

My Trip to Vent Haven

In 1986 I wanted to change the way I worked. Actually, I wanted to start over. I can't truly say that I wanted to disown all my pictures from 1976 to 1985, but I did have a strong desire to be a different artist. Basically, I was tired of shooting images of women, which, with the exception of some plastic cowboys and a plastic frogman, I'd done nonstop for almost ten years.

How could I photograph men in my language? I mulled over the possibilities of plastic TV characters and G.I. Joe's and Ken dolls. How to get the visual essence of "guy"? I thought about all the representations of men that might operate in the same way as a doll. Archaic cultures are crawling with totemic figures, from Kachinas to those legions of ceramic soldiers that guard the tombs of Chinese emperors. More recent history provides toy soldiers and superheroes. I kept returning to the image of an early, almost pre-memory Christmas present given to my older sister. It was a ventriloquist doll in a green suit with brown trim. I feel as though we spent the better part of our childhood trying to talk without moving our lips. My sisters and I often drew mouths and eyes on our closed fists in imitation of Señor Wences, a ventriloquist who threw his voice on TV shows, using few props and little dialogue.

Conceptually, I loved the notion of ventriloquism. Men speaking through surrogate selves and not having to take responsibility for their thoughts or actions. I remembered "The dummy did it" or "the dummy made me do it" as the operating principle of most of the skits I saw on TV or at birthday parties. Visually, I was rather indifferent. I didn't love the way dummies (or ventriloquists) looked—too spooky, too homemade, too much caricature, and way too many bad jokes. But a more photojournalistic urge

revealed itself to me, and I set off to find out what I could about ventriloquism. I was definitely drawn to the sad and tender notion of a marginal form of entertainment. Ventriloquism was its own kind of disappearing act. Where were all the ventriloquists and dummies? From what I could figure out, they were mostly getting jobs on cruise ships, at state fairs, and for church functions. The first ventriloquist I met in New York was a man called Doug Skinner, whose dummy was named Eddie Gray. Skinner had worked with the performance artist and clown Bill Irwin, and he was a great resource and something of a historian. He lent me books and records and eventually directed me to Vent Haven, a kind of ad hoc museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. Vent Haven was founded in the suburban home of a retired businessman with a passion for ventriloquism, who had done some amateur performing on his own. There is absolutely no other place like this in the United States, so Vent Haven has become the repository for any and all ventriloquial material worth donating (as well as a site for study, with its own curator). Once a year the museum hosts a convention, a national gathering for ventriloquists to meet and greet, entertain and study, complete with its own parade.

I made several trips to the museum, which turned out to be a short walk through the hedges in back of the Holiday Inn where I always stayed. The museum was made up of several prefab outbuildings in the backyard of a nondescript suburban house. The structures were set up like classrooms, with several dozen child-size folding metal chairs, each containing a fully clothed dummy. The rooms had an odd room feel, with wood paneling and sound-deadening ceiling tile, as though the kids might act up at night.

The walls were covered with ventriloquists' press shots and memorabilia sent from all over the world. I had to make a \$150 donation each time I came to work.

Every day my assistant and I would walk over to the museum and set up a small rear-screen projection system, tiny theater lights, and one chair. Only I was granted permission to pick up the figures, so I spent most of the day carrying dummies back and forth from their chairs to my set-up. The most difficult part was choosing which dummies to photograph. At the time I was interested in Irving Penn's ethnographic studies and images of anonymous people photographed within the contrived setting of a makeshift studio. Since the Vent Haven figures represented many races, nationalities, and animals, I felt like I was engaged in a cultural study—the biggest surprise being how many girl dummies and female ventriloquist press shots I encountered. In my makeshift studio I projected background images of rooms and landscapes to give the dummies a sense of place outside the museum.

