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WILL SHELDON: MY SMALL SUPER STAR

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Untitled (Red Eyes), 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 55 inches (182.88 x 139.7 cm)

by Katja Horvat

*Imagery Courtesy of Will Sheldon and Heidi
Photos of paintings Thomas Müller*

“I will be whatever you want me to be,” kind of sums up the ‘*My Small Super Star*’ series and the first European solo exhibition by artist Will Sheldon. Sheldon’s latest work takes on ball-jointed dolls and brings them, or more so, strips them of any preconception one could have, allowing the viewer to perceive the dolls in a completely authentic way.

Sheldon’s inspiration for this series is a full circle moment over his obsession with German artist Hans Bellmer, who built a mannequin back in 1933 using ball joints, and used her as a model for his photography. Bellmer’s doll was completely manipulated and perversely grotesque. His work, and the dolls, at the time, were not well received by the Nazi’s, which prompted Bellmer’s move to Paris, where surrealists completely embraced him. Later on he published a book of over 100 BJD photographs that he took between the years 1936 to 1938, a book that started a whole (sub)culture of collecting and making dolls, with its biggest craze coming from Japan.

These days, a website called legenddoll.net is what got Sheldon’s attention and inspired the series the most. Legend Doll is a retailer where you can buy a completely set up doll or you could do a build-up, in which case joints are sold separately. The latter is where Sheldon got his inspiration for ‘*My Small Super Star*,’ as his dolls mostly have no hair, no eyes and appear with very visible joints. The eyes caught Sheldon’s attention the most as the empty socket mixed with the lightning used to photograph the dolls creates an empty yet radiating gaze, which is something Sheldon brings to notice in his paintings.

The dolls range in set up as much as they range in what they trigger and mean to people. From Agalmatophilia (sexual attraction to dolls) to Pediophobia (fear of dolls). From complete comfort to discomfort, and anxiety. Dolls simply cannot exist in a neutral middle and the same goes for Sheldon’s paintings. ‘*My Small Super Star*’ will definitely make you feel something, but it’s up to your psyche to determine where on the spectrum you are, and what you end up getting out of it.

KATJA HORVAT: Let’s start at the beginning. Why BJD?

WILL SHELDON: It all clicked when I started to go through a website that sells them. I was looking through these images and how people that are selling these dolls take pictures of them... It all really reminded me of being in college and doing still life in drawing classes—dolls were lit in the same way. I don’t know, there was just something about it that felt different, and also these dolls are basically the dolls that Hans Bellmer helped create. It all comes from him and I’ve been a big fan of his since I can remember; he is a big inspiration for how I draw and what I draw.

There is so much to the dolls, and it has been explored before—it’s not new, but I just became completely enamoured by the photos that people were taking of the dolls, to the point I ended up buying it and now painting it.

HORVAT: Show is called “My Small Super Star” which in a way already has a sexual innuendo on its own, but then the dolls itself could also easily be perceived as sexual very fast. Is there more to this or is it just the human perception and how we were almost taught to think and parcel things?

SHELDON: I think that the dolls can represent many things; one of them is perfection, and that specifically can be controversial for a lot of reasons. And also, simply put, people do sexualize perfection. That being said, when I look at them, I don’t think of them as sexual beings. I just like painting them. If they were real people, it would have been totally different.

There is this documentary I watched, “Married to the Eiffel Tower” where the protagonist, as said in the title, marries the tower. And I don’t know, through that doc you see there is an array of people who get more from the objects that we could ever think of. They just establish a different type of connection, and I think this whole thing is really interesting to see and tap into.

