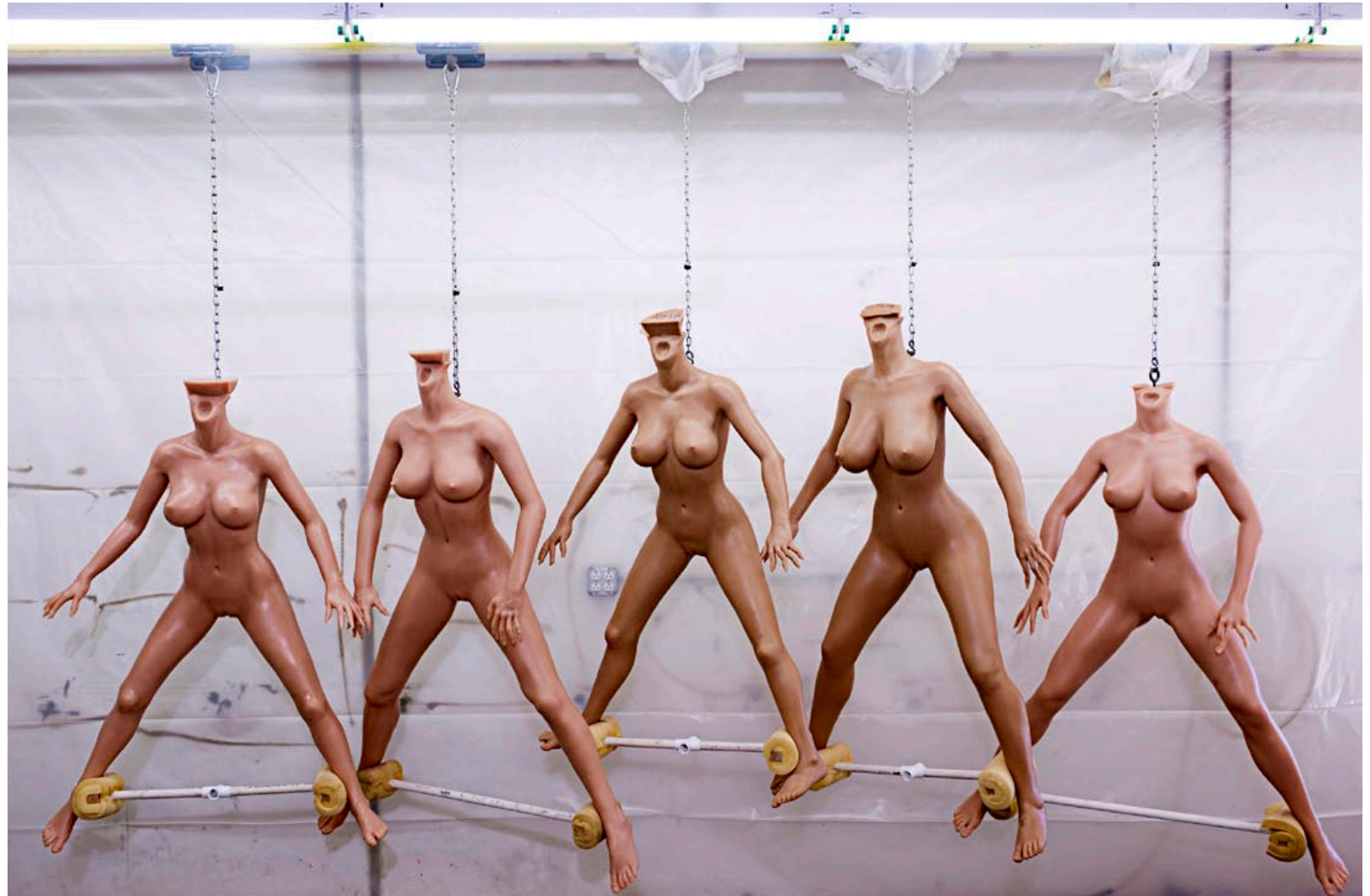


Real Dolls & iDollators

Photographs by Stephan Gladieu
Text by Anne Sengès

They look and act like the guy next door, but they live with life-size silicone dolls: flawless, Barbie-like, and pricey at USD \$7,000 apiece. Called iDollators, these men, usually in their mid-forties and often shy, prefer their perfect-looking dolls to real women. In a society where being married with two kids is still the social norm, they are a bit ashamed of it. Blame it on their lack of social skills, or call them weirdos. Listen to them, however, and they will convince you that their silent companions, dubbed Real Dolls for their lifelike appearance and anatomical correctness, play a much bigger role in their lives than your average sex toy. The emotional bond is so strong that some dare to call it love.

