

filthy dreams

You Know I Love Dolls: ASMA's "Ideal Space for Music" at SculptureCenter

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ASMA, *The real, the imaginary and the symbolic, (B doll)*, 2024, detail, ASMA: *Ideal Space for Music*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2024-25. Doll (found objects, wood, metal, epoxy resin, fiberglass, newspaper, silicone, fabric, synthetic hair, plastic, seed), taxidermy skunk, artist-made lamps, glass figurine. Doll: 40 1/2 x 11 3/4 x 4 inches (103 x 30 x 10 cm); installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artists; Gaga, Los Angeles and Guadalajara; and Peana, Mexico City. Photo: Charles Benton.

Nobody can convince me that ASMA's dolls don't come alive and skitter all over SculptureCenter at night. That these little featureless skeletal femme creatures don't pop up when the doors lock to tinker with the accessories placed around them—playing cards while lounging in the nude, tinkling the keys of their piano used as a momentary seat, and whispering in the ear of their taxidermied roadkill skunk friend. That they're not peeking around the corners of their temporary home in SculptureCenter's winding basement with their uncanny sock-covered non-faces with only divots for eye sockets and a point for a nose like a bank robber in pantyhose disguise while trying to goad the cleaning crew into a rousing game of three-claps à la *The Conjuring*. That the last gallery attendant in the building doesn't hear the soft metallic clinky-clanking of their lanky limbs, cobbled together from seemingly anything their creators' could find—ripped jeans, medical equipment, a clarinet bit, oddly sinewy carved muscles—like Geppetto became a hoarder after a nervous breakdown. That a worker who returns late after forgetting their keys isn't spotting a flash of shiny black hair from Cher's wig collection out of the corner of their eye, swearing they just heard a giggle. Maybe these dolls account for all those bite marks in the half-eaten apples tossed around Álvaro Urbano's cruising cross-time collaboration with Scott Burton's corporate lobby art installation *Tableau Vivant* upstairs. Or maybe I've just seen one too many doll-related horror movies. But then, explain the flickering video that projects the dolls staring vacantly out windows in dim rooms. They're plotting their escape!

Whether reality or another product of my diseased mind, ASMA's current exhibition *Ideal Space for Music* sparks the darker recesses of the imagination. The show's title is deceptively dry and even perky for the spooky and dramatic tactics employed within. The Mexico City-based artist duo, Matias Armendaris and Hanya Belia, alongside curator Jovanna Venegas, treat SculptureCenter's basement as their collaborator in producing an uneasy, off-kilter atmosphere. Not that it's tough to do with the basement's dungeon-y architecture that lends itself to picturing chains and torture devices hanging from its walls. ASMA manages to make the basement even more foreboding by squirreling away faceless dolls in various nooks and crannies, lining hallways with giant, barely legible textual paintings and aluminum balls covered in curved swooshes and ripped six packs, playing with light and shadow—sometimes illuminating nothing but a brick wall—using artist-made lamps that slam together errant found objects like kitschy mugs, and piping in an ambient soundscape that floats down the arched corridors, its ethereal whooshes and drones punctured by random footsteps and plunking water drops like David Lynch and Dean Hurley's *The Air Is on Fire*. At times, the soundscape is so realistic that I kept looking up to dodge being dribbled on by dirty basement water. The ideal space for music, indeed.



ASMA, Sub, (D doll), 2024. Doll (Found objects, wood, metal, epoxy resin, fiberglass, silicone, fabric, synthetic hair, plastic, leather, paper) glass figurine, artist-made lamp. Doll: 40 ½ x 11 ¼ x 4 inches (103 x 30 x 10 cm); installation dimensions variable. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. (Courtesy the artists; Gaga, Los Angeles and Guadalajara; and Peana, Mexico City. Photo: Charles Benton)

