



Tressed for success

Alice Anderson's colossal installations made of red hair are at once comforting, suffocating and scarily realistic, says **Alice Jones** – and very much an extension of the artist herself

Today Alice Anderson's long red hair is held back from her face by two thick black clips, from which it ripples down her back, almost to her waist. An artist's hairstyle wouldn't normally merit comment, but for Anderson hair is not just a theme of her work, it forms the very building blocks of it. She's sent auburn curtains of it tumbling down the walls of the Royal Opera House and wound it around the towers of Frank Gehry's Cinematheque Francaise in Paris. Her installations choke whole galleries with burnished webs and plaits, flowing out of the fireplaces and cascading from the windows to the street below. Her smaller sculptures are made from the same material – bobbins wound with tresses rather than thread, ginger spider's webs and delicate human forms and nests spun from hair.

For her next three exhibitions, the 33-year-old artist will bind the façade of the Freud Museum with ropes of hair, fill the new All Visual Arts gallery with a giant, 4m-high cotton reel, wound with hair, and lead Latitude festival-goers deep into the woods with tangled hair trails on which they'll run across wax dolls, doppelgängers of their creator, sporting miniature versions of her fiery mane.

So it should come as no surprise that her tiny studio, at the end of an eerie corridor of lock-ups on Battersea's Lavender Hill, is filled, from top to bottom, with hair. It's not real hair, of course. Anderson ships it in by the boxload from a doll factory in China. She had a hard time at first explaining what a French/Algerian/British artist living in London needed with mile upon mile of the stuff, and why it had to match her own hair colour, but they've reached an



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understanding now. "It's not too far off, is it?" she says, diving into a box headfirst to compare the synthetic bundle to a handful of her own hair.

It's not. In fact, it's scarily realistic, which provokes a visceral reaction in viewers. "People hate it or they love it," says Anderson. "Your brain recognises something real but then it thinks, 'that can't be possible'. What I like is that there is a real physical attraction – or repulsion. It's like my little capsules there," she gestures at a coffee table covered in what look like ginger fur balls. "It's like, 'Oof, what is that?'

You don't know if you want to touch it or not."

For sure, these are no glossy L'Oréal locks. The hair is either tangled and scarily unbridled or, in her new works, twisted into prison bars or restricting ropes. As a material, it's rich in associations, calling to mind everyone from Lizzie Siddal to Louise Bourgeois via Rumpelstiltskin and Rapunzel. Anderson, inspired by Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch, prefers a darker narrative: she doesn't so much tell fairy tales, she twists them. Her 2007 film, *Bluebeard*, which showed at Tate Modern, had the princess sporting a blue beard and the prince – played by a girl – attached to his domineering mother by a cord. "I'm kind of against fairy tales. The story of a prince and a princess? Ridiculous," says Anderson. "For me, it's nonsense. On the other hand, anything to do with childhood, I use. I use a lot of toys."

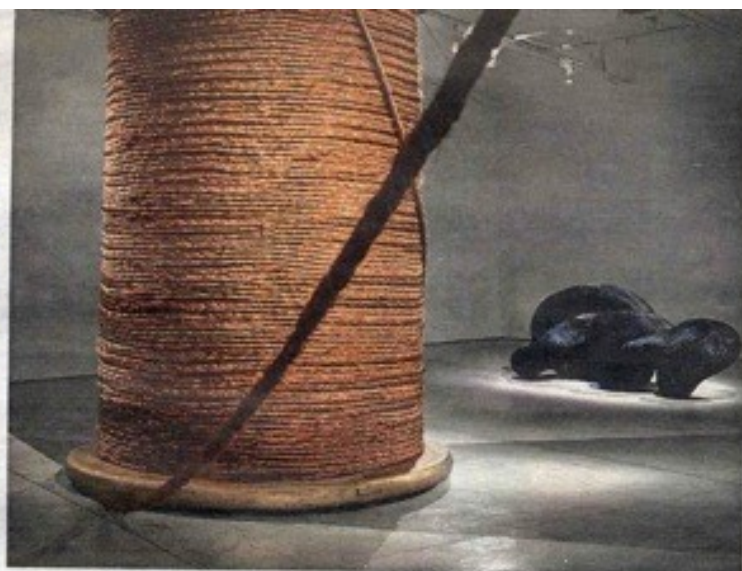
Dolls are the other signature of Anderson's work, from an eerie death mask of her own face trapped in a bell jar to a film in which she turns into a



Mane attraction: (clockwise from far left) Anderson's work on the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris; the artist works on a model for her forthcoming installation at the Freud Museum; a four-metre high cotton reel wound with hair at the AVA gallery, London; one of Anderson's hair "capsules"; Anderson's 'Confinement Room' TESSA ANGUS



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I'm trying to push boundaries all the time." In a further act of irreverence, Anderson plans to place her scale model of the house, complete with hair creepers, at the heart of the museum - right in the middle of Sigmund Freud's famous couch.

