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## REPURPOSING BARBIE: AN ARTS-BASED INQUIRY

CATHY SMILAN

### Abstract

The Barbie doll, a symbolic antithesis of feminism, is my sculptural medium for interrogating relationships between childhood play/role modeling and inequities in workplace structures. In this arts-based inquiry, I identify socially perpetuated trajectories of inculcated gender archetypes. Using the Barbie doll as a form for visual conceptualization, I reposition the iconic cast of U.S. material culture through semiotic inquiry, elucidating concerns from body image to self-imposed silence, to women's complicity in maintaining sexist proclivities of the status quo. Through arts-based inquiry, the imbalances of workplace relationships and human agency are traced from child's play through my journey to find voice and community. Ultimately, Barbie is repurposed as merely a sum of parts connected by string. As an art educator, I ask whom the next generation will allow to act as manipulator, challenging women to model different attributes toward which girls can aspire.

Keywords: *Feminist perspectives, visual/material culture, studio inquiry, gendered play*

### Repurposing Barbie: An Arts-Based Inquiry

This arts-based inquiry began as a vehicle for making sense of unintelligible disturbances in the sense of order within my college. As an offshoot of a text for conducting conceptual studio inquiry as a research methodology in art education, I began systematically investigating my work and place as a middle-aged woman in the patriarchal system of the university. Arts-based research (ABR) provided a way of knowing for me that was not attainable through other research methodologies (Eisner, 2008) and, perhaps more importantly, afforded an interpretive, more acceptable public voice through which to interrogate my very real perceptions of power shifts and exclusionary practices. Through applying the adaptive process of creative exploration, I sought resolution to perceived incongruences (Runco, 2007) between power struggles and accomplishments in my workplace. As with all conceptually based art, the process is of the greatest importance to the artist, and the meaning is oftentimes not revealed to the maker until after the work has evolved (Leavy, 2012; LeWitt, 1967). Making ideas visible through creation allows for equal valuing of process, transformation, conversation and final articulation (LeWitt, 1967). For me, this work unwittingly became an intervention to reconcile the imbalance between safety and threat, order and chaos, using a seemingly benign object. In the following discussion, I take the reader through my journey of coming to know through repurposing Barbie.<sup>1</sup>

In the process of making visible connections between childhood role-playing and adult workplace relationships, there were many failures, successes, and generative attempts. My creative and imaginative engagement with experience (Leavy, 2012) took the form of free-verse poetry and visual constructions informing my scholarship through processing multiple art forms (Blaikie, 2014). Through my poems and constructions, I found solace and safety in the release of a private, yet externally induced turmoil. What began as an interrogation of role-playing and dialoguing using Barbie collections morphed into questions about bias, blame, responsibility, and ultimately, empowerment.

Barbie, the much-maligned icon of North American feminine ideal (Duncum, 2007; Kuther & McDonald, 2004; Lord, 1994), was an easy surrogate for addressing body type, self-image, consumerist agendas, aging, and sexism; she also quickly became the vehicle for considering the role of the [false] sisterhood in workplace drama. Feminist educator and theorist, bell hooks (2000) identified this drama as internalized sexism that places women in jealous, fearful competition for patriarchal approval. Using a feminist lens to investigate the vestiges of a consumerist material culture, I explored what ultimately became the constant struggle to be *as good as*, that is, a notion of worthiness—the self-prejudice that is inculcated by adult producers, consumers, and guardians of the status quo onto each generation of girls in the United States.

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1. Barbie (1959) was manufactured by Mattel, Inc. Ruth Handler designed the fashion doll after the German doll called Bild Lilli. The collectible staple of the Mattel brand features over 125 careers, one of which is Art Teacher Barbie. Ken (Ken Carson) (1961) was introduced two years later as Barbie's boyfriend. Interestingly, the male doll has a surname ... which one can assume Barbie may one day inherit (See Lord, 1994).