The experience of meandering, semi-aimlessly, as I didn't bother to consult the exhibition map, around the winding, dank basement channels the combined trepidation and thrill of a haunted house. It isn't, as so many exhibitions are lately, boring. With each new corner, I anticipated—and hoped for—a heart-thumping jumpscare jolt. Sometimes, I got it, like with Sub, (D doll), who stands inside a recessed part of a back wall, glaring down with her unseeing eye pockets at passing viewers. A strange mix-and-match of materials, Sub, (D doll) is constructed from rounded wood and metal like sawed-off table legs and swaddled in scraps of sweaters, cartoonish prints, studded leather, and holey fishnets. Her blonde hair, mostly hidden under a puritanical veil of fabric that may be the same covering her face, pokes out in two thin wisps. The most realistic part of Sub, (D doll) is her hands, reminiscent of mini-Trump or red-right hand finger puppet tchotchkes impulse purchased at bookstore cash registers, one grasping a beam while the other splays out for balance. Blink and you may feel those well-defined fingies brushing through your hair—with those limp strands, she could use more of it. At least her little clear mousie gewgaw buddy that sits nearby adds much-needed cuteness to offset the seething dread. It's not just the dolls themselves—their shadows bounce off the walls, revealing ghostly humanoid figures hovering in the distance.

Even the most conventional part of the exhibition, its introductory antechamber upstairs with typically bland white gallery walls, has a dash of the beguiling with two works that share the same frame. One is a pen drawing of an angel, sporting round-bottomed Fashion Nova jeans, viewed from the back as they stare at other winged critters coming in for a landing in a strange natural landscape that includes a sun with sharpened shards for rays. The other, smaller work is a washed-out photograph of a mannequin in a storefront, advertising a floral Vampire's Wife-style dress and wedges. The mannequin, with her straight blonde hair and smoky eyes (the only visible features on her face), is the pinnacle of white Western beauty ideals (similar to the lingering mannequin shots in *Bye Bye Love*). However, this ideal is shattered if you stare too long at her stiff white arms clenched at unnatural angles. *shudder* ASMA discovered these two works on Mexico City streets, their unknown origins only heightening the mystery. What in the world were their creators' trying to convey? With the angel's big ass and the mannequin's sultry bedroom eyes, are these homemade jack-off materials? Cast off into the cold streets after the release? Their bizarro eroticism is an apt primer to the subterranean doll maze below, a mix of a lucid nightmare and a wet dream.



ASMA in collaboration with Josue Eber, *I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel...*, 2024. 16mm transferred to 4K video. 9:02 min. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy the artists; Gaga, Los Angeles and Guadalajara; and Peana, Mexico City. Photo: Charles Benton

Because there is something a little uncomfortably hot about ASMA's sculptural dolls, isn't there? No? Just me? Not even the naked card shark *Nude and the Staircase, (A Doll)*? As the title anticipates, *Nude and the Staircase, (A Doll)* sprawls under the stairwell, the exhausted aftermath of Duchamp's painted *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. Rather than artfully disintegrating into Dada hard angles, *Nude and the Staircase, (A Doll)* represents those disparate parts screwed and shoved back together. She seems none too happy about it either, worn-out and bored, playing solo in the rubble. Still, she maintains an eerie, post-human sexual charge with her Ingres elongated torso and H.R. Giger alien boobies, sanded arms and polished knees, and that one lace-up leg. The sensuality doesn't reach her face, of which there is none, reminiscent of David Lynch's child stand-in Pierre Tremond's plaster mask in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, minus the lengthy Pinocchio nose.

Artists making unsettlingly erotic dolls is, of course, nothing new yet it still maintains a freshness. Hans Bellmer is the first that comes to mind with his creepy-as-fuck girlie dolls and related peeper pics, which should have made everyone around him happy that Hans turned toward art rather than serial killing. Though Bellmer's work is nearing a century old, its sheer ability to alarm has not diminished. Case in point: I visited the Centre Pompidou's expansive survey *Surrealism* late last year. While I was blown away by wacko surrealists I had never heard of before and the knowledge that French boomers are just as narcissistically unaware of the presence of other people in crowded exhibitions as their American counterparts, the lasting memory is of seeing Bellmer's *La Poupée* in the flesh—or, I guess, faux flesh. The version of *La Poupée* on display in Paris was notably the only Bellmer creation I've ever seen with a head. With a stiff, dry wig and big, unblinking doe eyes, *La Poupée* was child-like, reminiscent of Balthus's also infamously Lolita-ish subjects, but with a catch. Plunked awkwardly on a slightly elevated platform, her torso sat in her lap with two pairs of gangly legs jutting out from either side like a monstrosity made by a disturbed child. One pair of legs wore feminine Mary Janes while the other was in more masculine formal dress shoes—a body horror play with the gender binary that feels contemporary.



