

This Section of *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* appears in each issue of the Journal and is dedicated to all forms of creative production born of an intimate and individual urge, often secretive, unbound from the conventional art system rules. Through short descriptions of the Outsider art work of prominent artists and new protagonists often hosted in community mental health services, this Section intends to investigate the latest developments of the contemporary art scene, where the distances between the edge and the centre are becoming more and more vague.

Carole Tansella, *Section Editor*

Morton Bartlett's secret dolls

C. Tansella*

Department of Time, Space, Image, Society, University of Verona, Verona, Italy

Received 7 February 2014; Revised 8 February 2014; Accepted 10 February 2014; First published online 19 March 2014

Key words: Erotica, Morton Bartlett, Outsider art, Photography.



On the left: Morton Bartlett: Girl Reading in Chair, Gelatin silver print, (ca. 1940), courtesy Marion Harris New York.

On the right: Photo of Morton Bartlett, courtesy Marion Harris New York. Full colour version available as online supplementary material. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S2045796014000134>

*Like a pair of binoculars with no right or wrong end,
the camera makes exotic things near, intimate;
and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much farther
away.*
Susan Sontag, 1973

*All men have secrets and here is mine
So let it be known.* The Smiths, 1983

There is a little girl with short black hair with a flower peeping through her curls. Her right arm is raised waving hello, her large dark eyes are expressing a happy surprise, her delicate mouth, as if saying 'Hi!'. Her left hand casually holds her summer dress while showing a glimpse of the lace hem of her white cotton petticoat.

In a different photo, one sees another girl, but it could quite possibly be the same. Not aware that she is being photographed, she is completely immersed in reading. She sits with her back stretched in an

* Address for correspondence: Dr Carole Tansella, Department of Time, Space, Image, Society, University of Verona, Via San Francesco 22, 37129 Verona, Italy.
(Email: carole.tansella@gmail.com; carole.tansella@univr.it)

oversized chaise lounge; leaning on her bent legs rests a large book. From under her sweater peers out a white t-shirt cropped at the navel, her ankles look out of her dark pants. She's reminiscent of a little Audrey Hepburn.

Then there are the pictures of the seaside. Girls with the signature boater on their head to protect them from the sun, in bikinis, and also without, but with a garland of flowers around their neck, enjoying the last rays of the sunset, before returning home from a long day at the beach.

In 1993, a year after Morton Bartlett's death, about two hundred black and white photographs, such as those just described, were found in his cellar. Various pencil sketches of children; seventeen colour slides never before printed, and above all, fifteen dolls, all little girls (plus some boys) aged preteen, sculpted in clay and plaster. A set of handmade clothes and wigs accompany each sculpture (Kittelmann & Dichter, 2012).

Morton Bartlett is an atypical artist among Outsider artists, which is the way he has been categorized since the discovery of his work. Bartlett did not have a history of hospitalization for psychiatric reasons; he was, in fact, a man who was well-placed in his community. He had his professional ups-and-downs, as anyone might have experienced, but he would never know the difficulties of a life at the margins of society. He considered his creations, the production and photographs of his dolls, as nothing more than a private hobby. He would never publicly exhibit them neither to his acquaintances nor to the art world.

Born January 20th, 1909 in Chicago, Illinois, Bartlett was orphaned at the age eight and soon after adopted by a wealthy couple from Cohasset, Massachusetts, the Goddard-Bartlett family. In his later years, Bartlett attended Harvard, but left after only one year, perhaps for economic reasons related to the Great Depression. Bartlett served in the military during World War II and upon his return to Boston held various jobs, including working as a freelance photographer. Later on in life he would go on to found the advertising agency Morton Bartlett and Associates (Kittelmann & Dichter, 2012).

From 1936 to 1963, Bartlett escaped from the routine of work within the walls of his house and devoted himself entirely to his family: his dolls. Bartlett's dolls were created with anatomical precision, the tailoring work in shaping and sewing the clothes and wigs and the construction of the scenes to create the right ambience for his photo shoots convey nothing more than sheer passion, patience and devotion, with which Bartlett lets himself be enchanted by a unique, sensual and idealized love.

The most prestigious stages of the art world, such as the last Venice Biennale, contend for the obscure and

eccentric oeuvre of this artist. His work is admired for the acute attention to detail and careful staging of the photographs, but also because it gives the rare opportunity to engage in a cultural taboo, a private perversion, not through the keyhole, but openly, in a sublime and idealised form.

Bartlett's 'so sweet and scary' productions (Simmons, 2003) do not look to be provocative. And how could they be, as creations born for purely private use (as it is typical of Outsider art)? Nevertheless, we hear the voice of Professor Humbert Humbert whispering in our ears the word 'paedophilia'. A lingering feeling of uncanniness takes over us and stains the mind after seeing these works. Perhaps because every time privacy is exposed and individual modesty is betrayed, an unsettling feeling of having crossed the limits of pornography taunts us.

The work of Morton Bartlett is conserved in Switzerland by the Collection de l' Art Brut in Lausanne and is part of the Marion Harris art collection in New York.

Barlett's art was part of numerous exhibitions among them Marion Harris, Outsider Art Fair, New York, 1995; Obsession, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, 1999; Pupées, Halles Saint Pierre, Paris, 2004; Create and be recognized. Photography on the edge, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2004–2005; Secret universe. Morton Bartlett, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Morton Bartlett, Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, 2012–2013; The Encyclopedic Palace, 55th International Art Exhibition, Venice, 2013.

Financial Support

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Standards

The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

Supplementary materials and methods

The supplementary materials referred to in this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S2045796014000134>

References

- Kittelmann U, Dichter C** (2012). *Secret Universe. Morton Bartlett*. Exhibition Catalogue, 11 May–14 October 2012, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König: Köln.
- Simmons L** (2003). *Guy and Dolls. The Art of Morton Bartlett*. Artforum, September issue: New York.
- Sontag S** (1973). *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York.
- The Smiths** (1983). *What Difference Does It Make?* Rough Trade Records: London.