

Alice Anderson's Time Reversal

A *Riflemaker* EXHIBITION



Alice Anderson directing the film *The Night I Became a Doll*, 2009.





Rapunzel by Marina Warner

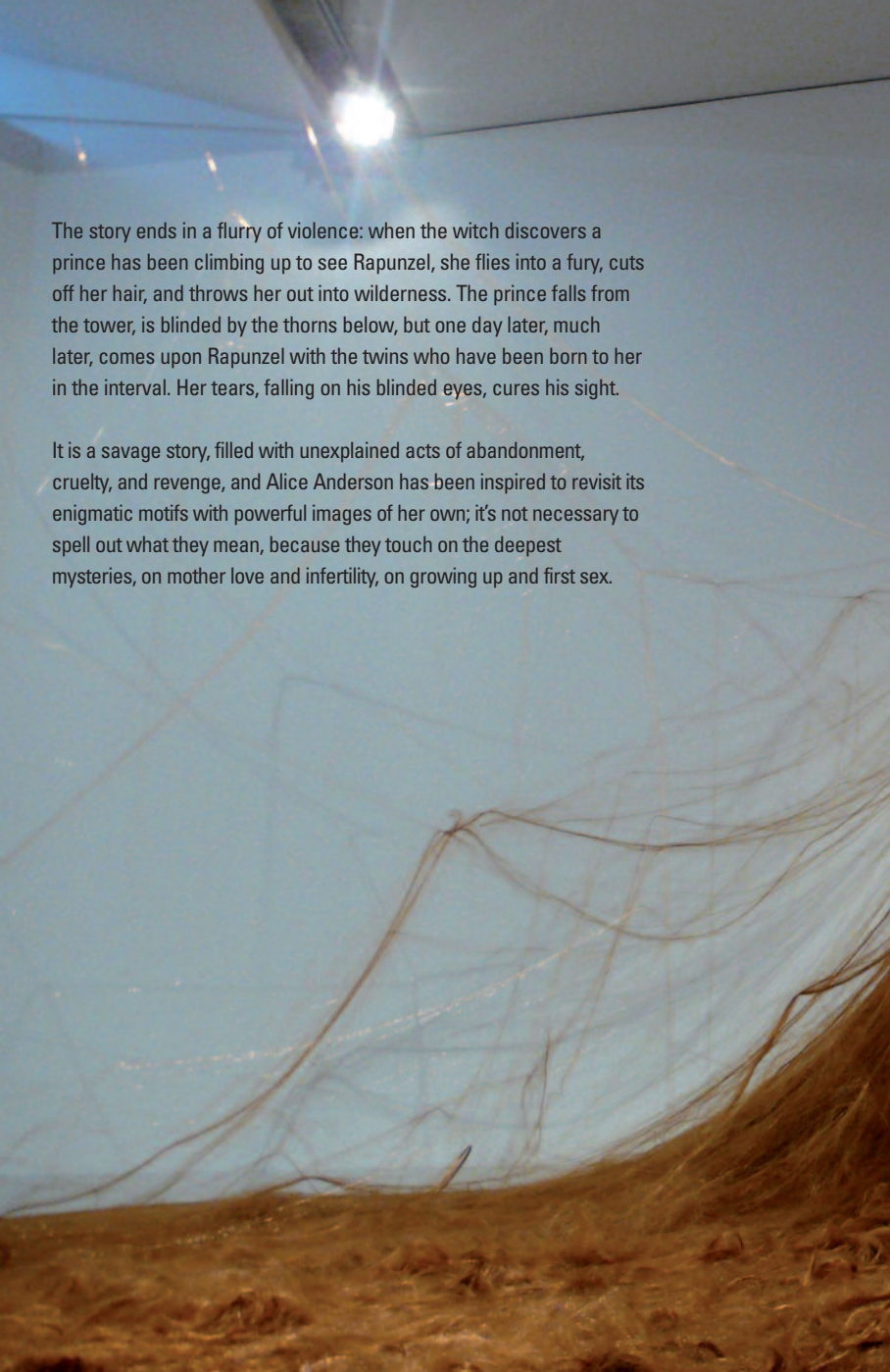
3000 metres of doll's hair, Marc Chagall National Museum, 2008

The tale of 'Rapunzel' has inspired recurring motifs in Alice Anderson's work - the fall and swathes of blazing red hair; the tower; the scissors; the coveted child who is maltreated; the true mother and the false mother - have appeared in earlier works of hers as well as in this show. She brings to them her own fantasy identifications, but the frisson remains attuned to the fairytale original.

The Grimms' classic version opens with a woman and her husband who long to have a child, but have had no success; it then describes how the sad woman can see into the garden of the witch who lives next door, and noticing some herb or greenstuff growing there, conceives a craving for it: it is rampion, known in German as *rapunzel*, a kind of lettuce or spinach. Her cravings become so intense she appears to be dying of want, so her husband decides to steal into the garden and take some for her. The first time, he succeeds, but eating it only makes his wife want more, so she begs him to go back, and this time, he's caught in the act by the witch, who makes him swear that he will hand over to her the child who will be born. 'It will have a good life,' she says, 'I will take care of it like a mother.'