Also, what I found through following people that collect these specific BJDs I am drawing, is that they give them power and help them overcome certain issues. People place their own imagination through

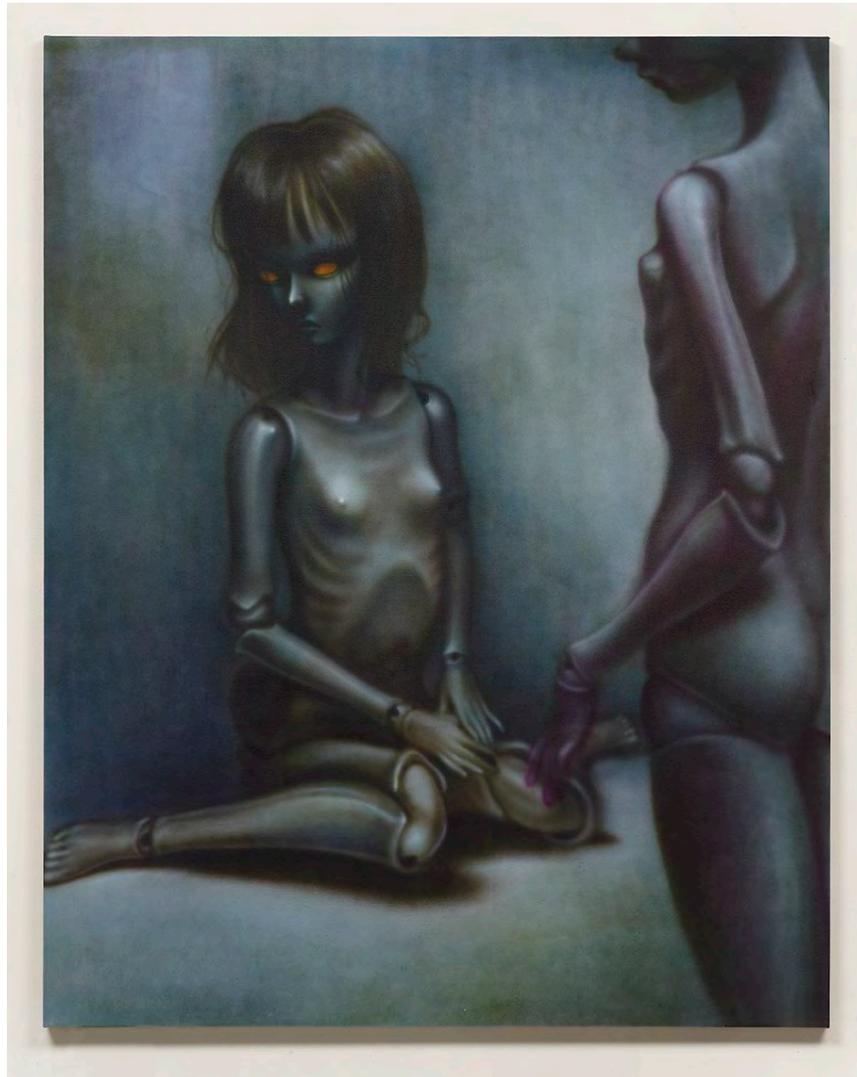
them and project their wishes onto them; for some it's sexual but for many it's just emotional connection and sense of comfort and care.

HORVAT: Dolls itself are not an easy subject, and people are usually very opinionated when it comes to them. Prior to making the work, did you ever think about the narrative it will be placed in?

SHELDON: I think some people will like it and some people really won't, as the work is rather specific. There is a whole different range of emotions that paintings and the dolls can exude but that's the point, that's basically what the dolls are, they are a vessel that makes you feel a very specific way which connects to your own personal sense of being.

And as long as my work is a jumping off point and a lens for people to feel a certain way, good or bad, that's great! However, people want to read into them, it's basically what the dolls should be doing.

Also, collecting real or BJD dolls is mostly deemed anti-social behavior, and that is a scary thing to many, not the doll itself, but more so what it represents and who these collectors supposedly are. There is a norm and then there are people projecting these normative ideals onto anything and everything.



Untitled (Blue Corner), 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 55 inches (182.88 x 139.7cm)

HORVAT: Correct. To me the doll collecting most heavily connects to loneliness, which is a disease. Obviously the obsession ranges, but at the end of the day, all these people who are collecting either dolls or whatever type of objects, they are filling up a certain void, a certain pain in their life.

SHELDON: Exactly, and the more you feel lonely, the more you alienate yourself, unconsciously almost, but you are just so in your head that you go into this vortex that is really hard to get out of. And I would think it's easier to fill a void with something that comes to you blank, with no real emotions and personality, as that gives you the freedom to project and make up whatever you need and are feeling at that moment.