### Reconfiguration in the Feminist Studio

According to Kenway and Modra (1992), feminists view women's locus in the social structure to be inequitable, leaving them undervalued, underutilized, and oftentimes oppressed by their very involvement in the system. They call for a shared vision and articulation "directed towards [sic] ending the social arrangements which lead women to be 'other than,' less than, put down and put upon" (p. 139). In my ABR approach, I configured form (in this case the form being a 55-year-old popular culture icon) to [re]conceptualize some of these structures. As a visual simile for the configuration of social constructs, the arrangement of the form itself is "deliberately uninteresting" from a formal standpoint to allow it to "more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work" (LeWitt, 1967, p. 80). By its ubiquitous nature, the form, like social norms, go unquestioned, even unnoticed. However, attempts to neutralize the plastic form as a geometric unit of composition through surface treatment, depilatory practice, or wrapping were somewhat futile. The formalistically banal icon, in and of itself rather commonplace and inconsequential, is imbued with arguably anti-feminist symbolism, and playing with this dichotomy became an intricate part of the work. Adding Ken on occasion, albeit a failure in the eyes of the Bechdel<sup>2</sup> test, allowed for a flagrantly symbolic visual metaphor for social mechanisms such as the glass ceiling. The generative tensions inherent in this inquiry were twofold: (a) to move beyond the ascribed physical characteristics through purposeful configuration relegating the doll to a form that is a means to an end, and (b) to create concepts and articulate ideas that subsume the iconic form.

### Reconciliation through Studio Process

This inquiry, much like the process of ABR (Bresler, 2014; Leavy, 2012; McNiff, 2012), originated from a cathartic, even therapeutic place. Adaptation through creative processing often allows for resolution of "any disequilibrium that develops when the individual's level of understanding does not match an experience" (Runco, 2007, p. 93). Such situational creative exploration can provide constructed clarity and insight (Leavy, 2012) and guide reconciliation of stress-producing events (Smilan, 2009). I was compelled to conduct ABR to answer my questions about my perceived reality of marginalization and to try to somehow find a place for those answers in the constructed world of workplace relationships. This was done as much for the process as for the product, as described by Bresler (2014). Studio inquiry thus allowed for intuitive discovery of issues and ideas.

From as far back as I can remember, I was a problem identifier. I often attempted to solve these problems while simultaneously finding solace through art-based

2. The Bechdel test measures the feminist perspective in fiction requiring at least two named female characters who interact through dialogue about something other than men. Based on the work of cartoonist Allison Bechdel, the test is generally applied to film, but has application to all media (Anders, 2014).

means. I identify as a maker, one who creates realities out of materials at hand, often "MacGyvering"<sup>3</sup> solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems. It is stunning how these very skills that are taught in university art education classrooms are devalued, trivialized by labels of discontent or contentious behavior; ironically, problem identification became the "insighting event" (Rodriguez-Cunill, 2014) for my creative work.

My current problem was a lack of voice and a feeling of insecurity. A student once told me how important it is to let people know if you are not feeling safe. Now, the pursuit of reconciliation seemed possible only through creative means, as there is a level of safety associated with translation of meaning into visual and poetic forms. The engagement with the work would be open to interpretation. "Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that he [sic] understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation" (LeWitt, 1967, p. 79). Yet I, like many of my colleagues, find myself in the exhausting position of justifying the connection between my work as an artist, teacher, and scholar as a unified role within the realm of art education, a *la a/r/tography*.<sup>4</sup> It is ironic that one expects an English professor to read and write, yet an art education professor often is not expected to create art as part of her research. According to Leavy (2012), research conducted through arts-based methodologies allows for a holistic view of relationships and social realities; in my case, it enabled me to connect the various experiences and responsibilities of a multifaceted life in the professorate.

### Deconstructing Barbie: Reforming the Questions

Barbie's effect on body images of young girls (and women) is a well-established concern (Blair, 2006; Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006; Kuther & MacDonald, 2004; Lord, 1994; Munger, 2006; and others). "Barbie is the cultural icon of female beauty that provides an 'aspirational role model' for young girls ... yet, Barbie is so exceptionally thin that her weight and body proportions are not only unattainable but also unhealthy" (Dittmar et al., 2006, p. 283). As devastating as this phenomenon is for young girls and women, it proved to be an extremely benign, non-threatening concept through which to begin the exploration. Such conformist content is polite and proper fodder for an art educator to investigate and publish about—there was security in the periphery of truth.