When the little girl is born, the witch appears, calls her Rapunzel after the herb she had craved, and takes her as her own. She is beautiful, we are told, and when she reaches the age of 12, the old woman locks her up in a tower with no door and no stairs and only a single window at the very top of the tower. Every day, when her witch mother calls up to her, the girl winds her long hair round a hook by the window (the story is clear about this important practicality) and hauls up her 'old mother' to bring her provisions - and company.

The Grimms then created one of the most memorable, weird, fairy tale refrains: '*Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your hair.*'

The background of the text is a large-scale art installation. It features a light blue, slightly textured wall. A bright, circular light fixture is mounted on the ceiling, casting a strong glow. From the top, a dense network of thin, brown, hair-like strands hangs down, creating a complex, web-like structure that fills the lower half of the frame. The strands are thin and delicate, resembling hair or fine threads, and they are arranged in a way that suggests movement and entanglement. The overall atmosphere is ethereal and somewhat unsettling, reflecting the themes of the text.

The story ends in a flurry of violence: when the witch discovers a prince has been climbing up to see Rapunzel, she flies into a fury, cuts off her hair, and throws her out into wilderness. The prince falls from the tower, is blinded by the thorns below, but one day later, much later, comes upon Rapunzel with the twins who have been born to her in the interval. Her tears, falling on his blinded eyes, cures his sight.

It is a savage story, filled with unexplained acts of abandonment, cruelty, and revenge, and Alice Anderson has been inspired to revisit its enigmatic motifs with powerful images of her own; it's not necessary to spell out what they mean, because they touch on the deepest mysteries, on mother love and infertility, on growing up and first sex.





Towers

TOWER, circular room, 3 x 4 m, made of plaster, Frac Paca, 2008



TOWER, *ISOLATED CHILD*, white leather cylinder, 37 x 22 cm, white head glass pins,
10 cm silicon doll, 2008







TOWER, *IRREVERSIBILITY*, transparent cylinder, 37 x 22 cm, white wadding, 10 cm silicon doll, white enamel paint, 2008



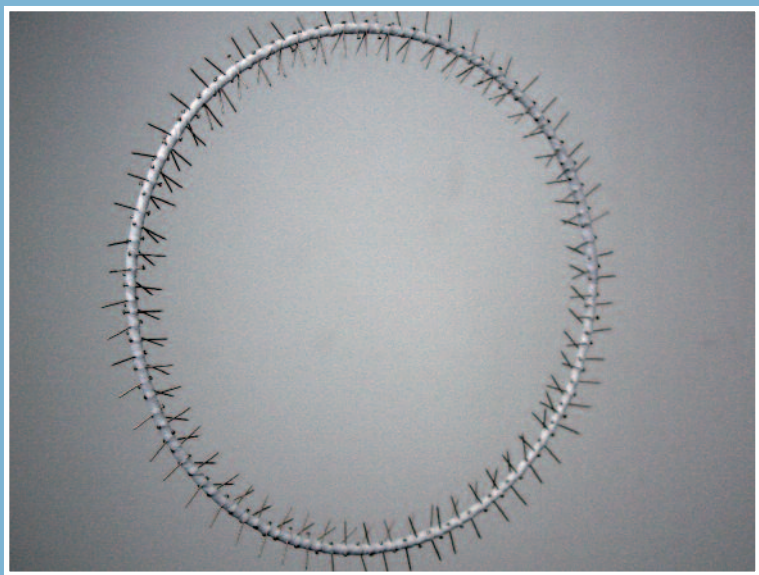
TOWER, *UNTITLED*, white wadding cylinder, 37 x 22 cm, white head glass pins, original 4 cm plaster doll, 2008