Elsewhere, the building will be filled with all manner of strange objects - prone figures, fetishistically bound in thread, and barely-there spiders' webs lurking in the stairwells. The centrepiece will be the loom belonging to Anna Freud, the youngest daughter of the psychoanalyst, who lived in the house until she died in 1982. Perched amongst its bars will be a "mother" doll, spinning out skeins of red hair to trap a "daughter" doll into the corner of the room.

The idea of the exhibition comes, explains Anderson, from her childhood bad habit of picking at threads on her clothes and winding them around her wrist or other objects. "It was when I was alone, waiting for my mother to return, because she was constantly out of the house," she says. "It's a way of calming anxiety. Time is more bearable if you're doing it." As her nerves worsened, Anderson began to play with her own hair in the same way. The 4m-high bobbin, wound with glossy red hair, which fills a room at the newly opened AVA gallery in King's Cross, refers to the same absent-mother ritual.

Mothers - absent or otherwise - have been a constant of Anderson's work ever since her first film, *Ma Mère*, a quirky series of 20 mini-arguments between mother and daughter (both played by Anderson). Born in London to a French/Algerian mother and an English father - from whom she inherited the hair - Anderson returned to France aged three when her parents

separated. For years, according to the artist, she was forbidden to talk about her father or even to speak English. When she was just 14 years old, her mother sent her to work as an au pair in New York. Incapable of looking after children and unable to speak the language, Anderson began to experiment with painting and photography instead. "It was quite a wild time, as you can imagine," she says. Back in Paris, she met an artist who allowed her to sit in on her art classes at the Louvre and who eventually persuaded her to apply to the *École des Beaux-Arts*. She had no qualifications, but was nevertheless chosen by Christian Boltanski for supervision and spent five years working in his studio. There she left behind the "trashy, violent" domestic paintings of her adolescence, discovered film and found a new, artistic family, defining her own style against that of Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Annette Messager and Boltanski. In 2002, she enrolled on a post diploma at Goldsmiths. "When I arrived I couldn't speak any English," she recalls. "It was just a way of getting back to London. I wanted to go back."

Though constantly referenced in Anderson's work, her parents keep their distance from it. "My father is not interested. He's a scientist," she shrugs. "My mother is aware of my work but she doesn't come to see it. If I sent her the catalogue, she wouldn't even look at it. She doesn't want to enter into it. I think she took it as a betrayal when I decided to go back to London."

It's a rich back story for any artist, but Anderson rejects "easy" autobiographical or psychoanalytical readings of her work. "Time is my main material," she explains. "There are autobiographical elements, of course, but it's a bit more sophisticated and multi-layered than that. I'm getting to the stage where I can see how an autobiography can be fictional. Recollection is a creative process." From her playful-meets-sinister dolls to her hair installations - at once comforting cocoon and suffocating web - there's more to Anderson's work than meets the eye. "We've all got memories. What's interesting is when you start to make something with them," she says. "Anyone can just tell you their story."

Bound, All Visual Arts, London NI (020 7209 5670; www.allvisualarts.org) to 30 April; Alice Anderson's Childhood Rituals, Freud Museum, London NW3 (020 7435 2002; www.freud.org.uk) 15 April to 5 June

wax doll. Anderson had the doll made by a sculptor at Madame Tussauds over two months of sittings which turned into an extended therapy session. "By the end I was saying very intimate things to this girl I didn't know," she says, unpacking a tiny 50cm clone in a red and blue dress from an old hat box. "It was bizarre, like going to the shrink. I swear I was ill for two weeks and all the time this doll was taking shape and getting stronger."

Appropriately enough, the doll is now the star of her upcoming show at the Freud Museum. Her first solo exhibition, it moves away from the free-flowing waterfalls of hair of previous installations to a more controlled, and controlling, set-up. Thousands of metres of hair, twisted into ropes, will creep over and grip the brickwork of the Freud family home in Hampstead, north London, like poison ivy. It's the first time the museum has allowed an artist to use the façade as part of an artwork. "They probably regret it now," laughs Anderson. "This is my fourth proposal. The others were too mad to get permission. I'm a bit like a child.