

The Dolls' Day by Louise Gray

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 beget 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.