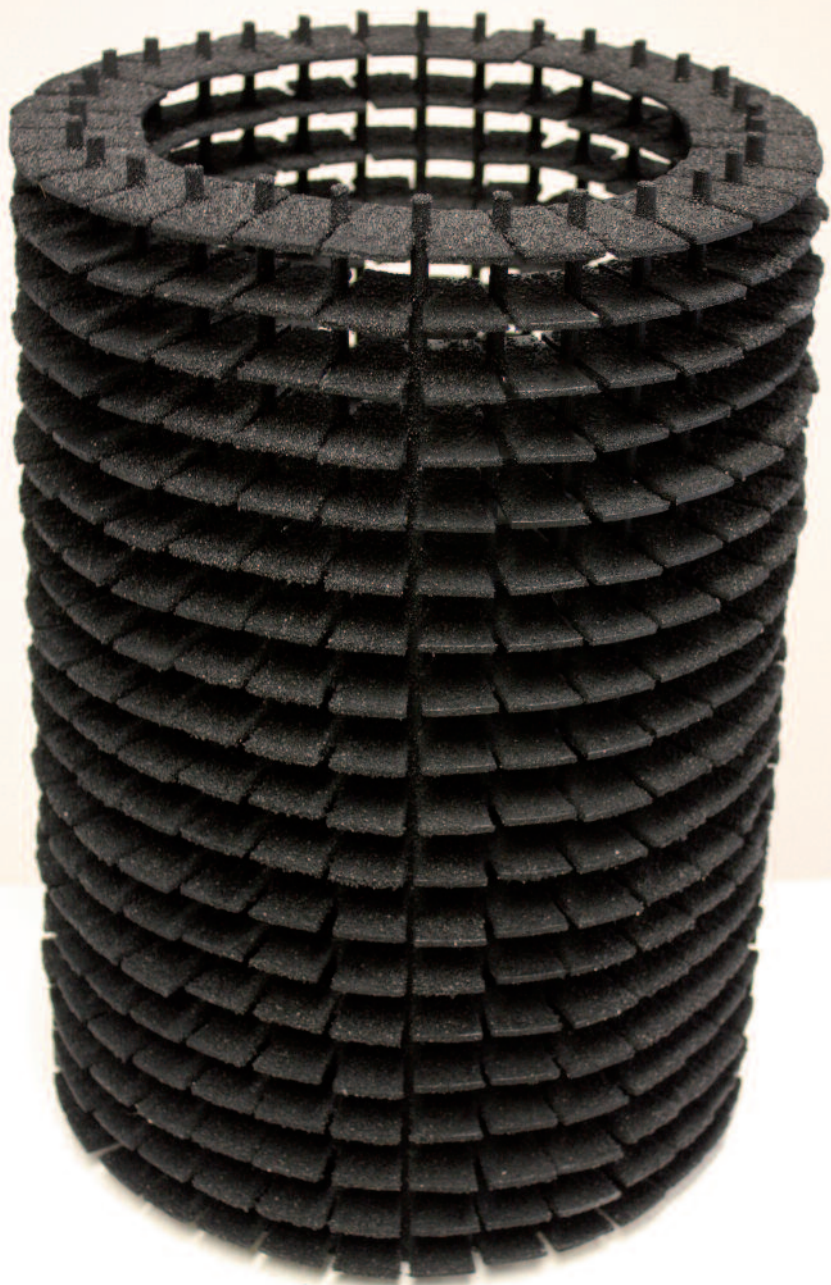


TOWER, *TIME LAG*, iron fence cylinders, 37 x 22 cm, white leather, 10 cm hand made silicon doll,
14 cm manufactured doll, 2008



PASSAGEWAY, glass head pins, white leather ribbon, 22 cm diameter, doll's hair, 2009







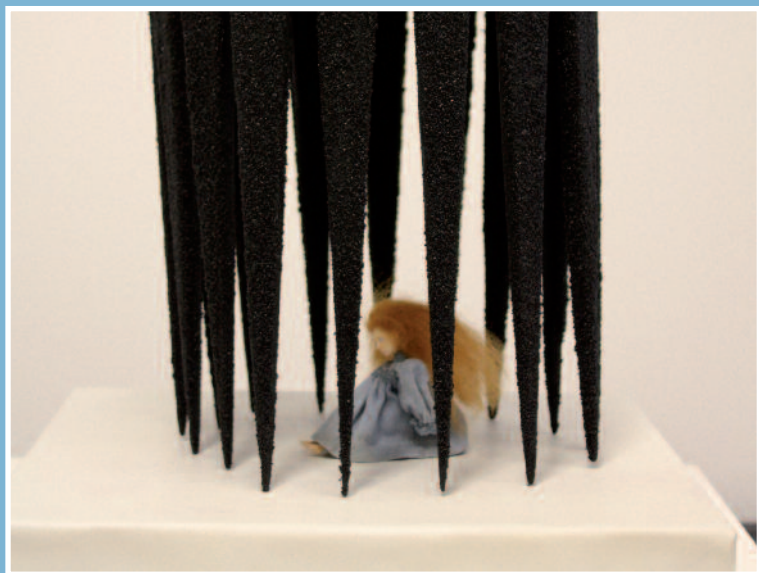
SAND TOWERS, *MEMORY*, black sand figurine, mixed media, 37 x 22 cm, 2009



SAND TOWERS, *SPINE*, black sand, mixed media, 37 x 22 cm, 2009







SAND TOWERS, *CROWN*, black sand, mixed media, 37 x 22 cm, 2009

Maud Jacquin In 2008, we collaborated on your series of solo exhibitions at the Marc Chagall National Museum, the Picasso Museum and at the Frac Paca. Since then your work has taken a new turn. At the time you were hiding with alter-egos such as Peter Pan or Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* whereas you have now fully accepted the autobiographical, or shall we say auto-fictional, dimension in your work.

Alice Anderson I used to play with the characters of Alice and Peter Pan, but also with other characters, all red-haired like me, in my films and sculptures. I'm getting to the point where I see how an autobiography can be purely fictional. An autobiography can manifest itself somewhere else other than in the immediate or literal truth of a story.

It is now clear to me that my work is a compulsive and obsessive production through which I explore and give shape to my childhood. I'm reinventing my childhood by playing with the fictional nature of memory – which is concerned with the notion of time – and its infinite layers.

For me, memory is the master of fiction. Memory is a reconstruction of a reconstruction, which constantly changes. Each memory is a distortion; therefore each memory is a creation in itself. Images that we create with brain are not linked to what our eyes can see but to the work of memory itself. The philosopher Henri Bergson says that in order to talk about the past, we must dream.

