 7.) Not a Feminist Way of Thinking, Daddy's Little Girl, 1:28min
- 8.) That's Deep: Again, 11:03min
- 9.) I've Never Really Been Into Feminism, 1:43min
- 10.) Embracing That Part of You That Makes You a Woman, 1:11min

Description: "Starting with sorority sisters and ending with her own mother, Amber Hawk Swanson scripts her ten videos from the Feminism? project from edited interviews with a variety of women. Their original responses to the topic of feminism range from naïve surprise to composed discourse, but become flip one-liners and ironic ramblings when voiced by Hawk Swanson in valley-girl intonation and enacted in provocatively sexual contexts."

Kendra Greene, MoCP

Amber and Doll Project: Performance Excerpts (Seven Videos)

Select Titles From The Amber Doll Project:

The Making-Of Amber Doll, 15:15min

viewable here: <http://vimeo.com/album/1458981>

"The Making-of Amber Doll" documents the wedding nuptials between the artist and her life-like sex doll, a RealDoll, produced in her exact likeness and made of a posable PVC skeleton and silicone flesh. The artist's doll, Amber Doll, began as a Styrofoam print-out of a digital scan of her head. Her face was then custom-sculpted and later combined with the doll manufacturer's existing, "Body #8 female doll mold. After completing, the making-of Amber Doll process in San Marcos, California, Amber and Doll drove to Las Vegas to wed in the chapel of the Aladdin Hotel and Casino where the 2007 Miss America Contest was being held.

Amber and Doll: Wedding Reception, 2:33min

viewable here: <http://vimeo.com/16060091>

During the performance event documented in the video, guests were invited to interact with Amber Doll for a cake cut, a first dance, a garter toss, and a bouquet toss. Attendees also opted to pose mimicking "doll face."

Amber and Doll: Rollerskate, 1:36min

viewable here: <http://vimeo.com/album/1459453/video/16061420>

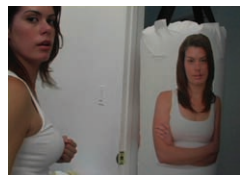
"Rollerskate" highlights Amber Doll's posable skeleton, stretched to it's maximum in a "splits" position that the artist herself is incapable of performing during the Christmas routine rehearsal of a youth rollerskating troupe.

Amber and Doll: Tailgate, 1min

viewable here: <http://vimeo.com/album/1459453/video/16062133>

Amber Doll is abandoned in the center of multiple Chicago tailgate parties and left for participants to explore.

INVENTORY OF WORK SAMPLES
 2005-2008 VIDEO CONTINUED



Amber and Doll: Pinball, 1min (<http://vimeo.com/16062791>)

Based on the barroom scene of the film, The Accused, "Pinball" documents the photo shoot starring Amber and Doll against a Playboy pinball machine.

Amber and Doll: eXXXotica / Girls Gone Wild, 3:31min

viewable here: <http://vimeo.com/album/1459453/video/16064217>

Dancing for cameras with Amber Doll as a prop are employees of the Girls Gone Wild corporation at the eXXXotica conference in Miami which takes place in the same convention center as Miami Art Basel.

Documentation of Installation at Locust Projects, Miami, 1min

viewable here: <http://vimeo.com/album/1459453/video/16067719>

Installation documentation of solo exhibition at Locust Projects, Miami - the exhibition included surveillance of visitors' interactions with Amber Doll as she was laid out in a casket. The live feed footage was viewable on a monitor on the other side of a wall that separated the visitors interacting with the Doll from visitors monitoring their actions.

Amber Hawk Swanson Press Clips (Four Videos)

Metromix Chicago Clip, 37sec, 2006 (<http://vimeo.com/16032383>)

On the topic of "The Feminism? Project" playing in the Reeling Film Festival

The Obscure News (Radio), 3:16, 2006 (<http://vimeo.com/16068781>)

On the topic of the punching bag video sketch passage in "Expectancy"

My Life As A Real Doll CurrentTV, 3:34min, 2007 (vimeo.com/16070635)

On the topic of the "Amber Doll Project"

Artist File, SexTV, 24:19min, 2008 (<http://vimeo.com/16077567>)

On the topic of the "Amber Doll Project"

EXTRAS: Unfinished Pre-Doll / Early Doll Video Sketches (Five Videos)

Pre-Doll: Expectancy, 11:36min, 2007 (<http://vimeo.com/16092850>)

"Expectancy" is a compilation of "pre-doll" video sketches. The piece begins with a commercial for Peyton Kane's services in coaching hetero-outsider males to find "success" with women (recommended to the artist by the community of men who own RealDolls). "Expectancy" goes on to document the artist tattooed with the word "Bully" to compliment Amber Doll's eventual "Prey" wrist tattoo. The video also features a passage in which the artist punches a heavy bag with her own image printed on it before masturbating to Peyton Kane's audio book and an online image of a RealDoll.