Installation view, ASMA: *Ideal Space for Music*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2024-25. Courtesy the artists; Gaga, Los Angeles and Guadalajara; and Peana, Mexico City. Photo: Charles Benton

Though he may be the modern artist most associated with dolls, Bellmer isn't the only one. In 1918, Oskar Kokoschka commissioned dollmaker Hermine Moos to produce a doll that looked exactly like his ex, Alma Mahler. If that's not enough to change the locks, Kokoschka also made explicit how he wanted the doll to feel, anticipating today's booming sex doll industry: "Please make it possible...that my sense of touch will be able to take pleasure in those parts where the layers of fat and muscle suddenly give way to a sinuous covering of skin." And if that's not enough to file a restraining order, things got even weirder once he received the doll. According to the Met's description of a photo of the doll by an unknown photographer (the image is tragically too small on their database to get a good gawk at):

"He dressed it in custom-made undergarments and clothing and is said to have taken it to cafes and the opera. Rumors spread about the depths of his perversions with the creation he called his 'silent woman.'...In the early 1920s, claiming the doll had entirely 'cured' him 'of his passions,' the artist staged a performative dollicide, in which he decapitated the inanimate figure and smashed a bottle of wine over its head."

Hooooo-k.

ASMA is clearly aware of these and other artistic doll antecedents, as well as the long, LONG list of dolls in horror, from Twilight Zone's Talking Tina to the scampering Giallo mannequin in Argento's Deep Red to D-movie schlock like Dolls. It's especially difficult to experience Ideal Space for Music without thinking of Osgood Perkins's devil-worshipping, glam rock fanatic Longlegs, particularly when tiptoeing down the cavernous hallway lined with shiny silver balls, which recalls Nic Cage's Longleg's metal mind-control orbs implanted into the head of gifted dollies in order to inspire dad to massacre the whole family. Homicide doesn't seem to be the end goal here. Instead, ASMA forges an appreciation for the spheres that articulate the joints on ball-jointed dolls, a strange anatomical doll part when you really think about it. These round joints expose the doll's unreal nature while also producing lifelike movement. By carving alluring musculature into their form, ASMA transforms the joints from utilitarian tools into objects of desire, following again in Bellmer's freaky footsteps with his The Doll in MoMA's collection, a Dahmeresque torso and four joint stubs glued together, the joints dangling on either end like malformed testicles.



Installation view, ASMA: Ideal Space for Music, SculptureCenter, New York, 2024-25. Courtesy the artists; Gaga, Los Angeles and Guadalajara; and Peana, Mexico City. Photo: Charles Benton

Not that it's all just doll fetishism. ASMA's monumental, tapestry-like paintings feature near-illegible fractured passages of text including, according to the corresponding essay, selections from Rainer Maria Rilke's absolutely batshit essay, "The Unfortunate Fate of Childhood Dolls," which I'm ashamed to say I never read before now. "The Unfortunate Fate of Childhood Dolls" is so admirably berserk I want to return to SculptureCenter to read it aloud while walking through the basement to the annoyance of all other visitors. Penned in response to an exhibition of Lotte Pritzel's dolls, Rilke waxes poetic on "the doll-soul" related to our use of dolls as imprisoned foils for all our blathered one-sided communication, hopes, dreams, desires, and projection. Rilke wonders: Has anyone thought about the poor lot of the doll?!!! Well, Rilke has, including the striking imagery of dolls pitching themselves into flames "like moths." But if we're going to focus on us, Rilke also describes the death-like "hollowness" of "sitting opposite the doll as it stared at us"—an experience ASMA channels and even heightens by their dolls' vacant eyeless faces. They give us nothing. "Are we not strange creatures, letting ourselves be guided to direct our earliest inclinations to where there is no hope of response?" he asks.

We sure are and given the nagging impulse to further project onto ASMA's Ideal Space for Music, continue to be.