HORVAT: One thing I really like is that most of your dolls are not named—paintings are untitled. As soon as you put a name on something, you create a certain narrative, and I think it's very smart to leave that door open so each viewer can create a story that works for them.

SHELDON: I usually have a lot of fun naming my work, and at first I wanted to name them, but then I just thought that would take too much away from them, and it would bring too much of me into them. I want other people to feel any way that they want to about them, and if they had a name, they would immediately give the audience direction to go in.

HORVAT: The dolls tap into the hyperreality of this world. They exist in fantasy as much as they do exist in real life. It is hard to explain as there is this realism to them, but then again, the projection and how we place them and what they represent is more so a fantasy. Where do these Stars live in your world?

SHELDON: I think they live right where you placed them too—somewhere between fantasy and reality. I feel like the perfection ideals and how these dolls look creates a certain murkiness around them...

I mean, at the end of the day, the dolls are a fantasy. They are a vessel for your imagination to go wild. But they are also a lens, whether dark or not, a lens for something that exists in reality and it's part of us now.

HORVAT: When making work, do you ever think about where the work may end up and who is the person who will live with it?

SHELDON: I do, but I try to keep that notion of where and how as open as possible, so I don't put any expectations on myself or work. I would like to think that if you collect the dolls, you can also collect my paintings—I hope they speak to the same audience in some sort of way.

That being said, I don't have a specific way I would want them to live or travel. I try to think that whatever happens will be the best for them. I kind of make things and figure the rest of the stuff later. I have a basic idea as to why I am interested in these things, but most of my work I truly only get years after I do it.

HORVAT: I mean, it's just like everything else in life. Time is perspective—we act on impulse and then, after some time, it really hits you how some things were perceived or communicated.

SHELDON: Spot on! And I do get the interest thing and why I tap into a specific element or react in a certain way or maybe how I go about it, but sometimes it just takes me months or years to realize what a specific work actually represents for me/about me, and why it came out when it did.

HORVAT: The more you try to make it make sense, the more you get caught up in it. It is what it is, and sometimes that's good enough. For the most part, it's just hard to realize that when you are in it.

SHELDON: It used to scare me to not have the immediate understanding or trajectory, but now I just accepted the fact that it will probably take years for me to realize why I am doing it, so for the moment, my emotions are what's guiding me and the reasoning part will come when it comes.

HORVAT: Most people know you as a tattoo artist. Does the work feel different when you are putting it on canvas versus putting in on a body? Would you tattoo someone with the doll imagery?

SHELDON: I would if someone asked, but it's also not something I thought much about. But to me, everything I do stems from pure excitement, so somewhere along the way the two meet and there is not much difference to where the imagery is being placed. I am so excited that tattooing exists and we can stain our bodies. I am so excited that the dolls exist and people can make up for what they mean. So yeah, to bring it back, no to the first part, yes to the last. (laughs)

HORVAT: Lasty, what were you into as a kid? What do you think shaped your taste the most?

SHELDON: I think one of the main things for me as a kid, and what was most inspiring are the *Guinea Pig* films, which all feel like they were done by artists as they are just so creative and imaginative. The special effects and prosthetics used in the films are beyond, so much so that Charlie Sheen got *Guinea Pig 2: Flower of Flesh and Blood* banned in America. He was given a copy, and after he watched it, he was convinced it was a snuff film and totally real. He called the FBI, who then investigated the movie and the story behind it. The investigation was dropped once they saw a documentary about how the movie was made. But yeah, I would watch these movies all the time, and my mom would pass the TV and I would turn it off, and when she left, turn it back on, as you know, those movies are just something you can only do/have for yourself.

My Small Super Star is on view at Heidi, Kurfürstenstraße 145, Berlin until October 30, 2021.

WILL SHELDON

Artist

Born 1990, Hong Kong

Lives and works in New York, NY



Untitled (Pink), 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 28 x 22 inches (71 x 56cm)