On my first trips, I photographed dummies of all types. During subsequent visits, I found talking objects like handkerchiefs, beer steins, and walking sticks, which I placed in front of examples of my rapidly expanding collection of slide backgrounds. In 1984 I'd started amassing notebooks full of slides organized by type, like wallpaper patterns, interiors, scenes from nature, etc. On my last trip, I photographed the press shots as they appeared on the walls. I shot with color film even though the press shots were all black-and-white prints. They had faded over time to beautiful duotones of sepia, blue, pink, and purple.

My vent archives were getting full. I subscribed to

several rinky-dink ventriloquist newsletters and prop catalogs. Friends were sending me "how to" books as well as recordings of vent dialogue and music by pros like Paul Winchell and Shari Lewis. I collected articles and artifacts. My files and knowledge were growing as my interest was waning. After I made the *Girl Vent Press Shots* (twenty-five press pictures of female ventriloquists) and the *Boy Vent Press Shots* (groups of ventriloquist press shots organized by themes like "hats," "tuxedos," and "animal characters"), the series was over.

Things on Legs

There is inevitably uncomfortable moment when one group of pictures is done and another has yet to begin. Though I enjoy the sense of completion, another part of me is open to messages about how to go forward.

One day, while visiting the ventriloquist Doug Skinner, I noticed a small black-and-white photo framed on his wall. It was a box of something like crackers or cookies on a pair of woman's legs. Very simple, just a box on legs. It jogged an early memory of a TV commercial in which cigarette packets were dancing across a stage in white majorette boots. That was barely a memory---more like a film loop---and I couldn't get it out of my mind. The memory was all mixed up with visions of synchronized swimmers and of the June Taylor dancers on the Jackie Gleason Show. They performed chorus-line routines reminiscent of Busby Berkeley film spectacles. Jackie Gleason had developed this idea of overhead camera shots so that all sixteen dancers could be seen at once on a small TV screen. Their kaleidoscopic arm and leg movements became the show's trademark. And of course they dressed in sequins and lamé.

My high-school-best-friend's mother, a leggy redhead, was a former Rockette. Whenever she had a couple of drinks (which was fairly often), she tried to teach us how to kick. Her claim to fame was that once, when Fred Astaire passed through Radio City Music Hall, he'd noticed her and said "Hi, Red." As a result, she maintained her flaming red hair until the day she died.

Legs were haunting me. I think the dummy chatter had worn me out. Their conversations were in my brain, and I needed to go to a quieter place, one less cerebral and more physical. Dummies

can't walk on their own. They need to be hoisted and carried like little children. Without a skilled ventriloquist to wake them up, they're absolute dead weight, the most inanimate of characters. In the early 1980s I'd taken many pictures of people and dolls underwater. I missed the grace and choreography of that time, particularly the peculiar kind of silence one experiences underwater.

I don't remember how I arrived at the idea of a camera on legs. I know the initial motivation was more symbolic and conceptual than visual. I was reading a lot at the time---Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag. My concept of the camera was changing, and becoming aware of its iconic, political, and psychological power was making me look at my own camera differently. It seemed less like a tool and more like a director. My camera was taking on a life of its own.

Some sequence of events led to my knowing that there was a camera character in the background of the movie *The Wiz*---a large hulking photojournalists' type box camera, complete with flash, wandering around on a man's body. Another set of coincidences led me to the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, New York, where the camera had found a permanent post-movie home. After some negotiation, the museum agreed to let me borrow the camera for a day.

There was no doubt in my mind who my model would be. I asked my close friend, the photographer Jimmy DeSana, if he would mind wearing the camera contraption. He had been at times my neighbor, my mentor, my steady lunch date, and always my confidante. He always seemed to me like a real photographer because he'd studied photography at art school, whereas I, having had no formal photography training, always felt like a latecomer. I relied upon his expertise for photo and

lighting information, and in return I modeled for him whenever he needed a female character in his suburban psychosexual dramas.

