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Greer Lankton in 1996, at the opening of "It's about Me. . . Not You" at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh
Photo by David Newcom b

GREER LANKTON, A MEMOIR by Julia Morton

At the funeral of East Village artist Greer Lankton, held just over ten years ago in November 1996, her grieving parents displayed a family picture showing an ordinary middle-class mother and father, brother and sister all standing on a beach in khaki shorts, tees and walking shoes. Their hair was blowing and their suntanned faces were all smiling for the camera. Posing next to the group of happy hikers was the youngest child. Pretty, pale and model-thin with neatly coiffed blonde hair, she wore a stunning black Chanel outfit accessorized with jewelry, high heels and red lipstick. It was Greer Lankton.

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The poster for Greer Lankton's exhibition, "It's about Me. . . Not You," at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh

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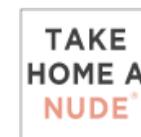
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TERMS AND RESTRICTIONS APPLY.

Only weeks earlier, the sickly but still glamorous Lankton had attended the opening of "It's about Me. . . Not You," a modest retrospective installation at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh. Lankton's sculpted dolls, mounted body parts, photographs, paintings, heroine shrines and memorabilia were displayed in a perfect reconstruction of her tiny studio apartment in Chicago. A minor scandal erupted over the nude photo of Greer that graced the exhibition's poster, but the fuss only added to the crowds and critical acclaim.

The installation featured an Astroturf front yard that led to a white house built of wood and



TERMS AND RESTRICTIONS APPLY.



Greer Lankton's "It's about Me. . . Not You," installation view, at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh
Photo by David Newcom b



Greer Lankton's bust of Candy Darling, in "It's about Me. . . Not You" at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh
Photo by David Newcom b



measuring only 10 x 10 ft. Inside, Greer had arranged her collection of Raggedy Ann dolls near the door. Scattered shelves held more dolls and a lifetime of memorabilia. The walls, painted turquoise and trimmed in pink, were covered with drawings, photos of dolls and a collection of sculpted torsos, their chests branded with crosses or hearts.

Faux niches served as shrines to Greer's idols -- Patty Smith, Candy Darling and Jesus. Several "self-shines" featured well-known portraits of Greer herself, taken by Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz and others. The photos revealed a younger Greer, the glamorous art world muse whose daring presence and challenging work had help to illuminate the 1980s East Village art scene.

Although most of the figures in the installation were small, three corners held dolls that were almost life-sized. The most riveting work was a pallid figure on its deathbed, covered in a red blanket that overflowed with empty prescription bottles. It stared with half-closed eyes up at a deep blue ceiling covered with gold stars.

Greer's dolls, ingeniously constructed out of soda bottles, coat hangers, umbrella hinges, panty hose, layers of paint, and glass eyes obtained from a taxidermy shop, have a surreal yet jarring vitality. Their skins are marked with stitching and other surgical handiwork, as she generally put each figure through several incarnations on its way to completion. Some dolls gained or lost weight, others had face-lifts or sex changes, and some were chopped into pieces and left as torsos or heads.

Greer's work was often compared to the "poupées" of Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer, as well as to the bone-thin figures of Egon Schiele, who also had an interest in self-portraiture and edgy sexuality. Freakishly seductive, the dolls can seem to inhabit a fairly grim bohemia. But studying Greer's installation at the Mattress Factory, which read like a visual memoir, it was clear that in her world, vanity and garish glamour weren't symbols of social decay, but a life-affirming force.

One of my favorite works by Greer is a sad-faced bust of Candy Darling. In her chest is a heart-shaped window void that holds a model of a strong human heart side-by-side with a colorful valentine, suggesting that the artist's life was sustained as much by fantasy as reality. Looking at some old photos, an object by Greer that had once hung in my apartment caught my eye, the flayed skin of a life-sized doll hanging on the wall. I'd remembered it as female, but now I noticed that it was in fact male.

Greer, too, was in "fact" male. Born in 1958, Greer began life as Greg, the third child of a Presbyterian minister from Holly, Ill. From the start

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Greer Lankton with her installation, "It's all about Me, Not You," at the Mattress Factory
Photo by Annie O'Neill



Nan Goldin
Greer in a Babydoll Dress, NYC, 1981
1981
Courtesy Nan Goldin Studio



Nan Goldin
Greer at Einstein's, NYC, 1987
1987
Courtesy Nan Goldin Studio



Greg wanted to be a girl. He made dolls, played dress-up and acted like other girls. Though his family was understanding, life as a "sissy boy" wasn't easy. So, in 1979, with financial help from his father's church congregation (of all things), Greg, then only 21, underwent a sex change.

