Desirée Holman is an Oakland-based visual artist. As with many of her works, the three video installations in "Make Believe" explore the tension between reality and fantasy. An interdisciplinary artist, Holman fabricates costumes and masks to be worn by herself and actors in portrayals of role-playing scenarios. Her use of primitive animation techniques and handcrafted costumes create a tension between passive and active modes of reception, allowing viewers a critical distance even as they find themselves pulled into the fantasies. These videos are the result of long-term research and a many-layered process often involving drawing, photography, sculpture, and writing.

Holman is currently an Artist-in-Residence at Headlands Center for the Arts as well as a recipient of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art SECA award. In 2007, she received the Artda: The Fund for Art and Dialogue award. Her work has been exhibited internationally at venues such as the São Paolo Museum of Modern Art, Hessel Museum, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Milan’s BnD, Toronto's YYZ, The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Berkeley Art Museum and Lisa Boyle Gallery in Chicago. She is represented by the Skowhegan Gallery in San Francisco. In 1999, directly after completing her BFA in sculpture at CCA, Holman attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and graduated with her MFA from UC Berkeley in 2002.

Artist Statement

Engaging in make-believe provides practice in roles one might someday assume in real life. It helps one to understand and sympathize with others. It enables one to come to grips with one's own feelings. It broadens one's perspectives.

—Kendall L. Walton, Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts

All the works in "Make Believe" involve role-playing games that utilize handcrafted figurative sculptures as props. The sculptures are effigies, and include life-size dolls, wearable full-body forms and masks. I use fantasy play with these effigies as a means of discovery. The process of playing and animating the figurative forms that I create allows for the probing and expression of the fundamental (but normally taken for granted) dynamics of human relationships and emotions.

In "Art as Therapy" (2002), I posed as a family therapist who is giving therapy to a family of life-size dolls. The aim is for the family members to better understand and accept their individual responsibility in the emotional life of the family unit. My initial "consultation" with the family begins with their appearance on a popular television talk show. From this television program, I created life-size dolls representing each family member, which I then animated in the video. In effect, I am both the therapist and the clients. The video provides a window into the transformation we experience as we struggle to change relationships, alleviate symptoms, and improve the emotional functioning of the family system.

Again, in "I would do almost anything that you asked me to do..." (2005), I act as multiple characters with the use of figurative sculptures. In this piece, however, I actually inhabit the effigies and animate them from within the forms. I was inspired by a type of extreme cross-dressing in which (usually) a man puts on a full-body latex suit of a woman's body and face. From four adult male models, I created four flesh-like, stretchy suits that I could literally step into and wear. Robed in these skins, I enacted the roles of four distinct male characters in relationship to myself, engaging in a romantic, yet failed, attempt to waltz with the various male suitors.

Similarly, "Troglodyte" (2005) features inhabitable sculptural forms. In this work, however, the characters are played by multiple performers including myself. The term "troglodyte" describes a simpleton or brute who is emotionally reactive and potentially dangerous; s/he is without acute powers of reasoning. For this piece, I sculpted multiple life-size, wearable, latex, hair and fabric, chimpanzee-like forms. Whether in the spotlight of academic investigations or popular culture, the chimpanzee has often been the focus for human projection. By inhabiting the sculptural forms and pretending to be a chimpanzee, the work investigates human emotion and behavior.

These games always revolve around relationships and reciprocity (or lack there of). I wonder what games of make-believe, like the ones I create in my work or the ones created in multi-user online games or elsewhere, can tell us about our behaviors in the "real" world.

Desirée Holman, 2009

Desiree Holman in the Press:

- San Francisco Bay Guardian
- 7 x 7 Magazine

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