[The doll owners in this story, except for documentary filmmaker Dave Hockey, are all identified by the handles they use on the Doll Forum, an online meeting place for doll owners and admirers, to protect their anonymity.]



Abyss Creations, a company located in the wealthy town of San Marcos in Southern California, manufactures "the world's finest love dolls". These expensive life-sized silicone dolls (which cost USD \$7,000 each), are made by hand. The company has sold over 4,000 of them since it began production in 1996. Customers can choose between 10 body types. The dolls are marketed as anatomically correct. The smallest figure is the most popular because of its light weight (80 pounds). Made of silicone, the dolls weigh as much as real women.

The scene is a meticulously well-kept house in a middle-class suburb of Detroit. On a winter day, 45-year-old Mahtek, the man of the house, comes home from work a bit tense. The economy is tanking, the automotive industry that employs him is on death watch, and his company has just announced another round of layoffs. "I started feeling better only when I saw the girls," he confesses.

Named Phoebe and Penelope in homage to Greek mythology, the two are in many ways the perfect girlfriends. They are stunning, stylish, and even brainy. Phoebe is your typical Bond girl. A special agent, she's classy and a bit reserved. Penelope, who looks more bimbo-ish (partly because of her supersized breasts), is a socialite, a party girl who got a job at the embassy thanks to Phoebe's connections. They are so alive, sitting in Mahtek's living room, it's hard to ignore them. If you bumped into them you would apologize profusely. But Phoebe and Penelope are hyper-realistic dolls. They were made in California by Abyss, the creator of the Real Doll brand, which has sold 4,000 of the luxury life-size sex dolls since it began in 1996. That's why they don't fight for their lover's attention. And their jobs, of course, are imaginary ones.



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"When Phoebe first came in 2004, I was astounded by her beauty. I thought that she would just be a sex toy, but the dolls are so realistic it's hard not to actually think of them as a person. In my mind I developed a personality for her. Of course she's not the real thing, but this is very much the nature of playing with dolls. Watch any little kids playing with their dolls. They make up personalities. But it's just play, right?" argues Mahtek. "I am very glad I have found Phoebe and Penelope." (The latter came on the scene two years later when Phoebe started to develop joint problems.)

"They really have made a vast improvement in my life. It's very comforting knowing that they are home waiting for me at the end of the day. When I come home, I may say, 'Honey I am home' and give a kiss on the cheek to the one sitting on my bed." Since he owns two, he usually rotates them: One hangs out in the room while the other rests in a closet. "Of course I know she can't answer, and I go about the rest of my daily business until I cuddle next to her at the end of the day," he explains.

In Lars and the Real Girl, A Hollywood comedy

released in 2007, a socially inept man played by Ryan Gosling finds companionship in Bianca, a Real Doll who ends up teaching him how to interact with real people. In the film, the young man is diagnosed by the family's psychiatrist as delusional. Mahtek recognizes that the movie has played a part in humanizing people who live with dolls, but, he argues, most owners don't have mental problems.

"Doll ownership is nothing more than a hobby. All the doll owners I have met are decent people. We are just a community of hobbyists. Our things are

our dolls, and we love them dearly without being delusional," he says. But he's also quick to point out that Phoebe's impact on his life was very therapeutic. "I got the doll to take a vacation from dating, to reconnect and find out who I was and what I really wanted. Before I got Phoebe I was feeling hurt, alone, abandoned, and whatnot. She gave me a type of comfort that I had never had before. She allowed me to forget what I lacked in life" - a wife and family. "Life is full. I know it really isn't, but it feels good. It's almost like a mirror: If you love the dolls, they will love you back."



"Penelope is a socialite, a party girl," says Mahtek, 45, referring to one of the two silicone sex dolls that he owns. Like little kids playing with dolls, sex doll owners often make up personalities for their toys.



Once in a while Mahtek, 45, likes to dance with Phoebe, one of the two silicone love dolls that he owns. Most of the days the doll stays in bed covered in an electrical blanket to keep her warm.



Mahtek, 45, does the washing up while Phoebe, one of the two silicone love dolls that he owns, relaxes. He bought Phoebe in 2004 to fill a void in his life, and says "It's not something you buy and just throw in the closet. Living with a doll is a lot like taking care of an invalid. You have to do everything for her." She is anatomically correct, but sex is fairly infrequent, says Mahtek. "For the most part she's just like a teddy bear." He likes to think of Phoebe as a special agent, like a Bond girl. "She's classy and a bit reserved. The only time I actually dress her up is for a photo shoot, because she's such a good model."

