

# Dolls play in the gallery



Staff Photos by Rita Reed

Dollmaker Sandra Self posed with some of her creations, which were arranged for a gallery exhibition in Lowertown St. Paul.

Late-blooming artist learns from figurines

By Karin Winegar/Staff writer for Star Tribune, Minneapolis, Mn

"It's a real playhouse her," said doll-maker Sandra Welf, padding around her studio. "I spent a long time gathering and now I'm creating."

In Self's playhouse –a St. Paul Lowertown loft with a view of the Mississippi River – is the stuff of life for dolls yet to be born: bolts of paintable muslin, fragments of mud-dyed South American shirts, bags of French silk ribbons, multi-colored clouds of fluffed silk, thread dyed purple, rust and teal, bins of cloth and leather scraps, sacks of calico and cotton, hoops of sculpture wire, jars and cartons of buttons, snippets of her mink coat.

From fertility dolls and voodoo dolls to Barbie dolls, Troll dolls and Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, human figures – dolls have been at home in every human culture.

Now dolls such as those Self makes are being displayed in galleries and sold as fine art.

The doll existed for thousands of years before the first child took possession of it, according to Max Boehn, author of scholarly works on dolls and puppets. Archaeology shows that human figurines used to invoke good fortune, fertility and health date back 25,000 years.

“This is kind of a late bloomer thing,” said Self of her dollmaking. She started art school in her 30s, but dropped out to support herself, first as a chemical dependency counselor and later in furniture sales and design. She returned to art in the late 1980s, and in 1987 started working with dolls and teaching dollmaking.

“It was just unplanned,” she explained. “I had some fabric I liked and an old Universal machine and started making a doll. I made one for my therapist, who is tall and thin, and the doll was small and round and kind of dancey, and it was obvious it was me.”

The first experience taught Self that “your intention isn’t always known to you, and dolls are a way of bring up things from the unconscious.”

Dollmaking is “a forgiving art form,” Self said. “Almost everything you do is wonderful. I think everybody can do this.”

Her inspirations include Japanese dollmaker Keiko Yamaguchi and her many friends – artists, writers, sculptures and dollmakers.



“Dolls are a way of bringing up things from the unconscious,” said Self. She and other dollmakers often draw upon archetypal or mythical themes. The doll at left can be worn around the neck as a talisman. Her handpainted cat dolls, above, are stuffed with sage.

Working with artist Nancy Myrnak of Minneapolis, Self designed dolls for “Ishi,” a theatre ritual at Heart of the Beast Theater in 1991. In 1994, she created wire and Velcro doll children for the Zorongo Flamenco performance of “La Irona.” Self’s smallest dolls can be worn as jewelry or suspended from necklaces of beads; they are carried at the Walker Art Center gift shop.

“The last seven years have been my most constant period of artmaking,” she said. “It’s not a great output, but it is the most important thing in my life now, along with my family,” two sons, five grandchildren and her mother.

“I put love and healing into my dolls so others can experience that,” said Self, whose most personal doll she calls her Authority Figure, a broad-shouldered, tall, faceless linen being wrapped in an ankle-length handpainted sarong.

“This one helps me deal with not getting lost when others are around me,” she explained. “It’s for power and courage.”

Dolls are not only showing up in galleries but surfacing in such national arts publications as *Fiberarts*, *Ornament and Surface Design*. The *Dollmakers Journal* (circulation 5,000) was founded in 1992 in Austin, Texas.

“Interest is rally growing,” said Dollmaker editor Barbara Johnston. “People switching to cloth dolls are not looking for Raggedy Ann or a Cabbage patch doll. They are interested in expanding their art. They start with cookie cutter dolls and go to a show and see what’s possible and go ballistic.”

The current renaissance in dollmaking, according to Self, “is part of the soft side of life. Everyone is aware of transformation in our culture, that things aren’t working, and we are moving toward a more human-friendly society. And dollmaking reflects that, although the dolls aren’t necessarily all sweet.”

Self, who works with supervisory groups, psychologists and school staffs, has taught dollmaking at The Minnesota Jung Association and at the Mythos Institute. Psychotherapists bring groups to her studio for group dollmaking or arrive solo to dream up their own dolls. And women are not the only ones to take dollmaking classes; Self’s male students include a local actor, a mail carrier, a politician, a priest, a realtor and a mathematician.

Self is part of the Urban Dollmakers Guild, a Twin Cities group that includes Deborah Foutch, Brenna Busse, Karen Searle, Mimi Holmes, Chris Crider, Jo Swanson and Kathleen Kruger. Their July 1993 show at MC Gallery –the first gallery doll show in Minnesota – drew acclaim from *Fiberarts* magazine, which noted that some of the dolls were born out of the artists’ previous work in painting, theatre design or sculpture and others were “adjuncts to personal revelation or therapeutic transformation.”

“I think it’s a huge phenomenon and it’s all over the country,” said Searle, who live in St. Paul’s Macalester Groveland neighborhood and lectures nationally on dolls. Searle and two other Minnesotans have been invited to show their doll work at Mindscape Gallery in Chicago in November and in a Florida gallery in January.

“All of us working in this form are tapping into something either archetypal or mystical,” said Searle, whose own figures are made from knit, crochet or woven fibers and include tubular dolls woven on a loom. She spins out knit mermaids and lizards and crocheted people that represent

emotional states. “I use dream and meditation and work with connection to ancestral or spiritual creativity.”

She cites pioneers such as Lenore Davis of Paducah, Kentucky, the first to make dolls shown in a gallery, and Hope and Phillip Holtzman, Berkeley, California, a woodcarver-weaver team whose dolls wear masks.

Searle and others prefer the term sculpture or figures, “because they are not like traditional dolls at all. We don’t identify in the least with the very traditional connotation of dolls, she explained.

Searle has known Self since 1985 when they did a textile tour of Europe together.

“I’ve sat in on classes she’s taught, and it’s a beautiful thing,” Searle said. “People come who feel they aren’t artists and don’t have any creativity, and she can show them they are. It’s a beautiful transformation – she’s a very good guide in that way.”

Self, however, thinks dolls do the guiding. “This wanted to be in the doll.’ Dollmakers talk that way,” she said. “We take our orders from the dolls as they are being made. Like characters in a novel, they often surprise us.”

The question has always been whether dollmaking is art or craft, said Self. Now that much serious high-quality work is being created by artists, she believes the question is answered.

“I’m very interested in art as a functional part of life, not a separate thing,” said Self. “And the fact that something can be used doesn’t take away from it being art.”