"Expectancy" then documents the artist shopping for a wedding dress for the eventual Amber and Doll Las Vegas wedding.

Early Doll: Road Trip 2:37min, 2007 (<http://vimeo.com/16080222>)

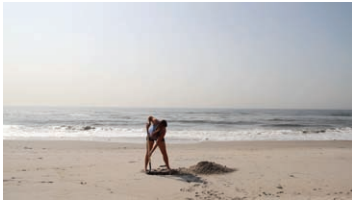
"Road Trip" documents Amber and Doll's wedding night hotel suite in the former Aladdin Hotel and Casino (Las Vegas) and the process of carrying her across the threshold of a Santa Fe motel into the rented car the artist drove from the doll factory (San Marcos) to her former residence (Chicago).

Early Doll: Brown Bunny Prop Prep, 1:52min, 2007 (vimeo.com/16079811)

Early Doll: Irreversible Prop Prep, 2:16min, 2007 (vimeo.com/16948066)

Early Doll: Monster Prop Prep, 2:12min, 2007 (vimeo.com/16079998)

During an early phase of the Amber Doll Project the artist responded to films that included rape scenes. "Brown Bunny," "Irreversible," and "Monster" Prop Prep Videos document the artist preparing costume equivalents of those worn by the female characters raped in each of the films referenced in the titles.



INVENTORY OF WORK SAMPLES
2010 VIDEO (WORK IN PROGRESS)

Dig A Hole You Can Stand In, 20min
(video sketch for work in progress)

two digs included in this video viewable here:

<http://vimeo.com/16287653>

<http://vimeo.com/16148754>

Along with my community at CrossFit South Brooklyn, I enjoy combining powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting, sprinting, and gymnastics along with functional fitness activities. My interest in CrossFit (CF), combined with the long list of the functional fitness tasks my grandfather assigned my father beginning when he turned age eight, has led me to regularly digging chest-deep holes for time. *Dig A Hole You Can Stand In* documents two wet sand digs side-by-side along. The video includes audio of my father describing his early digging experiences and footage of my “dig training” (weighted virtual shoveling) at CrossFit South Brooklyn. Each component of “Dig” references the videos CrossFitters post on blogs and video-share websites. The videos documenting athletes completing specific CF workouts are part of what is often referred to as a cult-like online community.

Dig A Hole You Can Stand In (As Deep As You Can Dig in 45min),
20min (video sketch for work in progress)

two digs included in this video viewable here:

<http://vimeo.com/16300236>

<http://vimeo.com/16279789>

Following an AMRAP (as many reps as possible) workout structure, “Dig A Hole You Can Stand In (As Deep As You Can Dig in 45min)” documents two hard soil digs side-by-side, each with the goal of digging as deep as possible during a 45 minute duration. In one video I reach near knee depth and in the other I reach near hip depth. It is my goal regularly digging chest-deep holes for time (I have now completed twelve) to improve my time or depth with each dig.

PLEASED TO MEET ME *Amber Hawk Swanson shrewdly explores issues of eroticism, objectification and violence by playing with dolls.*

In his writings on eroticism, French theorist Georges Bataille describes our perpetual struggle to experience the moment of death without actually dying – an effort to recapture the wholeness experienced at birth, before our psyches cleaved into the “self” and the “other”. Bataille relates the Rush felt at death to the Rush felt at orgasm, the latter an attempted fusion that requires both bodies to lose their individuality and merge for one gleeful, yet fleeting moment. Bataille asks, “What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners?... The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants.”