I started with a concept of the changing female body, layering paper over a

3. MacGyver (Henry Winkler/John Rich Productions et al., 1985-1992) was a television series in which an attractive, male secret agent armed with only his ingenuity crafted his way out of untenable situations week after week.

4. *A/r/tography* explains the connections between the three roles, of artist/teacher/scholar. Although they may appear to be separate, "the slashes in *a/r/tography* ... purposefully illustrate a doubling of identities and concepts rather than a separation/bifurcation of ideas" (Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, & Bickel, 2006, p. 70). (See also Triggs, Irwin & O'Donoghue, 2014).

Barbie mold. The unfinished piece, entitled *The [Af]Front* (see Figure 1), was to be reminiscent of Matisse's series *The Back* (1908-1909). With the intention of chronicling changes in the human female form over the decades, I began to layer armor-like sheets of paper pulp over the Barbie mold. Wholly departing from the mold, the figure morphed into a shielded, warrior-like entity, which would be identified in the literature on gendered play as more appropriate for boys than girls (Fisher-Thompson, 1990). Throughout this stage of the process my *mark-making* began to change; the pulp that was carefully applied, more generously to the slightly sagging breasts and plentiful hips in plate 1, was heavily and somewhat randomly placed in the subsequent form. Ultimately, in the final plate, the pulp, barely soaked, became torn shards that were aggressively thrown and glue-welded in place. This evolution in method was reminiscent of findings by Kuther and McDonald (2004) that girls became ambivalent to Barbie's stylized image of feminine beauty and societal expectations of gender roles, leading them to abandon or become destructive toward their dolls and to adopt the oft seen damaging play of their male counterparts. These researchers suggested this aggressive, destructive "torture play" (p. 44) may be a manifestation of hostility toward societal expectations of perfection and submission. For me, it was a rejection of the cover-up smile that hides the reality of "workplace violence" (Rodriguez-Cunill, 2014).



*Figure 1. The [Af]front* Cathy Smilan (2013) Recycled cast-paper series  
These studies explored the natural "abstraction" of the female form over time, applying various layers of pulp using the Barbie doll as mold. The studies remain unfinished process pieces.

It became immediately clear that the investigation itself was but a shield for the deeper issues and lived experiences that I needed to interrogate. Borrowing from Keifer-Boyd's (2010) cultural narrative mapping, I realized that I had been conforming to the situational archetype of a workplace that obfuscated mistreatment by "making [it] invisible" and "channeling" (Rodriguez-Cunill, 2014) responsibility by ascribing negative connotations to problem identification; I had all but succumbed to the disempowering assimilation to sameness. In seeking empowerment and voice through this logical subversion, my art merely "served to camouflage the mechanisms" of marginalization and oppression (Hicks, 1990, p. 39).

Heeding Hicks' (1990) direction that social and political empowerment cannot be achieved by isolated action, but only through active engagement in political spaces (Hicks, 1990; hooks, 2000), I abandoned the series of three-dimensional sketches and moved beyond focusing on the Barbie mold to focusing on the concept of the roles and perception of middle-aged women in the university system, the real source of my consternation. Evolving questions were: How are women perceived and treated in the workplace by men, by other women, and by themselves? How do quasi-administrative assignments change relationships amongst women? Are women seduced by the tenuous notion that authority makes them more appealing and/or empowered? How do otherwise collegial relationships change into competitions and power struggles in the desperate attempt to be acknowledged by the *Ken doll*, the self-enthroned entity, endowed with magical powers, if not genitalia (see Figure 2)? Through this work I attempted to alter the visual culture with regard to sexist ideas, expressing fragments of identity that would educate viewers either consciously or subconsciously (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004).

### Material Visual Culture and Social Gender Constructs

Transformation of "sexist thinking and practices" requires examinations of how visual culture influences gender constructs (Keifer-Boyd, 2010, p. 2). The subject matter and contextualization of the work produced by this inquiry are overtly feminist in nature; however, in an attempt to deconstruct objectivity and reconstruct situational subjectivity,<sup>5</sup> it was necessary for me to work through my researcher biases. Having jettisoned the symbolic stereotypes of Barbie in favor of Barbie as a simplistic form or unit of construction, I needed to reconstruct Barbie as the "grammar" (LeWitt, 1967, p. 79) for mapping transformative thinking. This required an investigation of what Barbie symbolized, not just from an academic, philosophically distanced perspective, but from a self-reflective, interpretive position as well. Considering Barbie as a material culture artifact, I began to make choices about her placement in installations, both physically and metaphorically, employing the objective and subjective in [re]purposeful ways.