15 Minute Interview by Maud Jacquin

MJ I have the impression that you have been creating more connections between your filmic and plastic works recently. You could say that the drawings, photographs and sculptures now draw the films out into the gallery space. But unlike Matthew Barney, whose sculptures are often taken from his actual film sets, you create new situations in a more abstract way, elaborating on the characters and motifs of your films.

AA Further than Barney's? [Laughs] Well, I don't see any difference between working inside or outside of a filmic space. The sculptures are other aspects of the narrative in an exhibition space. A body of work that has crystallised. In my films time runs in a linear way –but also develops in successive layers like in sculpture where time plays differently.

MJ And the doll who had an autonomous existence has now penetrated the filmic space. At the Picasso Museum, you made an installation – *Spectre* (2008) – in which she was exhibited in a glass coffin. What could have been the end of something marked the *beginning* of the doll's story, as if you had decided to go back in time.

AA The starting point of the loop you are describing started in 2006 when I had my exact replica, scaled down to a height of approximately 50cms, made by a sculptor at the Madame Tussauds waxworks museum in London. I had the strange feeling that this little doll took control over me in some way, so the first thing I produced with this doll was a series of photographs called *Master Puppet* towards the end of 2006. In that series one could obviously see that the doll is controlling me. Month by month, my anxiety about this increased, so I decided to put her in a glass coffin to get rid of her. I was in a double bind. In a way I couldn't commit myself to such an act, but I knew I had to do it. I went for the glass so it was less definitive.

Months later, the writer Louise Gray, a great friend of mine, gave me a book called *The Dolls' Day*, a 1915 children's novel by Carine Cadby. The title and its illustrations inspired me a lot. As the title suggests, it is a story about some dolls escaping from the playroom to have adventures in the outside world, but the photographs accompanying the text are fascinating – all the animals that Cadby's dolls encounter are dead, in that they have been stuffed by a taxidermist.

The book led me to imagine a long internal journey with the doll, a sort of a *circular novel* with many chapters happening in different locations. I decided to start with a chapter directly called *The Dolls' Day* (2008). It was shot in an abandoned water tower in Lille. The story about a doll with no name who goes back into her parents' past to seek revenge. The subsequent chapter *The Night I Became a Doll* (2009), was filmed in a 17th-century mansion in the middle of the swamps of the Camargue, about a girl who stops moving, eating and speaking to the point where she becomes a doll to her mother.

MJ Does the fact that you started with *The Dolls' Day* relate to this idea of going back in time? Could it be that *The Dolls' Day* is in fact the second chapter of the "circular novel" you are talking about? I would like to know more about the storyline connecting this film and *The Night I Became a Doll*.

AA The two stories are entwined. Obviously, things are not as simple as they first appear! If you place yourself in the girl's point of view, *The Dolls' Day* comes first, because this is where the girl's birth takes place. If you now look at it from the doll's point of view, *The Night I Became a Doll* comes first because this is where the doll's birth and its revenge takes place.

MJ Your recent films articulate more fragmented narratives, multiplying the instabilities of time and space which brings to mind David Lynch's films for instance. Is this an attempt to mirror the functioning of memory itself?

AA Yes. Memory works this way and you're right to say that disconnections of time and space are the basic language I use for my films and my sculptures. In *The Night I Became a Doll*, for instance, I'm using a gigantic circular magnifying glass to create a dialogue with the idea of a non-Euclidian space. The lens generates a physical sensation of the world becoming suddenly upside down. In fact the world I'm talking about is just an alternative experience of the world itself. However, this process seems to be the way the brain works and drives our memory.

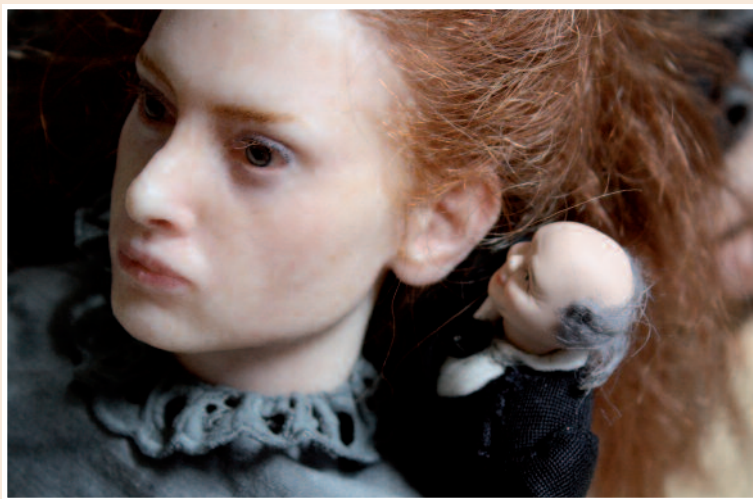
We learn so hard to articulate the way our brain works along a linear and chronological canvas to fit within the cultural and social reality. It is a permanent pressure we've been taught to repress our perceptions into common acceptance, you don't have to do a lot to unleash our perceptions into completely alternative mind routes. This undisciplined intelligence of what surrounds us embeds itself in childhood. Another book by Lewis Carroll – *Sylvie and Bruno* – plays with the dislocation of time as children construct parallel worlds. *The Dolls' Day* and *The Night I Became a Doll* haven't got one layer, but many layers.