The very embodiment of this complex dichotomy, Amber Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll act as a unit, their union symbolizing a derangement of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Journeying across America, Chicago native Swanson and Amber Doll partake in wildly erotic encounters with ordinary people in public spaces, eliciting reactions that are surprisingly terrifying, many of which were wrought with unexplained violence and aggression toward the inanimate doll.

On view at Locust Projects through the end of June are Swanson's video and photographic documentation of this unusual collaboration, as well as Amber Doll's funerary installation, where the artist has laid her "other" to rest – coffin included. Working to dismantle our unspoken social codes, Swanson delivers the viewer into an uncanny setting where "self" and "other" meet, proving that, after all, you only live twice.

MAP: Who is the real Amber Hawk Swanson?

SWANSON: What a question! I am, certainly, but I feel like Amber Doll stands in when I need her to.

MAP: Do you think this project is like elaborate ventriloquism – are you throwing out your voice, in a way? If the doll had a voice, would it be your voice, or a different one?

SWANSON: You know, I'm not sure, I can't really think about that. It is a part of the project that she doesn't have a voice, and that's what enables her to be this extension of myself, but there's this negotiation of self, too – certainly that's what gives people permission to explore her.

MAP: Have you changed the way you view yourself after getting Amber Doll?

SWANSON: Yes, and I am first going to answer that question in an appearance way. At this point late in the project, her eye is cracked, so is the silicone on her face...she is quite broken. It is sort of odd to look at a part of her body that's broken, then look at my own. Kinda trippy, really.

MAP: Are you simply a spectator in Amber Doll's activities, or are you a protector as well?

SWANSON: I think it's important that I am not her protector. I planned for Amber Doll to embody the concept of victim/victimizer by allowing all these things to happen to her without stopping them. In other components of

the project, we have a partnership where, in a way, we are fulfilling each other's needs, but that's separate from taking her to these ritualized spaces and interrupting the social codes of those spaces.

MAP: Your photographs range from Amber Doll being pampered sweetly to Amber Doll being violated utterly. Have you done any of the things that Amber Doll has done?

SWANSON: Well, I haven't spread myself in the middle of a tailgate, no. But there is some violent fantasy fulfillment happening – while I haven't done these things, there is still an interest in staging them.

MAP: Do you feel like you've done them now?

SWANSON: Yes, a bit!

MAP: What response are you looking to elicit from the viewer? On one hand, there are the people who visit the show, taking a critical approach, and then there are the people on the street who have much different responses.

SWANSON: It is easy for people to interact with the doll by creating a back-story or a future for her in their imaginations. Since she's a doll, there's not only the physical exploration, but then the fantasy storyline people enjoy coming up with. There is also a ceremonial aspect that's built into the way we look at art in galleries. So I am drawing upon that and allowing viewers to interact with Amber Doll, laid out in her casket, at her funerary installation.

MAP: On that note, how does necrophilia figure in? Not only with Amber Doll, but with RealDolls in general? Essentially, people are having sex with an inanimate “person”, right?

SWANSON: That's a good question and one that many people have! The first article I read about RealDolls addressed necrophilia and now that I understand the community of men who own RealDolls, I understand their relationships, sexually or otherwise, but of course necrophilia factors in somehow – we are thinking about spaces where we don't feel permission to be sexual, certainly funerals and also wedding receptions.

MAP: Were you afraid to lay Amber Doll in her casket? Do you still love her?

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amberhawkswanson.com, locustprojects.org, realdoll.com



PLEASED TO MEET ME



Amber Hawk Swanson's debut Miami exhibition – *To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll* – documents quite the deviant love affair: girl orders custom silicone self, whisks her doppelganger off to Vegas for a quickie marriage, pops new wife into the passenger seat and takes the HOV lane to party with the “Girls Gone Wild” in Miami. Fabricated from silicone and steel, Swanson's mute twin is one of approximately 3,000 RealDolls currently in existence. Infiltrating a niche that caters primarily to men, Swanson's work not only investigates the objectification of women, but it unearths the darker and more dangerous workings of eroticism, physically manifested in her hyper-sexualized “Amber Doll”. In his writings on eroticism, French theorist Georges Bataille describes our perpetual struggle to experience the moment of death without actually dying – an effort to recapture the wholeness experienced at birth, before our psyches cleaved into the “self” and the “other”. Bataille relates the Rush felt at death to the Rush felt at orgasm, the latter an attempted fusion that requires both bodies to lose their individuality and merge for one gleeful, yet fleeting moment. Bataille asks, “What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners?... The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants.”