In the summer of 1985 Jimmy was diagnosed with AIDS. By 1987 he was weakening, and it was not easy for him to stand up under the weight of the camera costume, but he really wanted to be in the picture. He was small and athletic and very proud of his legs. I'd bought him white tights and ballet shoes to wear with the camera, and he loved posing and seemed to enjoy the artist/model role reversal. I remember us both being aware that the picture was somehow important for our friendship, for our holding on to each other, and for my work. He loved being "Jimmy the Camera."

The subsequent shots were all objects placed on doll or mannequin legs, with the exception of the *Walking Purse*, which was a human-size alligator purse modeled by my sister Bonnie. Initially I'd wanted all the objects to be worn by real people, but when I started to build a walking cake, I couldn't find a baker who would ice it for less than thousands of dollars. Though using doll and mannequin legs was a decision based on necessity and convenience, I loved taking those tiny figures and enlarging them to seven-foot-tall photographs. The legs in the original shots could be any size. My only rule was that they ended up as photographic prints that were as large as people.

What objects deserved to be anthropomorphized? That seemed like the easy part, and after awhile, things just presented themselves to me in obvious ways. A tiny plastic camera keychain from Times Square, a child's microscope, an old microphone, and masses of cakes and petit-fours. I got into a kind of punning game with myself, with woman-as-cheesecake, the accordion-as-squeezebox, and the

globe bending down (rather than Atlas supporting it in a macho way). It felt like assembling a cast of characters for a musical or repertory company. The tough part was finding legs to scale to the objects that found their way to me. I had a collection of plastic, ceramic, plaster, wooden, and metal legs in all shapes and sizes; eventually I started sawing legs off dolls.

I loved shooting these pictures and would probably still be finding new subjects today if I hadn't decided to impose an absolute finale. I took my favorite characters and lined them up for one last scene, or curtain call, and named the photo *Magnum Opus*. I did everything but make them wave good-bye. In fact the picture is titled *Magnum Opus (The Bye-Bye)*.

When I finally printed the picture, it was over eight feet tall and twenty feet wide. My private joke about the making of a masterpiece was the biggest picture I'd ever made.

Little Men

I guess the book wasn't completely shut on ventriloquism. After *Magnum Opus (The Bye-Bye)*---the grand finale of the Walking Objects series---I once again had a nagging desire to examine men through my particular lens.

One thing that bothered me about my last attempt to photograph male characters was that my Vent Haven dummy project had been so visually stylized and odd. The figures I'd found at the museum were grotesque, primitive, cartoony, and in some cases insulting ethnic stereotypes. But my childhood recollection of ventriloquist dummies was of bland, generic fellows, well dressed and neatly coiffed---kind of smart-alecky Howdy Doody meets the collegiate good looks of Jerry Mahoney (Paul Winchell's dummy). I started searching for this character and realized that one option would be to build the guy myself. I found a ventriloquist and dummy maker named Alan Semokc and worked with him for over a year to get the features just right. I made my first dummy with a movable mouth, giving him the potential to be part of an act. I'd found a perfect little set of child-sized dinner clothes and patent-leather dress pumps, which fit him perfectly. I had seven more dummies made (without movable mouths) so that I would have a cast of potential actors for photographs. I dragged a few of the dummies out to the beach on Long Island to work on romantic portraits in natural light. I was absolutely mesmerized by the physicality of the characters I'd created.

I was reminded of an image that had made a deep impression on me years before. When I moved to a building in SoHo in 1974, I discovered that my neighbor on the top floor was a well-known French actor and a dwarf. He invited my roommate and me to his loft for a drink. When we arrived,

he answered the door and, with a sort of bow and flourish, said, "I'd like you to meet my wife." He led us to the kitchen to meet a beautiful raven-haired woman of average height. He was only the second dwarf I'd ever met, and I was surprised by how tiny he actually was. We all sat down with goblets of red wine and began to chat. At a certain point his wife picked him up and lovingly sat him on her lap, like a child. The image was very powerful, a little shocking, a little sexy, and somewhat tender---kind of Fellini-esque Madonna and Child. They seemed so comfortable in this exaggerated role reversal, where the woman was physically dominant and the boundary between man and boy became blurred.

