MORTON BARTLETT (1909-1992 United States)

Rosy-cheeked figurines – impeccably dressed and almost eerily animated – pose as if youthful theatrical performers. Whether seated with grace, consumed in reading, dancing at ballet class, throwing a tantrum, or scolding stuffed toys, Morton Bartlett’s 1940-50s idealized juvenile and adolescent dolls thrive atop sparse backdrops in single portraits and group tableaux that. His half life-size models don painstakingly hand-tailored or knit clothes with carefully constructed wigs. Bartlett invested nearly compulsive attention to detail – only completing one doll per year. He referenced medical publications and growth charts for precision. Despite a scrupulous procedure, Bartlett fashioned not realistic physiognomies, but ones that “bear their artificiality with self-confidence” as proposed by Kittlemann and Dichter. Orphaned at eight, Bartlett was later adopted by a Boston family. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard University for two years. Thereafter, he lived alone in Cambridge, where he worked as a graphic designer and commercial photographer.

An extremely private person – Bartlett crafted a family to call his own by his very hands. With the self-taught artist’s permission, Yankee Magazine published a 1963 article that made public his once “private obsession” and brought him unsolicited applause. He soon shied away from such attention. He prudently wrapped his astonishing constructions in newspaper and packed them away. His fabricated children remained unseen for thirty years until a number of his sketches, handcrafted doll apparel, over two hundred vintage black and white photographs, and his dolls themselves – three male and the remaining female, all at varying stages of pre-pubescent and pubescent development – were uncovered in 1993 by antiques dealer Marion Harris, who exhibited them two years later at the 1993 Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan. A corresponding catalogue titled Family Found: The Lifetime Obsession of Morton Bartlett was published the following year. Los Angeles-based collector Barry Sloane later discovered a large cache of material from Bartlett’s estate that included seventeen of Bartlett’s original Kodachrome color slides dated to about 1955, from which large color prints were created in the fall of 2006.
The New York Times’ Roberta Smith muses “Bartlett orchestrated psychologically complex art images that resonate with influences ranging from Northern Renaissance sculpture to advertising, fashion magazines and Hollywood portrait photography.” Questions abound in regard to Bartlett’s creative intentions. Many describe his lifelike dolls as “a surrogate family for their creator” as if to fill an agonizing gap forged in the loss of his own parents as a young boy. Others deem his creations as something far darker than these highly expressive, vivacious constructions may at first seem – perhaps even pedophilic. More recent interviews with the artist’s Boston neighbors disclosed Bartlett’s intention to sell his creations for mass toy manufacture. Rosemarie Trockel views these creations “not so much as finished works in themselves but as subjects for his camera.” His true aims may never be exposed – his creative intentions perhaps forever veiled in mystery. It is nonetheless this very fact that renders viewers free to make their own interpretations.

RECENT SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2012      Secret Universe III, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, Germany
2008      Without Borders, Melbourne, Australia
2007      Morton Bartlett, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, California
2007      The Sweethearts of Mr. Bartlett, Julie Saul Gallery, New York, New York
          Family Considered, Framingham, Massachusetts

RECENT GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2012      Read Into My Black Holes, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
          Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos, Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain
          and The New Museum, New York
          Secret Universe III, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany
          8th International Biennial of Photography and Visual Arts, Liège, Belgium
          Toy Stories, Westport Arts Center, Westport, Connecticut
2011      25 Years/25 Artists, Julie Saul Gallery, New York
2010      8th Gwangju Biennale - 10,000 Lives, Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, South Korea
          Museum of Everything, London, United Kingdom and Turin, Italy

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
Collection de l’Art Brut Musée, Lausanne, Switzerland
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Museum of Folk Art, New York, New York
Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California