Through careful reasoning and reorganization, my goal was to elucidate and explicate the signifiers of sexism and feminism by reconstructing objects that chal-

5. See Smith-Shank and Keifer-Boyd's architecture of participation as described in Keifer-Boyd, 2010, p. 6.

lenged this aspect of material culture. According to Blair (2006), Barbie is thought to be an integral part of female socialization and a popular part of “cultural pedagogy” (p. 1). It has been well established that childhood play is essential to the internalization of adult role modeling. “During play, children converse with their world and internalize elements of society, such as norms, values and adult roles” (Kuther & McDonald, 2004, p. 39). Despite capitalist efforts of the Mattel corporation to decorate the plastic Barbie form in a variety of career-based outfits, the metaphoric reality remains that Barbie literally cannot stand on her own two feet.<sup>6</sup> Barbie by design requires supports; in workplace roles women who too firmly stand their ground are in danger of being marginalized (not to mention they don’t get to wear the pretty shoes). The unfortunate reality is that women who dare to speak out about veiled improprieties are viewed as transgressors and are subject to punishing ostracism and psychological violence (Rodriguez-Cunill, 2014), including marginalization and stigmatization. As Hicks (1990) cautioned, we adopt prevailing perspectives of society, often trading our beliefs and traditions for acceptance in a community.

When *Child’s Play* was originally displayed in a faculty exhibit, one female colleague asked me how I could be so brave with my work. Another asked when I was going to make the antidote for the piece. My response was that overcoming fear and reforming a sisterhood were the antidote. As details in Figures 2 and 3 suggest, we only need to remove the glass to change the entire perspective and tenor of the piece from a closed system dutifully supporting sexist thinking to an equitable collaborative system supporting infinite possibility for women and girls. By making art and dialoguing about the fluidity of gender roles and by interrogating the variable nature of interrelationships, we can empower inclusive, reflexive teaching and learning – irrespective of gender, race, identity – to generate such possibilities.

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6. Realizing that I Can Be...President Barbie could not stand on her own two feet, Mattel, rather than altering her anatomy, accessorized her with pink wedge-heeled weighted shoes that allowed her to stand. (See [http://inthesetimes.com/article/13039/barbies\\_plastic\\_politics](http://inthesetimes.com/article/13039/barbies_plastic_politics)). Unfortunately, the 2014 Entrepreneur Barbie was not afford such accommodations and can merely “lean in”. (See <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/entrepreneur-barbie-is-ready-to-lean-in/373004/>).



Figure 2. *Child’s Play* by Cathy Smilan (2013) is made of found-object assemblage, and paint.

Discarded Barbies are arranged to create a decorative vessel (that cannot hold water due to the negative spaces). The dolls standing shoulder-to-shoulder are joined at the hip; with hands raised they support the glass ceiling which also serves as the floor of Ken’s office.



Figure 3. *Child’s Play* detail.

### Child's Play

#### *Starter Barbie*

*Little girls begin the collection, the inculcation  
Acculturation into the club  
In which we, uniformed  
In style and structure  
Learn to compete*

#### *Stay sleek*

#### *Stay strong*

*But not stronger than he*

#### *Compete*

*Who gets to play with the Ken doll today?  
Which of the molded, disproportionate figures  
Clad in the visual vestiges of planned obsolescence  
Will get the date  
Will be titillated by adorning his arm?*

*Barbie, by design, cannot stand on her own two feet*

#### *Unbalanced*

*She must be tethered, the Roman imitation of its Greek counterpart*

#### *Ken—the Greek God*

*Perfectly chiseled, flatfooted, can stand alone*

#### *Balanced*

#### *Joined at the hip*

*Competitors turned cheerleader*

*We learn in child's play*

*To work together to*

*support the glass ceiling*

*Then, as if to preserve the ritual*

*— immortalized — never changing*

*We cast it in bronze*

We make ... daily choices on the basis of our cultural habits and conditioning, and by reasoning from sign to sign. Thinking through the research process in semiotic terms challenges us to actively consider the foundations and trajectories of cultural habits, beliefs, and conditioning. (Smith-Shank, 2014, p. 212)

