

## ART

## Go Ask Alice

At School 33, a Team of Feminist Artists Creates a True Cabinet of Wonder

by J. Bowers

**Alice's Curious Cabinet** | At School 33 Art Center through Oct. 7



Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore: "Alice's Curious Cabinet" feels a lot like rifling through a friend's underwear drawer when she's not in the room.

**Curiouser and curiouser**—since *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was first published way back in 1865, Lewis Carroll's image of a naive adolescent girl plunging into the depths of a psychologically charged fantasy world has fascinated feminists, transforming *Alice* into an icon of that narrow terrain between womanhood and girlhood. Mixed-media wonderwomen Karen Howard, Renée Shaw, Jennie Thwing, and Nino Leselidze mine the deepest recesses of the rabbit hole for "Alice's Curious Cabinet," a singularly bizarre, deeply engaging installation that feels a lot like rifling through an acquaintance's underwear drawer—voyeuristic, perverse, and more than a little unsettling.

Set up at the end of an otherwise bare and dark white-walled room, "Alice's Curious Cabinet" combines looped video, photography, miniature sculpture, shadowboxes, audio, and found objects to re-create the sense of uncertainty that accompanies female adolescence, and to pay homage to an esoteric historical phenomenon. In the 17th century, "cabinets of curiosities" (aka *Wunderkammer*) were very much in vogue among wealthy European aristocrats. Containing an assortment of bizarre objects, the cabinets were meant to evoke a sense of curiosity or astonishment, while demonstrating their owners' ideas about art

(embodied in man-made objects), science (shown through natural oddities and taxidermied animals), and spirituality (represented by icons and other religious artifacts).

Straying considerably from the traditional constraints of the *Wunderkammer* format, half of the items inside "Alice's Curious Cabinet" seem as though they could have been secreted away by any imaginative, mildly obsessive-compulsive preteen girl. Plastic army men are stuffed into salt and pepper shakers. Jesus icons and preserved butterflies share space with strange clumps of melted beads, fishing lures, carved wooden animals, a box full of mangled, used-up tea bags, and a doll's clay birthday cake. Numerous cruets and jars contain mixtures of glitter, water, and cheap plastic-capsule toys. The value of these objects is uncertain—they suggest the childish tendency to hoard personal treasures and lend a certain quirky humor to the installation as a whole.

The rest of Alice's treasures convey the artists' undeniably feminist agenda. Homemade labels encircle bottles of "all-herbal breast enhancement." Bejeweled cameo frames surround pink breasts that look as though they've been molded with dental putty. More bosoms ooze out of a doll-sized china cabinet. A tampon is pressed into a clump of glitter and melted beads. And one set of shelves contains particularly disturbing, overt imagery—a milk-heavy pink plastic sow rests beneath an antique book displaying diagrams of developing fetuses, and a jewelry box is stuffed with costume jewelry and hastily wadded, menstrual-looking scraps of stained cloth. The cruets nearby contain gold glitter and kidney beans, echoing the shape of fetuses, and a tiny box holds a melted, mangled baby doll. It's all a very literal interpretation of the proverbial "loss of innocence," but the context and presentation are unique enough to make the artists' message worthwhile, and the connections between the cabinet's contents demand thorough

investigation.

In addition to the visual subtext of the feminine items on display, several interactive elements are present—a wooden box labeled take me contains a stack of grainy, out-of-focus photographs, and three fur-lined buttons trigger tinny recordings of the artists reading lines from Carroll’s original story. One announces, “Well, I’ll eat it, and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key,” a blatant nod at the collection of keys and rubber vaginas in the lower recesses of the cabinet and the vagina locked within a metal birdcage. There are a few direct references to Carroll’s tale, as well. A desiccated crocodile—one of the classic 17th-century *Wunderkammer* items, incidentally—lurks in the back of the cabinet, while one of the audio elements murmurs a line from Carroll’s poem “The Crocodile.” A dried mushroom has been transformed into an art object with oil paints. The video portion of the installation also seems very much in keeping with the spirit of Carroll’s work—footage of butterfly cocoons, antique-looking animated woodcut drawings, and creepy staring eyes are layered over clips of a stop-motion animated, curly-haired doll.

There’s a palpable compulsion to explore every inch of “Alice’s Curious Cabinet,” and an equally compelling impulse to leave everything just as it was when you found it. Some of the items feel last-minute or superfluous, but overall the room feels as though Alice herself could walk in at any moment and plaintively ask why you’re sitting on the floor, messing around with all of her private stuff. Despite Howard, Shaw, Thwing, and Leselidze’s tendency toward heavy-handed imagery, this level of character and presence is hard to achieve in any nonfigural art—let alone installation art—and in that sense “Alice’s Curious Cabinet” is a genuine wonder.

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