I became very involved in dressing the dummies. I met a woman who had a small vintage clothing shop for children. She had beautiful tweed suits and navy blue jackets with gold buttons, madras shirts, khaki pants, and loafers with buckles. I became aware of the fact that boys used to dress like little men, not children; basically, the approach had been to shrink grown-ups' outfits, right down to the dark socks, suspenders, and neckties. I saw the dummies as little men, so this proved to be the ideal wardrobe solution. The fact that the figures were almost identical, with just slight variations of hair and eye color, made their sartorial differences all the more striking. My idea of the mid-century man was someone trapped by ambition and conformity, most probably based on the late night TV movie reruns I'd seen as a kid, like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*. I'd thought a lot about conformity when I was growing up. The way mothers and fathers looked, the way children looked, the way I was supposed to look. The first visible expression of a '60s counterculture

was long hair for men and the banishment of physically uncomfortable clothing: buttoned-up shirts, neckties, and heavy wool jackets for men, restrictive undergarments for women. My dummies defined their differences solely through their clothes. Their shirts were tucked in or shirttails were flying. They had string ties, bow ties, or patterned neckties. The slightest differences of color or pattern seemed to announce who they were or what they thought. That, combined with a subtle placement of a hand in a pocket or knees or ankle crosses, seemed to speak volumes.

At that time I had a collection of children's chairs, which appealed to me because they were both sculptural and toylike. I sat the dummies in the small chairs, and one chair in particular seemed a really good fit. I nailed that chair to the wall at eye level, secured the figure on it, and decided that the dummies could have a life outside my photographs--something I'd never tried before. Sets and props had always been just that--objects never seemed animated outside the viewfinder.

I named the dummy-sculpture *Clothes Make the Man*, and I had the chair copied seven times, so each dummy would have a place to sit. I arranged the group on a gallery wall. I didn't give the figures individual names, but rather titled them by a series of vaudevillian wisecracks like *Clothes Make the Man*: "don't I know it," "don't ask," "tell me about it," "you betcha," "you better believe it," and "ask any woman." I was exhibiting sculpture for the first time.

I did not, however, give up the idea of the figures as characters in a picture story. Imagining their wisecracks made me curious about their inner lives. Just as a ventriloquist could give them a voice, I decided that I could give them their thoughts.

Intrigued by the potential of the computer and Photoshop, I planned to drop thought bubbles into my pictures and make a photographic comic book. I called these pictures Café of the Inner Mind because I was making up both the inner and the outer life of my imagined characters.

I tried to invent male fantasies--not just regular guy fantasies, but those suitable for the dummy mind. I gathered images and ideas wherever I could: comic books; old porn magazines; car, motorcycle, and gun magazines. I really knew nothing about the true inner lives of my subject--but then again no one else really did either. I was free to make it all up.

Me, Myself, and I

I spent a lot of time thinking about being a muse. To be the inspiration seemed as important as being inspired---or perhaps even more so. In those days the subtle societal messages that penetrated a little girl's daydreams made her pretend to be a nurse, not a doctor, and a stewardess, not a pilot. In our neighborhood-wide game of Rin Tin Tin, the plum role of Lt. Rip Masters was always taken by the boys. The best part I ever played was one of my own invention: a hawk that flew around in circles. This enabled me to view the proceedings from above, rather than play the lieutenant's girlfriend, which was a sideline part, at best.

I myself never had a muse, nor am I aware of ever having been one. Even though I had posed for endless hours in Jimmy DeSana's psychosexual photographic dramas, I always had the sense that, as his best friend and neighbor, I was more a convenient body than the inspiration for his stories. When it came time to design a girl dummy, I refused to give the part to anyone but myself. I liked the idea of my own image inspiring myself. I'd noticed at the Vent Haven Museum a tendency toward twinning. Dummies were designed in the image of their vent or the two of them simply wore identical suits or caps. There were a number of photographs of female vents posing with miniature versions of themselves. My particular favorite was a pair of girls in matching wigs and pinafores looking in a mirror (plate TK). Twins times two.