Puppet Master

PUPPET MASTER, Series of 3 photographs, 60 x 80 cm, 2008



PARENTS' VOICES, Series of 5 photographs, 60 x 80 cm, 2008





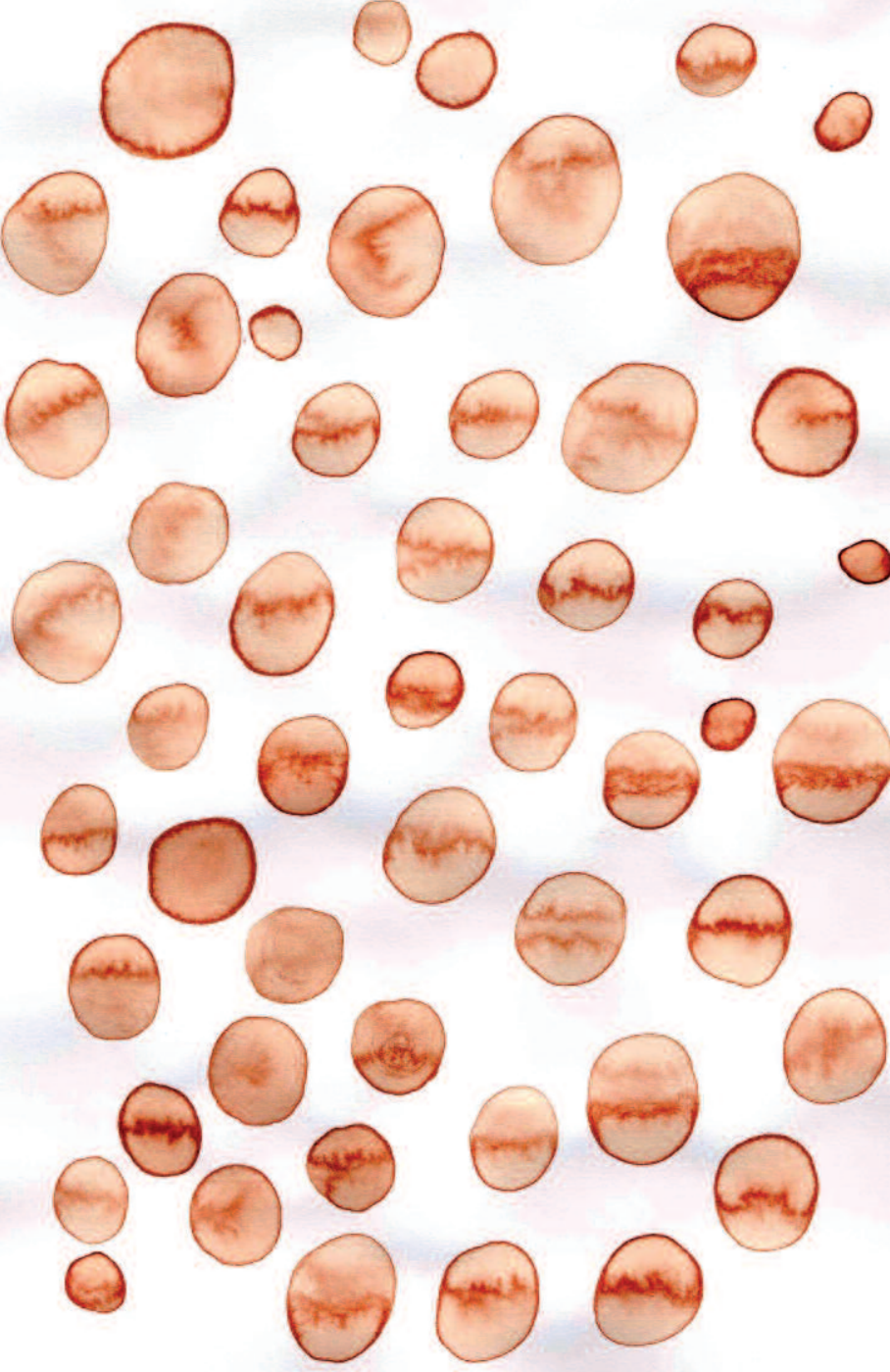
SPECTRE, 50 cm silicon doll, glass coffin, 30 x 20 x 70 cm, Picasso National Museum, 2008





