Desublimation and Morbidity

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What is a doll?
What is a doll?
It’s something strange.
It’s something from the shadows.
It’s something from the earth.
It’s something from the origin.
It’s something magical.
It’s something paternal.
It’s something forbidden.
It’s something from God.
It’s something distant.
It’s something without eyes.
It’s something animal.
It’s something birdlike.
It’s something silent.
It’s something eternal.
It’s something of mud.
It’s something pebblelike.
Something vegetal.
Something from childhood.
Something cruel.
Something joyous.
Something screaming.
Something mute.
That’s it!

—Michel Nedjar, from L’Indomptable (1996)

“My first doll: my father’s sex. He injured it with his zipper. And he said, ‘Look, I made a doll.’ I remember that there was a bloodstained bandage around his sex, and this was the first doll that struck me” (Weiss and Whitehead 1996). Such is a childhood reminiscence of the contemporary French artist Michel Nedjar, who, in the decade following a severe depression in 1976, created several hundred rag dolls which extend beyond the ultimate bounds of the grotesque to the chaotic limits of formlessness. These monsters of refuse and detritus are most often stained, filthy, spotted with paint, mud, and blood, tinted from immersion in vats of cold dye: monsters from the
earth, from the underworld. We are confronted with a plethora of dolls whose forms range from small mummylike objects to grotesque animals, from devils’ heads and eyeless, troubled masks to shrouded, deathly rag dolls: an indescribable animal’s muzzle and horns grow from the forehead of a ghoulish death’s-head; roots sprout from the bottom of a rag body, bearing a face in a state of extreme decomposition; small mummies are distended to give shape to primal forms; bird-men tax the limits of our zoological taxonomies. Here, the cosmic categories of animal, vegetable, and mineral are confused; hybrids are created; caricatures give way to monsters.

The creative matrix of these works is the artist’s collection of dolls, mostly magical, which include examples from all over the world: Peru (dolls of the sort found in tombs, alongside mummies), Tunisia (marriage dolls), Cheyenne
(dolls representing certain gods), Algeria (one example, explains Nedjar, is worn out, and consequently more magically charged), Mali, Guatemala (one particular Guatemalan doll was purchased the day before the death of the woman who made it, hence it is particularly significant; another from the same country had its clothes eaten away, revealing its insides, thus it is far stranger than usual), Mexico, Egypt, India, a turn-of-the-century European wax doll (worn away by time), children’s rag dolls, a crude doll by an anonymous maker (found in a garbage can in Paris), dolls of wrapped and tied paper (so formless as to be hardly recognizable as a doll), dolls by the artist Jaber, some of Nedjar’s own constructions, and, appropriately enough, a plastic Spider Man doll (just one of a series of spider fetishes which protect his home).

Also pertinent is the disquieting diversity of his collection of magic or fetish objects, gathered by his friends or himself: a human skull (found in the Paris flea market), a dried Peruvian llama fetus, a toy Sphinx, a baby iguana, an African doll, dried fruit, money from various countries, bits of thread and cloth, the rattler of a rattlesnake, a feather, a fossilized shell, an orange plastic fish tied with string, pebbles and bits of stone from holy places (tombs, the pyramids, churches, synagogues, the Wailing Wall, the Berlin Wall), a dried glove, a postcard of the Buddha, a paper plate (marked with both the words “Dangereux, Ne Pas Toucher” and a death’s-head), an Ethiopian magic scroll, a homemade fetish necklace, a bottle of Leffe Radieuse beer, a whale bone, a goose feather, a container of Najjar coffee, bits of Aztec sculptures, and the very first two sculptures in clay made by Nedjar, in 1973, of a tiny man and woman.

While his doll collection has an internal logic, his collection of magic objects is structurally illogical, and gains coherency only through the meaning given these objects by Nedjar himself. And yet, taken together, these collections—along with the many images from postcards, photographs, and newspaper clippings that adorn his studio walls—provide the context in which his dolls, drawings, and films must be understood. Here, we are far from purely aesthetic considerations. Nedjar’s habitation is a condensed focal point where numerous, and presumably incompatible, traditions and types of magic meet, accumulate, and coalesce—finally to be transmitted to his own work. Perhaps a particular example may establish the connection between Nedjar’s worlds of magic and art—a bifurcation that certainly does not exist for him, and which is only a problem generated by our hermeneutic enterprise. One doll in this collection, found in the Paris flea market, is particularly striking and distressing: a classic Barbie doll, nude, blindfolded, thoroughly bound with black thread, and pierced with dozens of pins. We need but consider the tragic phantasmatic trajectory of this object to discover the complexities of intercultural symbolic exchange: from standard mass-consumer toy to (most probably) urban voodoo object to collected artifact. This ambivalence in turn inspired Nedjar—whose dolls span the ontological spectrum from aesthetic to ritual objects: fetishistic, magical, mystical, and especially exorcistic of the terribilità of our century—to endow the Barbie with new meaning, with a new destiny. The transformations and transpositions of this anxiety-producing object describe an itinerary which, if closely analyzed, might provide a detailed model of what could constitute a new paradigm for understanding intercultural objects.