In 1993 I contacted the same ventriloquist who had made my little men, and I sent him a bunch of Polaroids of my face and hair. He produced a female figure who resembled me so completely that her shadow in profile was virtually indistinguishable from mine. I photographed her over and over, but it was

her shadow that ended up haunting me far more than her face. I dressed her in my favorite sweater and jewelry and paired her with a guy dummy in a series titled *The Music of Regret*. These were the first pictures I ever made about love, and their kind of cornball musical theater ambience made it possible for me to deal with the subject matter. She became more real and more animated each time I photographed her, as I learned what kinds of tricks the light and shadows could play.

With her moveable eyes (rare in ventriloquists' dummies), I felt she was staring at me from every angle---like the *Mona Lisa*. As a child I'd been taken to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to view the *Mona Lisa*, which was on loan from the French government and hung behind bulletproof glass. We waited on line for hours for our turn to look, and the only things I was told to notice were her enigmatic smile and how she would seem to be looking at me no matter where I stood. It was way too crowded to see the painting from more than one angle, and I was at a loss as to what else to notice. In the end, Leonardo's masterpiece seemed far too small to warrant all this attention.

I especially liked posing the girl dummy in the center of all the boy dummies. She seemed to bask in the glow of their undivided attention while maintaining a somewhat bemused but coy expression. Unlike me, she was utterly comfortable with so many pairs of eyes gazing directly at her. I believed the dummy maker had infused her character with more than a touch of the coquette.

I'd always had the fantasy of inhabiting my own images: walking through the milky light of my toy bathrooms, say, or living in the magazine world of my color-coordinated interiors. I attribute this longing to

my having wanted as a child, to enter the space of a storybook. The books I remember having read to me had lusciously watercolored landscapes and loosely rendered but friendly children. The space on the page had an inviting depth and light, and I was frustrated I couldn't get in there.

In 1997, almost twenty years after I'd made my first set-up photos, I invented a small figure in my likeness who could step into my pictures. I'd found a beautiful black-and-white-model of a bathroom that had been used as a window display in a plumbing-fixture store. I cut a diamond-shaped hole in the wall so the sun could make the same shadow and light as in my original pictures (see plate 11). I placed the set-up (with the model of me) in front of the same window with the same morning light where I'd photographed the blue bathrooms years before. When I looked through my viewfinder at myself through the window, I felt as though one story was finally over.

From there it was easy to start having different heads made in my image by different sculptors. I was almost more curious about the results of the artists' attempts to capture my likeness than I was about the heads themselves. The sculpted heads resembled me to varying degrees, ranging from insulting to passable. I never ultimately got what I wanted, but the challenge of finding the one angle or the one facial feature that looked like me to me kept me shooting. My favorite head was mounted on a stick, reminding me of the talking walking sticks I'd found at Vent Haven (plate 203). I hung a party dress on this construction and photographed it in front of a plywood wall in a huge ramshackle cottage we rented on a lake in Connecticut.

I also commissioned a Neapolitan sculptor to make a huge angel with my face, sculpted in the

style of the angels on the Christmas tree at the Metropolitan Museum. I shot it hanging on the front porch of our lake house, with only a smoke machine and the summer night sky as a backdrop. My favorite picture is called *Midlake* (plate 305). My assistant swam out into the lake and held the stick underwater, so that only the head and hair showed above water---reminding me of the home movies my father had shot of my sisters and me swimming in a lake in Maine. Just heads and hair or colorful bathing caps bobbing up and down on the surface of the water. I also thought particularly about Harry Callahan's *Eleanor, Chicag, 1949*, head above water, eyes closed. I later found out that Paul Strand had rented the same lake house in 1916 and shot his Twin Lakes photos there, from the front porch.