



The New York Times

Account ▾

Bonnie Lucas, Still Playing With Dolls

The artist finds pleasure and healing in cutting up toys and feminine things, and reassembling the pieces.

Materials in the Bonnie Lucas's studio in the NoLIta neighborhood of Manhattan. George Etheredge for The New York Times

By Will Heinrich

July 12, 2020

For the past 41 years, Bonnie Lucas, a Syracuse native who graduated from Wellesley College a few years after Hillary Clinton, has been making intense, memorable collages of dolls, toys and craft implements at home in her tiny NoLIta walk-up. The collages, often bubble gum pink, are powered by a painful ambivalence toward conventional notions of sex and femininity, as well as political rage. Ms. Lucas prides herself on working without glue, instead pinning, tying, or sewing the collages together, or embedding their constituent parts in clay.

I first met Ms. Lucas about six years ago, tagging along with a gallerist on a studio visit, and since then, I've followed her work on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), as well as [reviewing](#) her 2017 show at [JTT](#). Knowing that she lived alone, I got in touch to ask how she was faring in the pandemic. She told me she had lost her mother at the end of April — but was also feeling newly inspired.



Ms. Lucas in her home, where she keeps her studio. George Etheredge for The New York Times

We spoke by Zoom. These are edited excerpts from our conversation.

Which came first for you — collecting tchotchkes, or making art?

First came saving pretty things in a box, and then came cutting them up and making my first collages when I was 21, 22. I saved paper palettes — I had done watercolors and I loved how the paper looked with the splotches of watercolor. I had candy wrappers. I loved chocolate and I would save the beautiful wrapper. And my first collages, I called them specimens, my specimens, were glued.

So you were already doing watercolors?

Yes, I did an independent study in the Wellesley greenhouses painting flowers with watercolor. And I graduated, and continued watercolor, but moved to collage because of my pretty things in a little box.

Weekly visits to Chinatown discount stores were an important part of your creative practice. How well were you stocked when the stores all closed?

In my back room there are probably 20 to 30 bags and boxes of things I've purchased over the last 41 years. So I was left with my 20 to 30 bags.



“Untitled” (2020). George Etheredge for The New York Times



“Untitled” (2020). George Etheredge for The New York Times

Did you approach them differently once you knew they would be all you had?

When I went in my back room and chose a bag, it was almost like I was at the seashore looking for shells. I would take a bag, sit on my couch, and lovingly go through it, an item at a time, looking for things that were interesting.

I had new courage to dismantle and cut up things I overvalued. The store-bought object is not meant to be cut up and dismantled. It's highly valued in our culture. Especially by women. We take care of things, we wash things, we store them. Especially feminine and pretty things. A few people I know said, You really cut that doll up? My mother said that to me. She's *appalled* that I did this, actually. My mother is someone that deeply and truly valued what she purchased in stores. I mean, really. That was her hobby, shopping, high-end shopping. She didn't shop at 99 cent stores. She shopped at Saks Fifth Avenue. She had a whole cedar closet for her clothes. She had a laundress who laundered her clothes. They were impeccable. And here I am with my scissors snipping things up, and it made her very upset. Probably why I did it!

What happened to her?

She died of the virus. She was 93 and in assisted living in Riverside, Calif. She never had any terrible respiratory problem. She took a bad fall, basically, and we think she took the fall because of the virus. Everyone was tested, my mother was tested — she had the virus.



“I think the power, the pleasure, and my feeling of mastery come when I’ve destroyed these feminine things and I’ve repurposed them in my own way,” Ms. Lucas said.
George Etheredge for The New York Times

Would you say that cutting up dolls and toys is a way for you to take possession of the violence that pop-culture does to women?

Exactly. You know, this is a little tool for sewing [pointing to a needle], but made useless — it’s too small. But I feel like, by poking and spearing, I’m using it in a clever and wonderful way that emotionally is very rewarding to me. It’s tiny and strange and mildly violent to pierce things. Especially things that are so feminine, so loaded with prettiness.

And then, in the process of reassembling the pieces, is there a kind of psychological healing?

I think you're right. I think the power, the pleasure, and my feeling of mastery come when I've destroyed these feminine things and I've repurposed them in my own way. To make something new that's mine, that's whole. That's it. That's the essence of me being an artist.

What you do with dolls also makes me think of the Polish-Jewish sculptor Alina Szapocznikow, who survived the Nazis only to be felled by breast cancer. How does being Jewish play into your work?

I'm one of four children, and when we were very young, my mother started telling us all about the Holocaust, in too much detail, gruesome detail. And I have a vivid memory of thinking, I don't want to hear this. We have a morbid streak in my family. My sister and brother have it, too. They love telling tales that are incredibly gruesome. They admit it. I'm not sure why. The underside of life is something they like to share. Looking back, now that I'm grown up and getting older and older — I wish my mother had tried to protect me. I wouldn't have minded hearing about the Holocaust when I was older.



At left, “World’s Greatest Daughter” (2011); above right, “Untitled,” from the 1980s, and below it, “Untitled” (2017). George Etheredge for The New York Times

She talked to you about it when you were how old?

Oh, way too young. Way too young.

What about being a woman? How were you taught to be a woman?

I don’t know about women of your generation, but the easiest way for me to be in life is to show vulnerability, to show weakness, and to ask for help, and to lean up, say I need something — that’s like breathing for me. I can’t comprehend how men can’t do that.

To me, your work has always seemed full of torment, but you talk so positively about the process of making it. How do you reconcile difficult subject matter with the pleasure of making art — and what are you excited about going forward?

I'm yearning to make a small, beautiful universe that's filled with the reality of the times — which is that things are dismembered and cut up. Because what's going on outside is so scary and dark and worrisome, my little universe will reflect all that. But because I'm healthy and alive and working, I can [also] tell a story where there's some beauty, and some sensuality. The whole endeavor is positive, let's put it that way. It makes me feel alive, it makes me feel sexy, it makes me feel smart. It makes me feel, this is me.

A correction was made on July 13, 2020: An earlier version of this article contained an erroneous reference to Bonnie Lucas and Hillary Clinton's years at Wellesley College. Ms. Lucas graduated from Wellesley a few years after Mrs. Clinton; they were not in the same class.