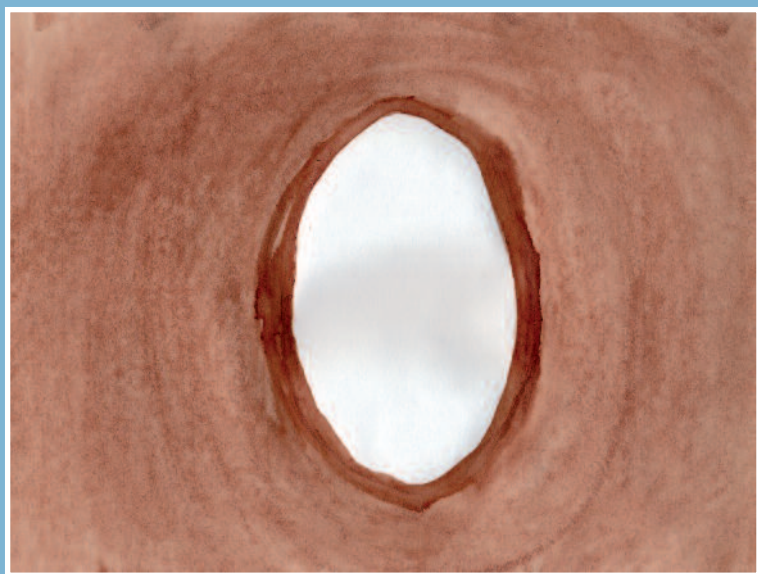


DOLL'S MASK N.5, silicon mask, glass eyes, leather ribbon, 20 x 25 cm, 2009



Drawings

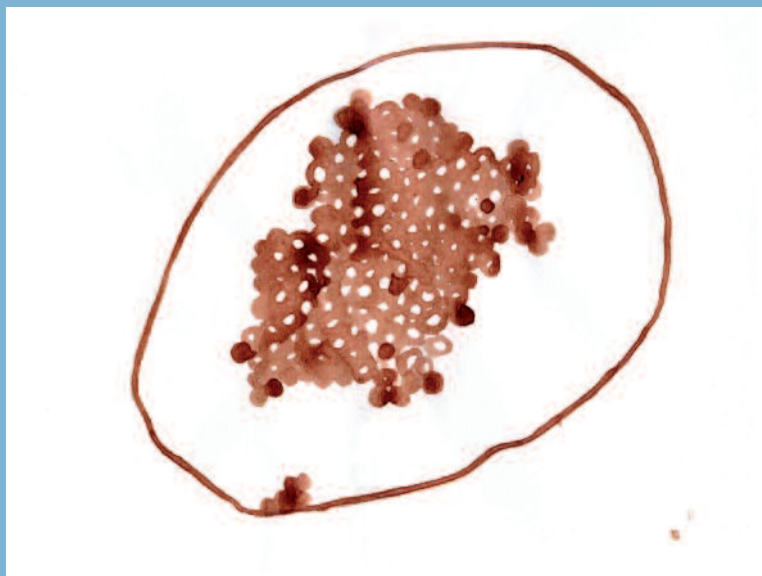
SERIES III, artist blood on paper, 21 x 30 cm, ongoing series, 2009













MJ These architectures are often circular and claustrophobic. Circular rooms, menacing towers and narrow spaces form your obsessive universe. If, for you, the circularity refers to the idea of endless repetition and non-linear time, it also symbolises the isolation experienced by your characters. Could you tell us more about the oppressive dimension of these circular shapes?

AA I'm obsessed with the circular shape; it has a lot to do with anxiety. It refers to enclosure. The circle is the only shape I can see properly, and therefore comprehend, properly. Even though the more I think I understand it, the more I realise how much I'm far from this understanding. Circular, isn't it?

Even when the shape itself is not a round one in itself, it is the obsession, which works in a circular way. For example, *Rapunzel* (2008), my installation at National Museum Marc Chagall talks about enclosure, about being enclosed, and it uses 3,000 metres of red dolls' hair to do this. In the pop tale of the Brothers Grimm, the character Rapunzel is imprisoned in a tower. My *Rapunzel* echoes a specific period of my childhood, the fact that someone is enclosed in a room.

MJ Architecture occupies a central place in your films, a space that is generally permeated by a psychological charge. Is it fair to say that your narratives both originate in and reveal the buildings' own stories?

AA Architectures have always been the starting point of my stories. This is the triggering point of recollection. It reminds me of the late choreographer Pina Bausch when she explained that dance begins when we remain speechless in front of architectures. And then there's Alfred Hitchcock and his continual attention to architecture – he would re-write a sequence of his script, to make it fit to some peculiar architecture he was confronted with.

MJ You also create analogies between architecture and bodies. In *The Dolls' Day*, for instance, the organic dimension of the space gives the viewers the bizarre impression of penetrating both a bodily and mental interior. Do you agree with this reading? Why this connection between bodies and buildings?

AA That's absolutely right. Our relation to memory and childhood is very much a physical relation. When I remember things, I live them in my body – it is also a physical experience. We were talking about the brain's role in the memory process like if it was disembodied we know this is not exactly what it is. All this happens within a body. The idea of the body is very important to me. I believe there is a true "thinking" of the body. In my work there is always something that says something about the body. There is always a physical emotion in what I show.

My body has always been my main material. I started as an artist doing performances and since then I have been working with elements of the body. As far as the architecture is concerned, there is an obvious intimate connection between the body and the architecture.

When I discovered the water tower that I used in *The Dolls' Day* it was an immediate shock. It was, for me, the perfect metaphorical projection of the body and a perfect mirror for my story. When I saw the hole in the ceiling, I immediately thought of a cervix and the mise-en-scène became obvious. The sequence where the daughter puts her head into the hole to come into the world was so clear to me. And when I discovered the large central leaking pipe I immediately made the analogy between childbirth and the pain that the mother has when she realised that she has given birth to a girl and not a boy.

The body becomes a piece of architecture in *The Night I Became a Doll*. I've made the body as part of the site. The body of the young girl merges with the architecture and furniture, as if she was part of it. It is as if the girl wanted to merge into the walls of the labyrinthine tower.