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amberhawkswanson.com, locustprojects.org, realdoll.com-

INTERVIEW BETWEEN LORI WAXMAN AND AMBER HAWK SWANSON

LW-The first question that I want to ask is about how your relationship with Amber Doll has changed since you first acquired her.

AHS-I probably wouldn't even have been talking about it as performance at one time; I imagined her as real. During the nine months of waiting for Amber Doll, I was buying things for the project—but as if I was buying gifts for her—and preparing my house. Every minute of my time was consumed with waiting for this doll. I had so many expectations for what she would fulfill for me.

LW-So if those were the initial expectations, that she was going to be this new, real person in your life, how has she turned into something else over time?

AHS-Now I'm thinking more about the fact that she's this sexually available silicone replica. So she's no longer filling emotional needs for me. By putting her in all of these ritualized spaces, I'm looking at her less as a partner and more of an extension of self.

LW-So more than a replica of you, she becomes a proxy for you in certain kinds of situations. But what are these situations where you need this Amber Doll proxy?

AHS-It started out with the wedding reception, way back when I was feeling connected to Amber Doll. I wanted it to be a celebration of our six-month wedding anniversary and joint birthdays. There were a lot of people who knew me personally [at the event], so it surprised me to see them molest my doll, and it made me wonder if those were things that occurred to them to do to me or to women in general. Someone took her tongue out, and her skirt was lifted up, and there was a real interest in her vagina and her mouth—and of course she's penetrable in three orifices, which is exciting to everyone.

Watching these interactions blew my mind, and I realized afterward that that's really where the project lies. Since we had already started using this hyper-ritualized setting, I wanted to find others, so I went back to my early research on cinematic rape scenes. There was always a partnership scene that preceded the rape scenes in these films. Roller-skating rinks came up all the time, especially in the movies with queer content—so that was the next ritualized space we hit.

All the spaces we pursued had something to do with dating. They also had this kind of innocence, but it's this innocence that feels like it could turn at anytime. It's interesting how the social codes of innocence are broken by Amber Doll's availability. In all of the settings, I was the most surprised by how a leader of violation as well as a protector would emerge.

LW-So even in a situation like the tailgate, a protector emerges?

AHS-Yes.

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

LW-In the pictures I've seen from that setting, this wasn't apparent to me. And that makes me think that maybe you're leaving out the photos that have a kind of redemptive content.

AHS-I may have edited out the redemptive images but the video tells a really different story. In it there's no way to get away from the fact that a protector emerges in each scenario, whether it's overt like in the wedding footage, where someone says, "Be careful!" or, "She's a lesbian, you can't touch her like that." It happens in the tailgate, too, but more subtly. Someone walks by and says, "Hey man, look out, we're on the street." And just that little mention, in the midst of this free for all, was enough to make me think that somebody might stop this. In another instance, the doll interrupted a group of men and women who were tailgating together, and one of the women grabbed Amber Doll's hand and made this waving motion, trying to bat away the people who were investigating her.

LW-In the earlier photographs, it becomes very clear that Amber Doll is both a live performance prop and also a studio prop. How do these two very different artistic situations play out?

AHS-The studio shots are the partnership of Amber and Amber Doll, our interaction and the love I once felt for her. Those pictures are important in a larger group, because they stand in the way of the viewer's potential position of voyeur. The relationship between me and my doll I think complicates that whole idea, or I hope it does.

LW-What strikes me as being very different between studio-prop Amber Doll and live-performance Amber Doll is that in the latter nothing's a setup. Real curiosities and desires are being acted out on this doll and real protection is coming into play. Whereas in the earlier photos, I feel I'm not seeing a relationship, but rather the faking of one.

AHS-Well, outwardly it may come off as staged, but what I was trying to get at was the partnership between Amber and Amber Doll. It's also part of this violent fantasy fulfillment, the embodying of victim and victimizer, that is more developed when I'm using Amber Doll as a prop and trying to understand what she does in these spaces and how she interrupts things or not. I'm putting her in these positions and I am not personally protecting her.

LW-In all of these situations though, she's still a prop. Whether she's a live prop or a staged prop, props are something that we use. Is Amber Doll just a thing to be used in the end? Or is she something else?