It is precisely concerning the hermeneutic positioning of an object within the symbolic that a confusion of interpretations may arise, regarding what Homi Bhabha writes of as, “a process of ambivalence in the structure of identification, which intervenes precisely in the elliptical ‘between’ where the other’s shadow falls on us, and vice versa” (1989:27). At this juncture, ritualistic practices of initiation are crucial to bridge the sundry gaps of “betweenness,” of alterity: such is often the only manner of entry into a symbolic system otherwise held secret, for psychological, sociological, or political reasons.
Marcel Proust, in *Le temps retrouvé*, discusses the relation between dolls and memory:

Dolls bathing in the immaterial colors of the years, dolls exteriorizing Time, that Time which is not usually visible, since becoming seeks bodies, and takes hold to cast its magic lantern upon them everywhere that it finds them. ([1927] 1986:323)

Yet one would hardly know how to integrate Nedjar’s dolls into such a memory theatre, since Proustian temporality, though informed by death, exists as self-reflexive becoming, therefore remaining on this side of life. Nedjar’s dolls come from elsewhere; another system, not iconic but transformative and iconoclastic, is needed to situate them. In *Novices: A Study of Poetic Apprenticeship*, Clayton Eshleman discusses the implications of the Freudian notion of the primal scene on the poetic imagination. He utilizes the model of a pyramid lying on its side to connect memory with the immemorial, humanity with the unhuman, the body with phantoms: surmounted by the self, the parents are phantasized in the primal act of coitus, interpreted simultaneously as copulation and mutual cannibalism; this is in turn divided into the sets of grandparents, great-grandparents, et cetera, et cetera. Exploring the depths of this pyramid, he imagines:

Who knows what you will find at the back wall—deified ancestors, human beings with animal heads, or roaring nothingness? And streaming out from the base, like giant squid tentacles, are these not the pyramid’s roots connecting it to the kingdoms of the nonhuman other? (1989:11)

What if we were to use this schema to create a doll museum? At the entrance will be found the stereotyped, neurotic, Oedipal family games in which such dolls as Barbie and Bécassine, Midrani and Bluette, are so often cast; further back are ritual dolls representing ancestral figures, guarantees of social continuity and psychic stability; yet further back will be effigies of white and black magic, fetish dolls, demonic figurines, death images; and finally, in the profoundest recesses, exist certain unmentionable, unrepresentable, uncanny objects, hardly dolls at all, inadequate icons of the black abyss of depression, the horrific dismemberments of schizophrenia, the crushing deifications of paranoia. It is precisely within this teratological boundary, according to an apotropaic magic, that we must place Nedjar’s dolls, as he himself situates them: “In the primordial mud of existence, an exhumed doll, a miraculated body soaked with tears” (in Weiss 1992:7). These dolls are personifications of anguish, *memento mori*, simultaneously creations in order to remember and remembrances in order to forget. They effectuate a return of the repressed; a precarious overloading of the memory system that permits mourning without which history itself is an abomination. These anxiety-producing objects evoke a countersublime, indicating those terrors, inexorable and insidious, that exist within our own bodies.
The doll, simulacrum of the body, is an object of the most profound psychic projections, the ultimate floating signifier. As such, it is particularly adequate to express, and to counteract, that most empty and final of signifiers, death. As Nedjar explains:

If I were to bury my dolls, it would be in order to dig them up again. The emotion of things decaying. Decaying material, the way the earth sets to work, the earth gnawing away, the moldiness. The doll is transformed just as the body is undoubtedly transformed beneath the earth. For me, there is no frontier between decay and its opposite. I need a full transformation. (in Weiss 1992:13–19)

This discourse of mourning and melancholia attains a mythopoetic dimension, albeit situated in the most morbid and terrifying moments of modern history. As Nedjar wrote on the back of a postcard representing a Flemish painting of The Fall of the Damned, describing a moment of his life referred to as “the fall of the angels”: “It’s easier to slip down than to climb up. But falling—what creation within our existence—creation, exodus, darkness, hell, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the plague, AIDS...” (Nedjar 1988:57). These dolls are thaumaturgic, fulfilling the antithetical conditions of magical objects: simultaneously practical and aesthetic, constructed and confabulated, causally projective and psychically introspective. Life is expressed not through icons or metaphors, but as metamorphosis; not through normative forms, but as abnormal deformations; not as signs of a collective unconscious, but in its moments of radical singularity—marks of accident, not essence. As monsters, these singular representations of the human body in extremis collapse natural and psychic categories into a magma of sheer disfiguration and distortion. How, then, are these objects to be grasped?

Freud explains that: “The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathected energy from all sides [...] and draining the ego until it is utterly depleted” ([1917] 1963:174). In Nedjar’s dolls, such energy is aesthetic, the work of Eros; and such draining is morbidity itself, the work of Thanatos. This is the moment, ecstatic and morbid, when the psychic apparatus most closely approaches the end of the phantasmic museum of dolls postulated earlier in this essay, where the fragile, quotidian principium individuationis dissolves into telluric chaos. “Something from childhood. Something cruel. Something joyous. Something screaming. Something mute.”

I shall conclude with an allegory, since the nature of these objects demands analogical, or even anagogic, language. One of the early scenes of Carmelo Bene’s recent play, his extraordinary Macbeth Horror Suite (Paris, 1996), may serve as an emblem not only of Nedjar’s dolls, but also of the profound epistemological aporia between iconology and psychology. Bene describes his celebrated staging of the horrific Shakespearian bloodstain:

Here it is. A bandaged arm. A wound? Unroll this bandage, unroll and unroll: white, white, less white, a bit of red, red, redder (is the wound here?) Unroll and unroll again, less red, less red, less red. White, white, whiter, no more bandage. Nothing. It was the bandage that was wounded, but not the arm. Would this be melancholy, and nothing else? (in Manganaro 1996:46–47)

And nothing else? What else can there be? Wounds without a body, death beknown, wounds of the spirit. Shakespeare himself might have here intoned, “God’s wounds.” We, in a moment of all-too-human desublimation, might insist on our own.
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3. Michel Nedjar’s studio contains his collection of created and found magic objects. (Photo by Michel Nedjar)