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Canadian filmmaker David Hockey bought on the Internet one of the four dolls used in the making of *Lars and the Real Girl*. Then he drove 9,000 miles with Bianca at his side, from his home in Nova Scotia to San Diego, where the dolls are made, for his documentary *Doll Chronicles: Man's Quest for the Ultimate Surrogate Female*. Most doll owners, he believes, know exactly what they have, and most would gladly give them up for a compatible female companion. "Perhaps doll ownership could be more closely...



Abyss Creations, a company located in the wealthy town of San Marcos in Southern California, manufactures "the world's finest love dolls". The silicone is applied onto the underlying jointed framework.



Abyss Creations, a company located in the wealthy town of San Marcos in Southern California, manufactures "the world's finest love dolls". These expensive life-sized silicone dolls (which cost USD \$7,000 each), are made by hand. Pictured, small sharp scissors are used to trim off any excess silicone from the dolls' bodies. Each doll is carefully handcrafted at the factory.



The nipples are painted by hand at Abyss Creations, the manufacturer. These expensive life-sized silicone dolls (which cost USD \$7,000 each), are made by hand.



Two employees are patching the ankles where the dolls get bolted into the molds to prevent slipping, at Abyss Creations, a company located in the wealthy town of San Marcos in Southern California, which manufactures "the world's finest love dolls". These expensive life-sized silicone dolls (which cost USD \$7,000 each), are made by hand.

... related to car ownership. There are those who simply see them as a form of transportation and those who treat them as if they were a family member," he says. Life with a doll is very much what life would be with a quadriplegic, he observes. "People don't buy these USD \$7,000 dolls to beat them up. They care for them."

Hockey now owns a few dolls, but confesses that although the dolls can have a certain presence, Bianca provided little companionship when driving across the country. "As a matter of fact," he recalls, "one of the loneliest moments I have experienced while driving was perhaps during the long stint from Hershey, Pennsylvania, to Phoenix, Arizona. I looked over at Bianca in the passenger seat and thought, she is not going to talk to me, or share my feelings or experience. Moments later I was on the phone with my wife."

Everhard, a 52-year-old British man with a passion for hang gliding and a fondness for dolls - he has five - is said to have inspired the character in Lars and the Real Girl. He readily acknowledges his lack of social skills. When asked what his life was like before he owned dolls, he simply answers: "The usual life of the single man wondering about how to acquire a female companionship and not being able to." In Everhard's case, the impetus to acquire his first doll was the need for sex (as his handle on the forum suggests). "For people who don't have much of a sex drive they think it's not that bad to be single. But for somebody like me, who thinks of nothing else but sex, it's quite devastating," he says.



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Another Englishman, Karl, who started the monthly webzine CoverDoll in 2000, points out that as the world progresses toward becoming a single society, more people are drawn to virtual companionship. "There is a stigma to owning something that's marketed as a sex toy, which explains why people are so reluctant to admit that they share their life with a doll," he says.

In the fascinating book *Love + Sex with Robots*, author David Levy suggests that robots will soon become the objects of real companionship and human desire. The marketing of Real Dolls as the perfect women - always ready and available, providing all the benefits of a female partner without any of the complications involved in human relationships - will likely appeal to many of the men who use prostitutes for sex, he says, and to some who have problematic sex lives at home. Levy is also convinced that electronically enhanced sex dolls should be the next big money spinner for people who are already pulling in buckets of cash from the adult entertainment industry.

"I believe the next stage will be dolls with additional features such as vibration technology and artificial speech. Just imagine a man has one of these dolls, and it's talking to him and telling him how handsome and what a wonderful lover he is!" says Levy. He believes a lot more people will buy the enhanced versions. Honey Dolls, a Japanese company, is already marketing a sex doll equipped with touch sensors that can make it moan during sex.



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Doll makers, of course, are quick to point out that their products can play a therapeutic role and fill a void in people's life. In San Marcos, a wealthy town near San Diego that is home to a large population of retirees, Matt McMullen, a 39-year old alternative rock star and artist, admits that when he first started making the dolls he thought of them only as sex toys and beautiful works of art. (The myth of Pygmalion, who falls in love with the statue he carves and later sees it brought to life by Aphrodite, can't have been far from his mind.) He is the founder of Abyss, the company that produces Real Dolls (once labeled "best sex ever" by controversial radio host Howard Stern). "I didn't think of them as therapeutic devices. Now I definitely realize that we have helped a lot of people in one way or another," he says.

