

ABOUT THE BARBIE PAINTINGS

These paintings are both homage and critique, reimagining the portrait through the stylized, uncanny faces of Barbie dolls. For Walt Morton, Barbie becomes a subject that goes beyond surface beauty, drawing from Lucian Freud's raw, painterly approach, the existential intensity of Francis Bacon, the dark humor of Martin Kippenberger, and the cultural critique of Mike Kelley. This blend of influences allows Morton to tap into the tension between the idealized and the grotesque, framing Barbie not only as an object of beauty but also as an unsettling icon in a consumer-driven culture.

Inspired by Bacon's ability to evoke visceral psychological states through distorted form, Morton uses selective color, detail and expressive brushstrokes to reveal Barbie's duality as both beloved childhood figure and a deeply encoded symbol of beauty, femininity, and societal pressure. This approach confronts viewers with an uncomfortable reality, presenting Barbie's features as fractured and strange, exposing the artificiality of beauty standards and the societal forces that shape them. Where Bacon's portraits often reveal inner turmoil and vulnerability, Morton's Barbies reflect a quirky emotional depth, questioning what it means to embody "perfection" and the toll it exacts.

The irreverence and brave, blunt style of Martin Kippenberger resonates throughout Morton's work, challenging viewers to question the nature of identity, persona, and even the purpose of painting itself. Like Kippenberger, Morton is unafraid to push boundaries, using Barbie's familiar face to parody and probe the tension between high and low culture. Barbie, a mass-produced icon, enters the hallowed tradition of oil portraiture in Morton's work, a choice that provocatively juxtaposes the refined with the commercial. This tension underscores a critique of the art world itself, one that questions why certain subjects are celebrated in oil while others are relegated to pop culture status, despite their shared memetic influence on collective identity.

Much like Mike Kelley's exploration of toys, memory, and popular culture, Morton's Barbies reflect a nostalgia that is both personal and societal. Barbie, with her origins as a child's "blank slate" for adult identity, echoes Kelley's questioning of the roles imposed on individuals by society from a young age. Morton's Barbies explore this blank slate concept, suggesting that the seemingly innocent play of childhood is layered with societal cues and commercial aspirations, guiding children toward a vision of beauty and success pre-designed by culture.

At a time when painting is continually questioned for its relevance, Morton's work affirms its power to provoke, critique, and reinterpret. Oil portraiture, traditionally a highbrow medium, becomes here a tool for re-examining the cultural significance of Barbie and what she represents in a consumer-driven society. The work is a fusion of high and low culture, challenging viewers to look beyond the commercial facade to see Barbie as a loaded cultural symbol with profound implications on concepts of femininity, self-worth, and identity.

Through these multi-layered portraits, Morton's work both reveres and subverts traditional portraiture, positioning Barbie as an icon worthy of serious artistic examination and cultural critique. This body of work challenges us to confront not only the artifice of beauty but also the impact of commodified symbols on our perception of self and society. In blending influences from Freud, Bacon, Kippenberger, and Kelley, Morton forges a distinctive voice that engages deeply with the complexities of modern identity, the legacy of portraiture, and the evolving role of oil painting in 2024.