AHS-Just when I think I've snapped back into reality, someone says something like that: Like a prop! [laughs]. You're calling Amber Doll a prop? It hurts a little bit, so I'm clearly still assigning meaning to her. Perhaps in a lesser amount than I was, but I still don't think of her as something to be used. I feel like she holds the answers to something and that's probably the personal side to this whole project. But she's not a prop to me. She's an Amber Doll. Whatever that is.

LW-That's a good corrective because if I'm thinking about something performative, it's with participants. There are people, but people are not props. In Vanessa Beecroft's performances, I think people are props and that's a huge issue one can take with her performances and it's also a huge part of their affective tension. So it's very interesting for you to insist that

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

Amber Doll, who is in fact an object, doesn't get reduced down to being just a prop.

AHS-I think some people think of her that way but I think an equal amount of people think of her as real as I do. Otherwise, I don't think those protectors would emerge. There's something about the one person assigning meaning to this doll or protecting this doll for whatever reason that gets more people to understand her as real. I've watched that happen in many settings.

LW-Now for a totally different question: Why does it all come down to sex, and sexual violation? Why are these the situations in which we keep finding Amber Doll?

AHS-The wedding is a great example of a place where I really didn't expect those kinds of things to happen. But because it happened there, it made me think, this is going to happen no matter where Amber goes. And that might have something to do with the way that Real Dolls have been presented in mainstream media. People understand what they are, that they are sex dolls as opposed to mannequins, which are not penetrable. There is also something related to the way children explore dolls. I remember Jeanne Dunning talking about this years ago, when she was doing her work with dolls and the way that children assign sexuality to them or not. Exploration and dolls go together and often in a sexual way.

With Amber Doll it's also so overt. She's a sex doll: no matter what shirt you put on her, her nipples peek through. There's enough signifiers that she's a sexual object that it gives most people permission to go there with her—especially at the wedding reception, where you just wouldn't normally accept that. I'm trying to think of what other scenarios exist where that would not be permissible, and I think that might be a funeral. The very first Real Doll article I read was about necrophilia, and the author was comparing the relationship between owner and doll to necrophilia. I've come to understand the relationship in a really different way through my interactions, but there is something to that. I do wonder what will happen when she's laid out and acting in these funerary rituals, if people will still feel that permission.

LW-That brings us to the last question, which is how and when will the relationship between you and Amber Doll end, and if in fact it must end, and why?

AHS-Part of me feels like it will never end, but not in a way that I would feel trapped. Mostly this project has had a really big impact on my personal life. As far as the project goes, you know, she'll be laid out in a casket. I'm interested in drawing upon the ceremonial aspects of a gallery setting to invite viewers to grieve with me for Amber Doll, on her untimely death. People have asked for my backstory. Real Doll owners often have extensive backstories, about where their doll was before, or when their doll entered their lives. I don't have a backstory. I saw her birth, so before she came to me, she kind of didn't exist. And I actually don't have a backstory for how she might die. But she is going to be laid out. She might be acting, we don't know yet. She might be revived. I also have fantasies of burying her and then exhuming her.

LW-You called her death "untimely." And I'm wondering if, in fact, it's timely, for you and for her and for the project as a whole.

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

LW-You called her death “untimely.” And I’m wondering if, in fact, it’s timely, for you and for her and for the project as a whole.

AHS-In the Sex TV piece there’s an emphasis on the way that my relationship with my doll has waned since I met my current girlfriend, and certainly that’s the case. That’s one place where this performance gets muddy, and the whole art practice and personal life come together. I also do feel ready to be done taking her to places. But I’m still curious about how people might interact with her when they perceive her to be dead. I’m trying to think of how else it may be timely other than I feel a little bit exhausted by it all, it’s been a really intense project.

LW-Rest in Peace.

Lori Waxman is a Chicago-based critic and art historian. Her reviews and articles have been published in the Chicago Tribune, Artforum, Artforum.com, Modern Painters, Gastronomica, Parkett, Tema Celeste, as well as the sadly defunct Parachute, New Art Examiner, and FGA. She has written catalogue essays for small and large art spaces, including Spertus Museum and Three Walls Gallery in Chicago; Spaces Gallery in Cleveland; INOVA in Milwaukee, WI; Turpentine Gallery, Iceland; and Dieu Donné Papermill, New York. Artists written about include Arturo Herrera, Jenny Holzer, William Cordova, Eugenia Alter Propp, Raissa Venables, Gordon Matta-Clark, Joel Sternfeld, Emily Jacir, Taryn Simon, Ranbir Kaleka, and Christa Donner. She teaches art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is completing a doctoral dissertation at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, about urban walking as a revolutionary aesthetic practice of the 20th century.