MJ There is a new element in the content of your stories as well. While in your previous films the daughter was systematically the victim of her mother's malicious intentions, *The Dolls' Day* and *The Night I Became a Doll* stage the revolt of the daughter who performs the most horrific crimes to complete her revenge. Are you aware of this evolution?

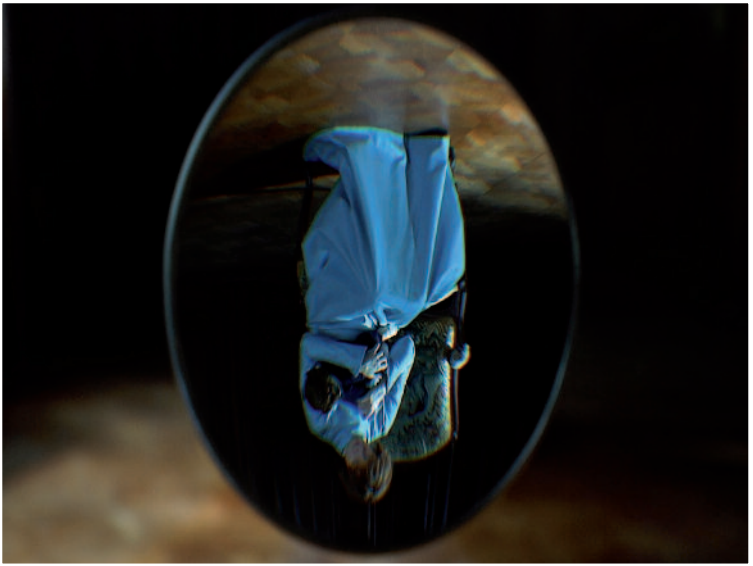
AA There is always some sort of violence, which comes out of the relation between the mother and the daughter. You're right to say that in some of my earlier films this violence was self-directed and it is now more towards the mother. However, the whole point is about power, the idea of power. Power is always the central point of my work. Manifestations of power come and go both ways. For me, the family is the footprint of all political organisations. It is an original unit where we have many aspects of relationships and cultural traditions. In the mother-daughter relationship there aren't two actors, but three. Power is the third element.

MJ For me, these two films investigate the role of storytelling with relation to identity and the resolution of traumatic experience. If in your previous works you were interested in questioning traditional narratives and the act of rewriting, you now seem to engage in a reflection on narration itself.

AA We've mentioned earlier on that autofiction and storytelling are directly linked with the work of memory. In *The Dolls' Day*, the father reveals his story to his daughter and this is what gives her enough strength to revolt. In *The Night I Became a Doll*, it's a matter of silence.

MJ True to your circular narratives, can we conclude with the beginning of a new story... can you let us know what your next chapter will be?

AA The next chapter will take place in Algeria where my mother comes from. In a few years' time, all the chapters will come together as one *circular novel*.



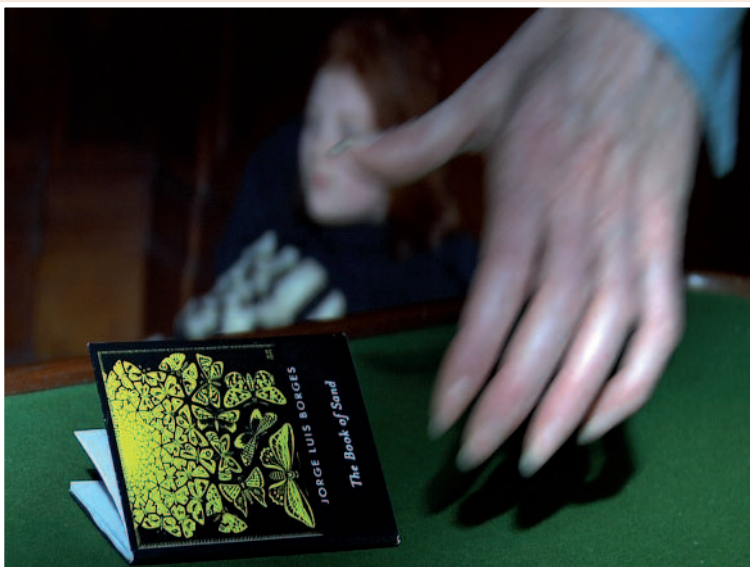
The Night I Became a Doll

9 Minute Video 16/9 ©2009, Arte, Paris-Brest Productions, Anna Leska Films











When one afternoon in 2007 I found by chance a copy of *The Dolls' Day* in a junkshop in Spitalfields, I knew that the novel – published in 1915 in the early years of the First World War by Carine Cadby – should be bought for my friend Alice Anderson. What I didn't know was that, in Anderson's hands, the book would become a springboard for something altogether new. "The starting point of a new body of work, a sort of circular novel with many chapters all together called *The Dolls' Day*."