Kuther and McDonald (2004) found that Barbie play entailed reenactment of home life and perceived attitudes toward unattainable female beauty, conflicted with torture play and rivalries. This emotional polarization mirrored societal reaction to unattainable stability. *Child's Play* represents the perpetuation of childhood role-playing in sustaining the workplace status quo. The assemblage addresses Duncum's (2007) girl as consumer, supporting the capitalist agenda, asking viewers to further consider the socio-economic ramifications (Jaffe, 2013) of the forms, joined at the hip and continuing to support the glass ceiling. The impetus for the piece was a dispute over office space that eventually resulted in a junior, male colleague triumphing over a middle-aged female tenured professor to get the larger office space. The cultural conditions of sexism and female conformity once again prevailed.

Contextualizing Barbie within the political instability of the times, Lord (1994) wrote, "[A]s real life grew more politically polarized, Barbie turned away from it, retreating into a self-contained fantasy world" (p. 61). So, too, does the escapist mentality play out by women in contemporary systems (see Figure 4). Barbie modeled the importance of the stylish, smiling, compliant woman. Girls are taught to mask their aggressions and fears; it is not lady-like to air one's dirty laundry (see *Professionalism*, Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Professionalism* by Cathy Smilan (2013) is made of bleached muslin, cotton crochet thread, clothes line, and wooden clothes pins. Three iterations of Barbie are wrapped in white, starched cloth (reminiscent of funerary wrapping); the molded figures with hands over eyes, ears and mouth respectively, are aired on a clothesline interrogating notions of professionalism.

In this series, Barbie is posed with hands over eyes, ears, and mouth. The posed forms are wrapped with bleached-white muslin, which is starched to retain the shapes after the forms are removed. Barely discernable, the phrases “See no Truth,” “Hear no Truth.” “Speak no Truth” are cross-stitched in white floss; each panel is delicately edged in hand-crocheted lace.

**Professionalism: Hear no Truth, See no Truth, Speak no Truth**

*Lovely delicate image  
Cross-stitched with pristine cotton  
Starched, pressed, tatted  
Lest one's hands be  
Idle*

*Bleached-clean white muslin  
Message all but cloaked in intricate fragility  
Masking the strength behind the  
Airing of Dirty Laundry*

**Repositioning Social Structures through Art Education**

As artists and educators, we are called upon to challenge the ways in which image and artifact, and ultimately human interactions, are viewed. If as Kenway and Modra, (1992) suggested, knowledge systems inherently contain exclusionary and sexist practices that foster inequity, how do we contradict that which has been so carefully preserved in order to move society into a more equitable reality of empowerment?

Feminist artists and educators must raise awareness of bullying by passive avoidance by actively making issues visible to gallery audiences and art teachers, transforming agents of internal and external sexism (hooks, 2000) into curricular agents of change. With almost effortless ease, Barbie, the symbolic antithesis of feminism, can be molded and repositioned to shape the voice of feminist methodologies, which, as Keifer-Boyd (2014) has pointed out, focus on equity and social justice through exposing socio-politically conditioned attitudes toward race, class, gender, and sexuality. Empowering people requires understanding and re[en]visioning how such freedom relates to the dynamic relationships and power structures amongst human beings within communities and systems (Hicks, 1990).

Art education that respects unique voices and experiences of all learners provides feminist perspectives by repositioning women within the traditionally male-centric curriculum (Hicks, 1990), allowing girls to see themselves more equitably situated within their historical and contemporary artistic context. Education that poses questions about difference rather than sameness and encourages deep inquiry into social challenges through studio exploration can guide the type of seeing that is required to break out of the oppressive casting. According to Smith-Shank (2014), “Social semiotic research is at the heart of a very thorough enterprise that investigates and interrogates cultures, cultural objects, and the relationships between them and human agency” (p. 216). Questioning cultural and situational norms in the safe spaces of art classrooms and studios, we can raise awareness of issues of inequities and fear-based support of non-functioning systems. Structuring studio inquiry based on questioning that which is inherent within our visual and material culture, can help learners see new perspectives and, hopefully, reposition themselves in the systems that they will inherit so that they will not be left clinging to unfruitful vines.