NICOLE PASULKA: How did you come to have both a personal and a professional relationship with Amber Doll?

AMBER HAWK SWANSON: The project, from the beginning—and I think I've held true to it—is about wanting to embody victim and victimizer simultaneously. It's what I've held onto during all of the different phases of the work. At first, I was really attached to what I was beginning to understand would be the academic parts of my project with Amber Doll. But at some point, the personal side, which included desiring a RealDoll for many of the same reasons other doll owners/lovers desire their dolls, just seeped in.

NP: As far as your work was concerned, you wanted something to act out on?

AHS: I wanted something that would be an extension of self, a negotiation of self and, more than anything, something that would look like whatever it is that victim and victimizer would look like if conceptually merged and placed in a single frame. I knew I wanted to embody each role, so I needed a double of myself. More than just a double, I needed a sexually available double of myself. Of course, it had to be a RealDoll, since they are known as the "Cadillac" of sex dolls. At the beginning, it couldn't have been any more academic in my mind.

NP: So the project started professionally and then became personal?

AHS: It wasn't until I'd already sent out proposals and put things in motion for my RealDoll project that I started to feel an affinity with the [online] community of men who own RealDolls. I started looking forward to owning Amber Doll in a personal way. I also changed the writing in my proposals to reflect the fact that I was actually buying clothes for her and preparing my home for two. I was surprised to find myself changing the proposals to incorporate that kind of "lived performance" because up until that point I hadn't made that kind of work. It was a strange combination of experiencing the desire and being aware of the desire in a way I knew would influence the work.

NP: How should we understand the trajectory of your relationship then? Were you girlfriends?

AHS: I've heard people interpret [the relationship between Amber Doll and me] as flipping perceived gender roles within queer butch/femme relationships on their heads, [in regards to the high femme gender presentation both Amber Doll and I seem to uphold]. I think that could be true in many of the scenarios we shot. But there are others where that's not the case, where I've played the role of a stagehand of sorts, and happened to take on more masculine codes in order to do so while she remained undeniably feminine. I am able to change my gender presentation but she seemingly cannot. That whole spectrum is explored in the project. It's part of my life and it seeps into the work.

Q AND A CONTINUED

NP: Is she your collaborator?

AHS: At the beginning, I really thought of her as my collaborator. I always used language like “we” and “us.” But now I’m taking all the credit. If it actually were a collaboration, she would be upset with me about that. [laughs]. After our wedding reception, where I was surprised by the way our guests “explored” her, I decided to treat her like the replica of myself that she is. I sort of said, “OK, I’m going to place you in these potentially vulnerable situations and you have no choice in the matter.”

NP: It’s interesting that the wedding was what turned you two into separate entities.

AHS: I know! Honestly, I had received a grant and wanted to use part of it to celebrate the project and my relationship with Amber Doll. Everyone in my world was like, “We have to see your doll.” It was the six-month anniversary of her birth and of our Las Vegas wedding, so I threw a big party and screened *To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: The Making of Amber Doll* documentary. I had my photo tech assistant shooting portraits and a few other tech assistants shooting video of what happened when people interacted with the doll on their own. I didn’t expect what happened. The guests were all people who know me personally, which, for the most part, included a bunch of queers and artists. I thought people would pose for some pictures and drink a whole lot of champagne, but it ended up being so much more. I was like, “here’s my wife, she’s gorgeous and not broken in any way, yet” and people pulled her tongue out and looked up her skirt. There were piles of people on her at once. It was a bit shocking to me at the time.

NP: It sounds like that influenced the direction of the rest of the project.

AHS: Before, we were doing photographic sketches—but they just weren’t working. They were telling me a lot about this idea of victim and victimizer that I was trying to pursue, but the wedding reception was a turning point. I saw the potential in allowing other people into the project, at least in the part of the project that involved violent fantasy fulfillment.