It was Cadby's illustrations – photographic scenarios featuring dolls and other animals, the latter, dead and stuffed – that alerted me, even though by the standard of her times, they were not extraordinarily bizarre. In some of Alice Anderson's earlier art works, she had experimented with immured body parts – at one installation in Burgundy, the smooth walls bulged with the plaster-cast shapes of her limbs; and more recently she had been working with waxworks. We had had conversations about puppets, toys and homunculi and the power they exert and the ambivalence they generate in both the popular and fantastical imaginations. In any case, the book became a present and it was a good present, although the coincidence of a book published in wartime for a birthday that falls on Armistice Day was not one made consciously by me at the time. The book itself needed something more, to be wrapped in context and Anderson was insistent that she be told the full story of how the book came into my hands. A junkshop in the historic East End of London, next to the *Ten Bells*, a pub where, over 120 years ago, some of the victims of Jack the Ripper drank and a place where, today, contemporary Jack the Ripper story tours regularly drop off. And so a storybook begat a story, and, as is the nature of storytelling, resonances are created, slips are made and networks of association are constructed and mangled and broken, but never ever dissolved.

Unlike those of Jack the Ripper, the victims of Alice Anderson are not (at least in any legal sense) real, but there is no doubting the violence done to her puppets nor the rigours of the world in which they are situated. In the assembly of artworks – drawings, models, installation and film – that make up Anderson's *The Dolls' Day* (2008), there are drawings in blood, red-headed dolls – facsimiles

of the artist herself – encased in either a high tower, its interior studded with pins, or a wire towers. While these dolls have not been completely abandoned (indeed, in *Time Lag*, one element of the larger exhibition, two dolls, each captive in their own wire tower, are linked brutally, by a single rope of red hair), the parental figures that feature in the film of *The Dolls' Day* have no potency – there is no hope of rescue or contact or communication.

In the last section of the film of *The Dolls' Day*, the daughter breaks and destroys the doll representation of her parents in an act of violence described by Darien Leader in his introductory essay as “so powerful that no ‘realistic representation could do it justice”. The terrifying aspect of Anderson’s *Dolls' Day* is that there no reparation is either sought or allowed.

In *The Secret Life of Puppets*, writer Victoria Nelson suggests that human-made images operate today in “a lost field of perception”. It is, she says, impossible for us to look on images – she offers us as examples Christ on his cross and a statue of Krishna – and see the coincidence of the supernatural and the vital. Although Nelson is working within a different space to that of *The Dolls' Day*, *The Secret Life* is nevertheless germane to a study of Anderson’s work. If puppets were once experienced as gods (as Nelson theorises), then what of this still lingers in their presence? If a child’s parents could be considered the first gods, then, with her models and her puppets, Anderson is an artist who is also an iconoclast. Out of such destruction comes the separation necessary to work.

The Dolls' Day

by Louise Gray



The Dolls' Day

10 Minute Video 16/9 ©2008, Espace Croise, Alice Anderson











Front Cover **PUPPET MASTER** series photographed by
Marcela Iriarte set designer for film and illustrator, London 2008

Back Cover **ALBERT EINSTEIN** photo by Harry Burnett,
Caltech Archives

Front & Back Cover Flap **Alice Anderson / Performance at the
Marc Chagall National Museum, 2008**

Inside Covers **MEMORY SCREEN, 1.80 m wooden camera, slide
projector, Frac Paca 2008**

Alice Anderson's Time Reversal is a Riflemaker exhibition

Special thanks to Marina Warner for Rapunzel text.

© Marina Warner 2010

Page 2 Photograph by Agnès des Ligneris

Book edited by Tot Taylor. Design by Julian Balme at Vegas Design

Curated by Virginia Damtsa. Thanks to Robin Mann at Riflemaker

Footnote, pages 56-57

1] Alice Anderson *15 minute interview* by Maud Jacquin, 2009

2] Darien Leader, *The Doll's Day* exhibition catalogue,
Artproix Space, London, 2009.

3] Victoria Nelson *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Harvard University
Press, 2001.

ISBN 978-0-9563571-2-0

Published in an edition of 1000 copies

ALSO AVAILABLE IN THE RIFLEMAKER SERIES

Artists Anonymous: Lucifer over London, text by JJ Charlesworth

Anya Niemi: Porcelain

José-María Cano: La Tauromaquia, text by A L Kennedy

Voodoo: Hoochie-Coochie and the creative Spirit, edited by Tot Taylor with
text by Marina Warner and Zina Saro-Wiwa, 2008

Liliane Lijn: Stardust, 2008

Francesca Lowe & Alasdair Gray: Terminus. Unpublished short story by
Alasdair Gray, text by Sarah Kent, 2007

Chosil Kil: Living With Andis, co-published with Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2007

Jamie Shovlin: Lustfaust, text by Jamie Shovlin, 2006

Gavin Turk: Me As Him, text by Tot Taylor, 2007

Riflemaker becomes Indica: by Tot Taylor, with contributions from
Barry Miles & John Dunbar, 2006

William S. Burroughs: The Unseen Art of William S. Burroughs
with text by Stephen Lowe and James Grauerholz, 2006

Jamie Shovlin: Fontana Modern Masters, text by Martin Holman, 2005

Christopher Bucklow: If This Be Not I by Christopher Bucklow, 2004

Marta Marcé: Playroom, reproduction of the artist's sketchbook, 2004

Jamie Shovlin: Naomi V. Jelish, 2004

We have made every effort to clear copyrights in all images and text used in this
publication. Any amendments will be corrected in future printings.