

Folks find lots of love in their real dolls

by John Wilkens

The new movie "Lars and the Real Girl" is pulling back the curtain on an unusual world where people find companionship in the arms of eerily lifelike silicone dolls.

REAL DOLLS - An Abyss Creations worker installs an eyeball onto a RealDoll. The company is so backed up that it takes three to five months to complete an order. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. HEART TO PART WITH - At Abyss Creations in San Marcos, Calif., interchangeable faces attached to silicone heads wait for a body. The company charges between \$6,500 and \$50,000 for the RealDoll of your dreams. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. At the center of that world is a small company, Abyss Creations, which has been making "RealDolls" since 1996 and has so much business that the wait for a new prosthetic partner is three to five months.

Cost per doll: About \$6,500, plus shipping. Dolls with custom faces and bodies can run up to \$50,000.

That's a lot of money for a sex toy. And don't be fooled by the chaste nature of Lars' relationship with Bianca - most of the customers use their anatomically correct dolls for erotic fantasies.

But Bronwen Keller, a company spokeswoman, said some owners use them as art objects, photography subjects, and as training devices in cosmetology and crime-scene investigation. RealDolls have appeared in the TV shows "My Name Is Earl" and "nip/tuck."

"These dolls become more than a sex toy to most of us," according to one posting on DollForum.com, an Internet meeting place that has 21,000 registered members. "Some of us don't even use them for sex play. We grow to enjoy them as companions, ornaments, hobbies, household decorations; we use them like giant Barbie dolls."

There are owners who buy clothes and makeup for their dolls. They move them around the house as the day unfolds - to the breakfast table, in front of the TV, out in the yard.

The dolls are so realistic, light years beyond the cartoonish vinyl blow-ups of gag-gift fame, that some owners treat them as spouses - even to the point of calling themselves "doll husbands."

Their world is unsettling to others because of what it says about the state of human relationships, or society's morals, or the objectification of women. On the Internet, in particular, doll owners are ridiculed - "When you think about it, 6,500 bucks is exactly how much you saved this year on rent from living in your Mom's basement" - and get called names like "freak," "loser," "perv."

But the Internet has also enabled doll owners to find each other and, as it has in many other areas of modern life, to form a community. They fondly call each other "idollators." Some have moved more into the open, posting videos on YouTube to talk about their dolls, creating MySpace pages, and appearing in "Love Me, Love My Doll," a recent BBC America television documentary.

"Dolls, and the people who play with them, have been around a long time," said Elena Dorfman, a San Francisco-based photographer whose exhibit and book, "Still Lovers," featured RealDolls. "But technology has brought them to life, and out of the closet."

And onto the big screen. In "Lars," Bianca plays Ryan Gosling's love interest, and the attachment is emotional, never sexual. She becomes a silent anchor in his storm-tossed life.

"I'm worried to say this because it makes me sound crazy, but she did have a real presence," Gosling told a reporter after the movie was released. "I really felt some kind of connection to her and a camaraderie. This whole movie rested on our relationship together. She had a very supportive energy."

That energy got its start in the San Marcos, Calif., at Abyss Creations, located in a nondescript, signless building in an industrial park. A dozen employees work there, half of them in the manufacturing plant.

Abyss was started 11 years ago by Matt McMullen, who was working for a Halloween company, fashioning various products out of silicone, including masks. One day he sculpted a half-size woman, thought it was kind of artsy, and posted pictures on the Internet.

Soon he was getting e-mails from people wanting him to make the figure into a life-size sex toy. He quoted a price - \$5,000 - he thought nobody would pay. But someone did, upfront and in cash. Suddenly he was in the "love doll" business.

Customers these days can order from 10 female body types and 15 faces. They choose the hairstyle, skin tone, eye color, makeup and nail polish.

Options like tan lines and interchangeable faces drive up the cost, and custom work, which requires sculpting new molds, is especially pricey. A custom face: \$10,000. A full-body likeness, such as the one of the character Kimber from "nick/tuck," can top \$50,000.