NP: It’s funny to hear you mention that the wedding reception was full of people you know, because from the photos—especially where you and Amber Doll are cutting the cake—it looks like a very heteronormative wedding. The social acceptance of you and Amber Doll portrayed in this photo was immediately striking.

AHS: I was so obsessed with getting every detail to be heteronormative and/or Barbie-like. What would Barbie want at her wedding reception? Lots of pink and baby blue, the cake had pearled decorations. Nothing that I would pick with my girlfriend, but something I’d maybe pick with some of my former sorority sisters.

Last summer my girlfriend and I went to the wedding of one of my former sorority sisters. My girlfriend’s gender-queer appearance stood out among the other wedding guests, and made negotiating the space an interesting challenge. I don’t mean to say wedding receptions across the board are uncomfortable.

Q AND A CONTINUED

NP: But they can be horribly uncomfortable places. I've been the weird girl in a suit at awkward weddings before.

AHS: There's something about [my girlfriend's and my] presence at this sorority wedding that was disrupting social codes. And my wedding to Amber Doll was also disrupting social codes—not in exactly the same way, but somehow in a similar way.

NP: So then, is this project explicitly about sexual identity or the way sexual identity can be disruptive?

AHS: My intention of embodying victim/victimizer happened at the same time that I was craving companionship as we discussed earlier. While I wanted to make artwork with Amber Doll, I also really believed that I would be getting companionship with her in the same way that friend of mine and fellow doll-owner Davecat is partnered with his doll. I felt like I was picking out a girlfriend, but certainly in a non-traditional way.

NP: We imagine that the typical “real doll owner” is a lonely, straight man. Does it seem hard for people to believe that you actually wanted a relationship with Amber Doll?

AHS: As I was waiting for Amber Doll, I was saving my hair because I heard that RealDoll owners saved their hair to glue it in the pubic area. I also got excited initially that people were dressing their dolls up. It sounds so much more fun than it is because silicone is so hard to dress. It's certainly an art project and it has always been, but I was single at the time. I knew it was crazy ordering the doll and spending all the money, but I was really excited about it and all of the minute details of doll ownership, like hair, clothes, and cleaning. There was a community of mostly men I was interacting with indirectly. There's a whole community of people who love dolls. It's sort of less about the dolls and more about each other in some ways. It ends up looking like [a lot of other kinds of] fandom. I thought I was going to get all this companionship out of the doll—I enjoyed every second of waiting for her and then getting her—but what also happened was that I formed personal connections online, and it could have been about cooking, you know. I'd never speak for everyone in the community. I'm sensitive about that. But definitely for me that's what it was about.

NP: So I can't help but wonder about your sex life with the doll. And when I think about that, I understand that this project invites the same sort of detached voyeurism or preoccupation that non-normative relationships often encourage in people who feel outside of them or have no experience with gay or lesbian sex and relationships.

AHS: All the time I was waiting for her, I was so excited to strap on and have her strap on and I was imagining all the things that would be possible. I was intent to enjoy Amber Doll separate from any project. The whole time I was waiting, people would ask me how I planned to get sexual pleasure from this doll. Female RealDolls are created for sex with men, but for me getting off with the doll felt really possible.

NP: Isn't that the way people often question lesbian sex? Asking how you do it?

Q AND A CONTINUED

AHS: Yes. Totally, and my ultimate fantasy was Amber Doll. But when I watched her “get made” I’m not going to say that killed it, but there was little mystery left. I got her and had my first night with her and did not find her sexy, I’m sad to report. I didn’t find her vagina sexy. All three of her orifices are ribbed, but I don’t understand how her vagina could provide pleasure because it is really big and wide—like beer bottle big. It felt disconnected to me. It was like putting my hand in a hole. I was determined the whole time to get off having sex with Amber Doll, but it did not happen. In fact, she’s a virgin. I explored her vagina, and looked her all over because I was so in shock to finally have her, but I never ended up having sex with her, nor has anyone.

NP: You were just in Miami for your show at Locust Gallery. What was Miami like for you and Amber Doll?

AHS: Part of the mission of Locust Gallery is get artists to do site-specific work. I decided to shoot photographs and video not only in Miami, but also at a popular Florida theme park. My experience in Miami was partly shooting [with Amber Doll] and also meeting folks. A lot of the same things that happen wherever we take Amber Doll happened in Miami. We went to the eXXXotica convention where I didn’t know what to expect, but I was very excited because Girls Gone Wild was going to be there.