*Withering on the Vine* (see Figure 4) was a homage both to a plant I accidentally protected to death<sup>7</sup> and a warning about the fear-based starvation of proactive change. The installation piece extends the idea of women supporting the status quo, oftentimes

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7. When I moved to the Northeast, I bought a dwarf blood maple and planted it in a pot. When winter threatened, I dragged the pot into the garage to shelter it from the harsh elements, protecting the roots from freezing. The next spring, the tree bloomed later than those planted in the yard, but when it did, it was brilliant. When the temperature once again threatened, I labored to bring the tree in. This time, some of the leaves did not fall. The following spring, it refused to bud. The roots had not frozen, but the tree had not been not given the space, support, and cross-fertilization it needed to thrive.

from paralyzing positions of fear-based conformity. Like the multiple Barbies, collected by girls for their individual attributes and accessories as cleverly merchandized by the executives at Mattel Corporation (Lord, 1994), workers are collected to support those who have agency within the institutional system and to advance the agenda of that system. When I accepted the professorship, I was full of hope and the promise of rewarding work based on innovation, expertise, and new ideas. Yet once firmly transplanted into academia, my participation was shunted, my voice denied, and my work marginalized. Any question of the status quo was deemed to be negative rather than a generative impetus for positive change. The false sisterhood was quickly revealed. We stand together only in support of the status quo, too afraid of change. We stand together only to support the glass ceiling of ideas and position, using any position of power to maintain the sexist order. Isolated in shallow pots, we wither until we can no longer bloom.



Figure 5. *Withering on the Vine* by Cathy Smilan (2014) is a hand-woven trellis installation made of bittersweet, greenbrier, birch, and silk. The installation represents entanglement with gendered societal play and the notion that women's contributions are oftentimes left rotting on the vine.

Through this piece, my goal was to re[en]vision the concept of not fully utilizing one's potential. The trellis represents the painstaking planning and nurturing that goes into one's preparation for career and growth. The silken Barbie cocoons represent the isolation of women in the academy and the loss of that which might have been otherwise.

Choice of materials notwithstanding, one can make a connection between this piece and *Child's Play*. At a recent exhibit, a female colleague who was, in fact,

integrally involved in the dispute that prompted *Child's Play* commented on the installation. Ironically, she shared that *Withering on the Vine* was an interesting piece because it required viewers to really look within and not take the work at face value. At first glance, she thought the silken Barbie cocoons were tissue paper littering the trees—an installation of sorts that might be created by disgruntled children who did not receive their desired Halloween treat. Following Runco's (2007) suggestion that creativity requires discretion, I did not disclose that the silken cocooned Barbie forms were portraits of her and others who silently cling to the thorny, withering vines, *merely going along to get along* in a male-dominated system.

Over time, the installation changed naturally. The dehydrated leaves became brittle. The silken forms, mutated by gravity's pull coupled with the bias-cut warp of the threads, also took on an elongated, dehydrated appearance. Upon viewing the work two weeks after the installation, another female colleague from a different college on campus made the comment that the vines are the place that sucks the life out of the forms. Runco's discretion notwithstanding, sometimes the perception of the viewer does mirror the perception of the artist due to familiar, similar experiences.

It is noteworthy that the bittersweet vines are compromised by greenbrier, a thorny, hardy vine with waxy green leaves that is, in the end, the invasive and dominant flora. It is also interesting to note that when plants (and humans) are not given the sustenance needed to thrive, their leaves frequently do not fall from the branch or vine to which they are tethered. Thus, no new buds are created; the leaves just wither and remain lifelessly suspended until someone or something—a strong wind or an opportunistic new recruit—intervenes to displace them.