The dolls range in height from 4-foot-10 to 5-foot-7 and weigh between 75 and 115 pounds. There's also a male doll, "Charlie," who is 5-foot-8 and weighs 125 pounds. Metal frames with joints underneath the silicone enable the dolls to be moved into various positions.

Each doll takes about 80 hours to finish, Keller said. The most popular model is "Jenny," 5-foot-3, 92 pounds, 32B-24-33, with blond hair, blue or brown eyes, and medium or tanned skin tone.

Abyss averages one order per day and ships about six to eight dolls each week. Most of the dolls are sold in the United States, Keller said, but there are owners on every continent. About 4,000 dolls have been sold since the company started.

"There is no one type of person who purchases a RealDoll," Keller said. Most are men, frequently ages 55-65, but "there are also a great many couples who own the dolls, and some women." Some own more than one doll, including a man from Texas who has eight.

"We believe that the success of the company comes from the fact that old notions of sexuality as something dirty, bad or needing to be hidden are falling by the wayside," Keller said. "People are still happy to use their disposable, or carefully saved, income to live out their fantasies."

Sex is what attracted a 34-year-old customer-sales representative in Michigan who goes by the name Davecat. He said in a phone interview that when he first got his doll, in July 2000, "it was all sex and nothing but."

That has changed. "What she gives me now is a sense of comfort and peace," he said. "I know she is always there." He jokes that they've been together seven years "and we still manage not to get into arguments."

He said "most idollators are romantic idealists who can't find a relationship with an organic partner they would be totally or even mostly satisfied with."

Gordon Griggs, 40, a factory worker in Virginia, bought his doll Ginger in 2000 after a string of bad experiences with women, including one who ditched him at the prom and another who phoned for a date and then asked him to baby-sit her daughter while she went out with someone else.

"I do not have any desire at all for a real woman now," he wrote on his Web site. "We are perfect for each other. She does not drink, smoke or do drugs. She cannot get pregnant (I never wanted children). She will never steal from me or lie to me. I am totally happy with her!"

Stacy Leigh, 36, a married photographer in New York, said she was attracted to the dolls for an obvious reason: "They're hot!" She owns two, along with extra faces and wigs. She admires the "artisanship," and said the dolls inspire her artistically.

"It's funny, though," she said. "Sometimes I'll knock into one of them, and I find myself apologizing to the doll."

The other photographer, Dorfman, said all her assumptions about doll owners were shattered when she began work on her "Still Lovers" project in 1999.

"I remember flying out to the Midwest to meet a couple, fretting about how I was going to photograph these freakish people having sex with a doll," she said. As it turned out, the couple owned several dolls and never had sex with them.

"That's when it got interesting for me," she said.

She wound up focusing on eight owners, all of them similar to Lars in that their attachment was mostly emotional. "These were people who really cared about their dolls and treated them as significant others, like dear friends," she said. "They were in love."

Dorfman has seen "Lars and the Real Girl" and said she thought it offered pat answers for why people buy dolls - trouble with real women - when her experience was "there are lots of reasons people have dolls."

But she found it realistic in the way it captured how others are "freaked out" by the dolls. "People are afraid of how real they are. They are creepy at first and that never really goes away. They're pretty, and so realistic, but also so vacant."

To her the dolls raise interesting questions about love and "what it means to value an object - a replacement human being, in effect - as real." But she's not sure the dolls say anything about the state of modern society.

"These are the kind of people who have always played with dolls," she said. "If anything is different now, it's the Internet. There is a community for them."

In that community, there is talk about the next stage of doll design, with moving parts and sounds - ever more realism.

Gosling, aka Lars, has shorter-term concerns. He joked in a recent interview that he wants to manage Bianca's campaign for a best-actress Oscar, if for no other reason than to watch famous designers "fighting over who's going to dress her."

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