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Moraa Stump

Untitled.

May 26 – July 8, 2023

In the Window Sits a Child (and a Doll)

As a child, I played with dolls. My favourite, a small girl with big hair and blue stockings, told me things and taught me things, and I listened and learned with bright eyes and an open mind...

Reminiscent of a childhood home, Moraa Stump has transformed the front window of Xpace. The floor is checkered in soft shades, and the wallpaper along the walls is coloured haphazardly as if a child took their crayons to the blank surface in front of them. In the centre of the space sits a doll. Larger than life, this soft sculpture is made from reclaimed materials of linen, denim, and upholstery fabric. While it is not a traditional quilt, it references the language of quilting and transforms from object to entity, one that embodies a living history. Confined and squeezed in the glass showcase, *The Doll* forces an engagement of self and other at once. It draws on a rich history of textiles, doll making, and black artistic expression to offer us a view into the past, showing us the moment in which we learned what to be, and what not to be in turn.

While the history of doll making is long and extensive, black cloth dolls have a much more recent story. As early as the 18th century, black dolls have been one of many essential tools of play through which social constructions of race, gender, and class are explored and enacted, particularly among children (Seow 337). And for as long as black dolls have existed, they have been viewed in contrast to the ideal white doll. As such, the black doll remains a

representation of the values of dominant social groups and shows colonization's lasting influence on the collective imagination. This rich history exposes the complex nature of simple things. A doll is not simply a doll, but a tool which teaches children what they should be from a young age. By remaking *The Doll* in monochrome black pieced fabric, Stump juxtaposes the domesticity and comfort associated with textiles and quilting with the pervasive pressures and systems taught to black children through childhood play. *The Doll* reveals just how deeply ingrained these social systems are by presenting us with an undisguised doll, one which confronts us with its size, colour, jagged teeth, and hollow eyes.

As we watch *The Doll* be compressed and suffocated in a space far too small for its size, a mirror image is reflected back at us. Across temporal fields, *The Doll* shows us those things we are taught to know as truth when we are children, those beliefs we didn't even realize were not fact. Our gaze reveals that we are constantly being watched. For Black viewers in particular, *The Doll* speaks to the ways Black bodies are forced to engage with and perform for the gaze of others, with and without our knowledge.

For Stump and many other Black artists, creating work has never been simple. It has always come with pressures. Not just those brought forth by the white gaze which makes up much of the art world, but also those affected by fraught internal relationships to self-expression and self-determination. Black artists must not only contend with the outward influence of colonial legacies but also those internal remnants of a system which has told them what they are since birth. Stump engages with and makes visible these internal and external forces, taking their power and redirecting it toward personal and communal growth and healing. By drawing on the language of quilting and textile work, Stump recalls themes of comfort, play, and domesticity from her childhood. The convergence of the past and present of her own life is embodied by *The Doll*, and yet extends beyond it. This material familiarity brought forth by *The Doll* offers a point of entry for viewers to recall their childhood and, in doing so, reconsider their present.

Moraa Stump's installation asks us to perceive ourselves as both child and toy. The subject, and the subjugated. Drawing on the rich history of Black cloth dolls in the United States and Canada, *The Doll* exemplifies Stump's transformative use of the language of quilting and doll-making to address the complexities of Black life. By engaging with enriching narratives of healing, self-reflection, and joy, Stump repurposes play to reject and rewrite the social structures inscribed in these "toys" we call dolls.

Works Cited

Bernstein, Robin. "Children's Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; or, The Possibility of Children's Literature." *PMLA*, vol. 126, no. 1, 2011, pp. 160–69. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41414088>. Accessed 8 May 2023.

Forman-Brunell, Miriam, and Janet Rosemarie Seow. "Chapter 8 Black Girls and Dolls: Navigating Race, Class, and Gender in Toronto." *Deconstructing Dolls Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play*, Berghahn Books, Incorporated, New York, NY, 2021, pp. 337–373.