Figure 6. Details – *Withering on the Vine*

### Withering on the Vine

*Twisted bittersweet*

*Shadows playing off the pristine white*

*Roots uncovered you cling to the hand-woven support,*

*Guiding your growth, holding the fruits and future seeds*

*Pulled from the mother, lacking sustenance, you begin to weaken, to wither*

*Invaded by stronger flora, with more adaptive, protective spikes*

*Cling, amongst the thorny greenbrier, to the last vestiges of light and nutrients*

*Cocooned in hibernative protection*

*You survive in isolation, endeavoring to expend the minimum resources, the minimum*

*life effort – storing all you have for possible future use*

*The vine, uprooted, cannot sustain -*

*nourish.*

*Leaves wither but do not fall nor produce new buds for future bloom. The winter wind*

*strips the foliage, eventually, providing no spring*

*Recovery.*

### Conclusions

I began working with the Barbie series as a medium for critical social commentary on the objectification of women, women's self-image, and, perhaps most significantly, gender inequity in the workplace. This most recent body of work moves beyond the somewhat commonplace Barbie as objectification of feminine ideal to Barbie as a mere form for artistic arrangement. Here the words and postures become as significant as the images of the repurposed plastic dolls. Through the symbolic deconstruction of the feminine ideal, I attempted to investigate the process through the lenses of feminist theory and semiotic inquiry. My confidence was bolstered by the favorable response to the work, especially from students, and I became empowered to delve beyond surface treatments to work/play through the situational realities of my experience as a marginalized, 54-year-old woman in an ironically patriarchal system. It was not Barbie per se, a non-biodegradable molded plastic form, but the arrangement of that form—like the arrangement of myself and [with] other women in the workplace—that was of interest. It was not, of course, the doll that made girls have unrealistic images of what an adult female should look like or an ageist view of beauty and usefulness. Although the doll symbolizes these misguided attributes, it is the very capitalist acculturation that, as Duncum (2007) stated, instills the insatiable desire that is the villain of our popular visual culture and that has infiltrated our reality worlds virtually unchecked.

Barbie is an undeniable part of my visual material culture and has influenced who I was and who I became. I was unconsciously educated by her message and the so-

cial and familial conditioning instigated through this 11½ inch toy. As grammatically useful as she may be, the Barbie form had to be acknowledged beyond mere “meaningless space fillers” for its prescribed intrinsic and extrinsic value that inextricably joins the artifact to the art (Kander, 2003, p. 19). As a member of an academic institution, I needed to be more than a place holder; as a researcher, I had the unique opportunity to step outside of the manipulated scenarios and watch as coworkers allowed themselves to be complicit in the perpetuation of ironic, yet powerful stereotypes initiated in childhood play. It is perplexing that highly educated people submit to such games. Still sensitive to my vulnerability, whether real or perceived, I have come to know through this arts-based inquiry that one must emerge from the cocoon in order to fly; it is empowering to know that as artists, we can give voice to “the mobbing” (Rodriguez-Cunill, 2014) that is the status quo in many academic settings and to know that as art educators, we can incorporate questions about inequities into our curriculum to raise awareness that we all have an ability to choose whom we allow to pull the strings. Who will you allow to handle the strings?



Figure 7. *Miss Handled* by Cathy Smilan (2014) is made of paper marionette and binding thread. The Barbie marionette is purposefully mis-strung so that she cannot be manipulated by the puppeteer. The strings in the installation is configured in an homage to Georgia O’Keeffe, one of the few women artists introduced in school art curriculum, and one who in the end broke free from gender expectations to model feminist ideals.

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### **About the Author**

Cathy Smilan is associate professor of art education, Master of Art Education Graduate Program Director and Assistant Director of the Office of Faculty Development at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Her research interests include studio and visual culture-based research, art integration, museum/community partnership, arts-based literacy, and creativity development and assessment. Dr. Smilan is a current member of the NAEA Professional Materials Committee, past member of the Art Education review board and currently serves on the review board of the *International Journal of Education through Art*. She co-edited the anthology *Inquiry in Action: Paradigms, Methodologies and Perspectives in Art Education Research*, which includes her sole and co-authored chapters on research methodologies and partnership program evaluation as transformative research. Currently, she is completing a text on art-based research entitled: *Transforming Practice through Studio Inquiry*.

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