

»»» WHAT a DOLL!

BARBIE and Ken, THE real STORY?

A PHOTO ESSAY BY JANA CRUDER »»
STORY BY LIZ GOLDNER

Barbie's 50th anniversary celebration at New York Fashion Week, 2009, became the impetus for Jana Cruder to create "Great Expectations," her photographic art series based on the iconic doll. While observing that fashion show tribute to Barbie—replete with outfits by world-famous designers—Cruder also realized with dismay that all of the photographers shooting the fashion event were men. As a successful Venice, CA based celebrity/fashion photographer, she decided to buck that male-driven trend by shooting her own scenario about Barbie, but one with a plot-driven, realistic perspective. She ultimately created a Barbie and Ken-inspired photographic art series; that has the dramatic intricacy, along with the refined elegance, of '40s and '50s film noir. The series will be on display this month at the Joanne Artman Gallery in Laguna Beach

great expectations »»»







working girl >>>

morning coffee >>>

Cruder hired a model with a striking resemblance to Barbie, but who has a slightly fuller, more natural looking body. She found a hip, gorgeous Ken look-alike, and signed up a light-skinned African-American model to portray Ken's boyfriend, Joe. Her intention was to explore what she calls "the real story" beneath Barbie and Ken's exteriors. "I also wanted to find out where our ideas of beauty come from, how relationships form, and why young women think that life starts when they get a man." She gathered a team including hair, make-up and wardrobe assistants, and fortuitously was loaned a modernist Palm Springs estate for the photo session. Cruder and crew spent 12 hours at the estate completing 15 sequential photographs. The resulting sharply-defined





BONDING >>>

images in glamorous settings paint Barbie and company as beautiful characters who live out scenarios filled with longing, suspicion, remorse, passion, surprise and regret.

Cruder, 31, has spent her lifetime perfecting her skills as a photographer, while examining life and love with friends and co-workers. She grew up in Western Pennsylvania with a nurturing family who encouraged her interests and passions, and who introduced her to photography. In high school, she took all photography classes offered, and then set up a dark-room in her basement to continue her education. The budding fashionista took portraits and fashion shots of friends, often dressing them in thrift store finds. And she spent countless hours learning to process and print film. After a stint at a community college, where her skills nearly equaled those of the photography instructor, she was admitted to the esteemed Rochester Institute of Technology. There, she studied image making and photographic history, while working in a studio to learn the business side of her craft. In 2005, after working in New York City and Pittsburg, she moved to Venice. Hard work and self-promotion, along with a keen eye for fashion and celebrity shots, has been providing Cruder with work as a photo assistant and celebrity photographer, and, recently, more original work in *Harper's Bazaar*.

THE new normal >>>



Her “Great Expectations” series is her first foray into photographic artwork. “This body of work just came out of me,” she says. As she worked on the series, she understood her deeper intention—to explore how we learn societal roles, and how the media and culture help shape the ways we appear and behave. The series also demonstrates Cruder’s expertise as a fashion photographer with her attention to detail and understanding of composition, lighting, the power of eye contact, and use of props. On a deeper level, it reveals her kinship with photographers Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon, who originally worked in fashion, and then went on to shoot the gritty and conflicted understorey beneath the glamorous façades of ordinary and famous people.

Cruder’s first image, entitled *Great Expectations*, depicts the just arisen Barbie and Ken, with Barbie in elegant bathrobe, jewelry and perfectly curled hair, and Ken in white silk pajamas; both are on a balcony above the pool, surrounded by magnificent landscaping, the mountains in the distance. Yet this bucolic scene is marred by Ken’s joyous wave to the pool boy, Joe, as Barbie looks morosely into the distance. “Is Ken gay?” asks Cruder. The next image, *Working Girl*, set in the bedroom, shows Ken in bathrobe seated sullenly at the edge of the bed, with Barbie’s back to the camera, about to slip on her designer office dress. Implicit is that Barbie is the breadwinner while Ken is unemployed, a recipe for possible break-up, explains Cruder. In *Morning Coffee*, Ken tries to make up with Barbie, but she rejects his overtures.



song For you >>>





awakening >>>



Holiday >>>

Things get more interesting with Barbie at work for the day. Ken and new boyfriend Joe, seated in identical plush chairs and wearing identical casual outfits, are *Bonding*, while looking at *Playboy* centerfolds. Later, in *The New Normal*, as stylishly dressed but tired Barbie comes home, typewriter case in hand, she sees the self-conscious Ken and Joe clad only in swim trunks. Then in *Three is Company* and *Song For You*, Barbie has joined the two men, dressed in casual but elegant evening wear, languishing in their luxurious mid-century digs. The series continues with *Awakening*, as Barbie stands in front of a classic car, suitcase with travel stickers in hand, looking forlornly into space. Is she leaving alone, or going somewhere with Ken? But soon Ken is driving Barbie off for a *Holiday*, as Joe waves goodbye. But is it really goodbye? Subsequent shots without Joe imply his shadowy presence.

And so the photo series fades out with the viewer wondering if Ken and Barbie will live blissfully together in sun-drenched Palm Springs. Or do they go their own ways? Along with this dilemma are enduring images of the beautiful threesome and their to-die-for clothing and settings, enhanced by the poignant artistry of the individual stills.

WHO KNEW >>>



Jana Cruder, who was cited as an emerging photographer for “Great Expectations” at January’s “Photo L.A.” and displayed an “Expectations” image in this past spring’s “Paris Photo” exhibition at Paramount Studios, discovered a part of herself by creating this series. Implicit in this discovery—for the viewer as well as for the photographer—is a fresh, organic, and revelatory look at the myth behind the iconic Barbie doll.

Jana Cruder’s images for “Great Expectations” blends fantasy with reality, while bridging art with fashion and advertising. The exhibition, as part of “The Jane and Jana Show,” is on display at Joanne Artman Gallery, 326 North Coast Highway, Laguna Beach, through October.

POOLSIDE >>>