NP: What happened when you and Amber Doll hung out with Girls Gone Wild?

AHS: I brought Amber Doll into the Girls Gone Wild area. There were two women posing with whoever walked by. When they saw her, they weren’t quite sure what to do. Eventually, they approached her and there was a mad rush of mostly men with cameras. When the crowd assembled, the girls got into it. They didn’t go as far as we might see on a Girls Gone Wild video, but they were completely interacting with the doll after a few minutes and after more and more people showed up. One of the girls took Amber Doll’s hands and put them in her own hot pants. I didn’t expect them to interact with the doll that way. Eventually, someone who seemed like a bodyguard came over and asked me to leave, so we wheeled her off and hung out at the rest of the convention.

I was really after the Girls Gone Wild footage because I’d previously taken her to a Chicago Bears tailgate and I was thinking of that loosely as a reverse Girls Gone Wild because the “girl,” Amber Doll, is inactive, dead-seeming really, and the men interacting with her are all misbehaving in some cases in order to perform for my camera.

NP: How was the show at Locust?

AHS: The public opening definitely stood out. I had her laid out in a funerary installation. She was in a casket surrounded by fresh flowers. People were able to come close to Amber Doll. Her face and torso, where people might be walking, was surveilled by a camera with a live feed to a monitor on the other side of a free-standing wall. That was the first real-time performance of sorts that I’ve mounted—the viewers became the stars of the final video that they would encounter. It was surprising as an installation, but then it took on this tone of—I keep using this word—violation. I witnessed a different kind of aggression than I’ve noticed in other places when a young man wound up and forcefully punched her in her face.

Q AND A: AMBER HAWK SWANSON AND NICOLE PASULKA

I spoke with Lori Waxman for a Q&A for the show before the exhibition about how for me it's all about consent and permission. I was curious about what would happen in these places where there's a complete lack of permission to touch and be sexual. She's this RealDoll who gives you this permission in a way, but she's in this casket carries all the codes of "respect." He really punched her, and we watched it in the monitor.

NP: Do you have any insight into how and why that happened?

AHS: People often punch her because they want to know how the silicone feels. I see people punch her, and it seems to me it's to feel the material. It was toward the end of the night. I don't know if he'd been drinking. We were watching down the hall, on the monitor, we saw him jokingly giving mouth-to-mouth to Amber Doll. I found that funny, but then he just backed up and punched her.

At the end of the night, my girlfriend and I walked to our car. He happened to be walking towards us and he really aggressively flicked us off against our car window. I'm not sure if it was about the installation and the work, or if he was just feeling angry that night. Amber Doll seems to invite that kind of behavior, but I hadn't seen it in a way where it meant physical harm or damage to her silicone. She is now torn from mouth to jaw.

NP: And there's no question that this was a violent act?

AHS: Yeah, it seemed really intentional, but then again, I'm kind of facilitating those kinds of actions. People coming through had already seen a series of videos and photographs that document folks "exploring" Amber Doll before encountering the funerary installation. I'm interested in the way that some people can watch the video and think, "Oh, this is awful; I would never do that even to a doll." Or they'll think, "I can do that. In fact, the doll is right behind me, I'm going to sock her in the mouth."

NP: Did you have her face fixed?

AHS: There's no real way to fix her face, at this point. Her face just doesn't stay on any longer.

NP: Some people feel like you can enjoy representations of violence expressly because you know they're not real. It has the thrill, but not the actual fear or repercussions of real violence. So I'm wondering if what happened in Miami is a way of experiencing violence as a representation or if it's the expression of a latent desire. Does who and what she is give people some kind of permission to do this to her?

AHS: I don't know. I'm just the puppeteer. But, I'm there, facilitating the permission in some cases. People in some ways do very little and her sexual availability does it all—whether I'm providing alcohol, like at my wedding reception where all of the guests were people who knew me personally from my art and queer communities here in Chicago, or just rolling her somewhere and leaving her with strangers, like at *Girls Gone Wild*. I don't even know, in the project as a whole, how much I had to do with facilitating permission, but it ended up being a big part of how I think about the way consent and permission play into the work.