His new challenge? "Pushing the prices of the dolls down, to do our part and help our customers in these tough economic times." Because even if sex sells, dolls are luxury items. As of February, Abyss had just announced a free shipping policy on all new orders.



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Back in Detroit, Mahtek is getting ready to welcome to his spotless house what he jokingly calls the "Michigan Doll Congress." It consists of a small group of people who met on the Doll Forum, a place where doll owners and lovers exchange stories, share tips on how to maintain their dolls, and build friendships. Davecat is among them. At 36, he's well known in the doll universe, having been the subject of a BBC documentary. His doll, Sidore Brigitte Kuroneko, half Japanese, half British (at least in Davecat's mind), is a celebrity thanks to all the media attention they both received. Born in 1977, the year punk rock really made it, she even has her own website.

"We don't play video games together," he says, although the small apartment they share is full of them. "I don't have time to get her out of bed for breakfast. I kiss her goodbye. There is sex, but not as much as people may think. The main thing is that she knows she makes me happy, and I make her happy. She's an emotional anchor. But at the end of the day, she's just a doll. I am an eccentric but not a lunatic." Asked to describe his relationship with the purple-haired Sidore, he replies: "She's a fictional character with flesh."



At 36, Davecat has been sharing his life for the past nine years with Sidore Brigitte Kuroneko, a real doll, having bought her in 2000. They share a small tidy apartment in a suburb of Detroit. When asked to describe the bond he has with Sidore, Davecat says "She's an anchor, but at the end of the day she's just a doll." Doll owners often describe their silicone companions as giant teddy bears. For Davecat, Sidore provides all the benefits of a female partner, but without the complications of a relationship with a human being. Dressing and undressing the doll takes a great deal of patience. "There is sex, but not as much as people may think," says Davecat. "I don't have time to get her out of bed for breakfast."

Born and raised in Detroit, Euchre likes to call himself "just another statistic." The outgoing 38-year-old recently divorced his wife, works two jobs to try to keep up with the bills, and is losing his house to foreclosure. However, the way he acquired his doll Samantha - named "unconsciously, according to his ex," after his favorite character from Sex and the City - is quite unique. Three years ago his wife, who he says did not enjoy sex, suggested that he get a doll after seeing an episode about them on Real Sex, a popular TV series broadcast on HBO. Three months and USD \$3,000 later (he bought her used, or "previously enjoyed," as Mahtek puts it), Sam arrived. She didn't save his marriage and is now the only woman in his life. "Yes, I love her, but not like a human being. I am still looking for someone else, but she would have to accept Sam, unless I stop thinking of her," he says.



Euchre, 38, from Detroit, is recently divorced. He says he enjoys watching TV with Samantha, his real doll. His ex-wife, who didn't enjoy sex, suggested he acquire a real doll after watching a show on the subject on TV.

Euchre's request may seem like wishful thinking, but CDJ and his wife, C, are living proof that doll ownership and married life aren't necessarily incompatible. The couple drove to Detroit from Ontario, Canada, to attend the Michigan gathering. C is a friendly woman in her forties who met her husband online and married him on a cruise ship en route to the Bahamas. She

has no problem sharing her man with Sandy, an attractive doll with a perfect figure, as long as the doll doesn't get into the matrimonial bed. At home, Sandy has her own bedroom filled with Tinker Bell figurines and beanie babies. She has a huge closet full of fancy clothes and sexy shoes, where she hangs when she isn't lying languorously on her bed under a poster of

Alexandre Cabanel's Birth of Venus.

CJD and his wife spend about USD \$400 a month on clothes and accessories for the doll. "I wish I could wear her clothes. I would wear everything she does," confesses C, a few sizes bigger, who helps her husband shop for Sandy's clothes. "Sandy is put away in the closet most of

the time, so she doesn't bother me. But if there is a fire and I am in the house I will save her face" - a detachable component of the doll - "because I know she means so much to him." Sandy's body, too heavy to be carried in an emergency situation (100 pounds of dead weight), will be consumed in flames. Proof, if need be, that it's not all about sex.



CDJ is a doll owner from Ontario, Canada. He is married, but spends about USD \$400 per month on clothes and accessories for his doll called Sandy, who has her own bedroom and closet in the house. Sandy spends quite a bit of time lying on her bed under a poster of Alexandre Cabanel's painting Birth of Venus. The doll has two interchangeable faces and many wigs.





Slade Fiero, also known as 'the doll doctor', owns many faces but just one doll, which he does not use for sex. Named 'Blue' (pictured), the doll is coloured blue from head to toe. Slade is a tattooist by trade, and enjoys applying makeup on the dolls' faces.

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