It must have been shortly after the surgery that I saw Greer for the first time at Pratt, the art school we both attended. I remember her welcoming smile, her strange kinetic manner and the curious good-girl outfit she wore. We met again in late '82 or early '83 in my East Village clothing boutique, Einstein's. By then Greer was famous for both her art and her transsexual status. She and her best pal David Newcomb became close friends with my business partner Paul Monroe and myself.

Around 5'7" tall, Greer had a thin face with full hazel eyes, and a pretty, doll-like quality. Ambitious, with a drive to "get over," she was also warm and generous. Though she followed art-world issues, she preferred playful gossip to academic or political banter. Friends would drop by with stories just to hear Greer squeal with delight, or laugh contagiously until her asthmatic rasp would nearly choke her.

Perhaps because of her joyous, open nature, I was surprised to learn that only a year after her sex change operation that she had regretted her choice and attempted suicide. She was staying at Nan Goldin's loft on the Bowery at the time, and after she recovered she moved to a sunny walk-up on East 4th Street. The year was 1980, and the East Village art scene was just taking off. Goldin's many photographs of Greer, made around that time, helped to cement both of their careers, and provided the decade with some of its most haunting images of desire, isolation and self-deception.

In 1981 Lankton was featured in the seminal "New York/New Wave" exhibition at P.S.1 in Long Island City. She also began showing her work at Civilian Warfare in the East Village, the gallery started by Dean Savard in his ground floor studio apartment. At that time she was making terrifying little burnt dolls locked in tiny wire cages, sculptures of erect penises, belly button casts and a family of hideous trolls. She also made and wore a life-sized fat-body suit that she photographed herself in, perhaps in response to the feminine softening of her once-masculine muscle tone.

Paul and I attended her second solo show at Civilian's spacious new digs on Avenue B. Packed with admiring fans, the opening was a great success, and is widely remembered as one of the era's best. Greer glowed in the spotlight; she had true star appeal. The show featured her elaborate cloth sculptures of sideshow freaks and a toddler-sized hermaphrodite giving birth to twins. Another work, a favorite of mine, was an emaciated, near-life-sized figure titled *Sissy Boy*.



Peter Hujar
Greer Lankton's Legs
1983
Howard Yezerski Gallery



Timothy Greenfield Sanders
Greer Lankton, 1984
1984
from Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, *Artworld* (Fotofolio)



Greer Lankton with one of her works, 1996
Photo by Annie O'Neill Courtesy the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh



Dolls by Greer Lankton

Greer's dolls reflect her unique, isolated vantage point on both sexes, and her exploration of gender, outcasts and norms of beauty meshed perfectly with art world trends. As I look back now, this 1985 show was probably the high point for both Greer and the East Village.

While her public life soared, her private relationships were a constant source of heartbreak. Greer "passed" quite well, and guys were always interested. They'd date and start having sex, and then at some point she'd feel compelled to tell the whole truth, and the affair would end -- sometimes violently.

Eventually, she and my business partner Paul began dating. He was bisexual and, like Greer, he loved ornate esthetics and had an eating disorder. They quickly became inseparable, and she moved into his apartment and started working in our shop. Her next solo featured a number of portrait dolls, including one of her and Paul in bed (a la Yoko and John). Greer and Paul married in 1987. Terri Toye was the bridesmaid, Goldin took the wedding photos, and Greer's father was the minister.

Earlier that year, I'd left my East Village life behind and returned to work in the "real world," getting a job in the fashion industry. The art zeitgeist of the early 1980s, which had begun with so much promise, was over. Death had claimed many East Village artists and art dealers, and others were moving on up and out to SoHo. When Civilian Warfare closed, Greer began selling commissioned portrait dolls out of Einstein's. One depicted Diana Vreeland, then head of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I ran into Greer again in the early '90s and we shared a cup of tea, while she filled me in on the years I'd missed. It wasn't a happy story -- she and Paul had become abusive drug addicts, her career had tanked, and they'd divorced. Not long after our meeting, Greer moved back to Chicago to clean up and start over. We communicated by phone for a while, but finally lost touch.

Then, suddenly Greer's art was back in the limelight, when her work was included in the 1995 Whitney Biennial and Venice Biennale, and plans for her installation at the Mattress Factory began to take shape. The show was organized by Margery King, a visiting curator, who with Mattress Factory curator Michael Olijnyk went to Chicago to see Lankton. They were both amazed and appalled by what they found. Her apartment was a creative disaster site. Greer's figures, half hidden in the chaos, reminded King of Northern Renaissance sculptures. Together they decided to recreate an idealized replica of her studio, and so with boxes of stuff in tow, Lankton was flown to Pittsburgh to oversee the installation process.

Looking back now I imagine the weeks that led up to the Mattress Factory opening must have been



Greer Lankton's sculpture of Diana Vreeland
Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art

some of her happiest; working on her largest installation to date, money in her pocket and surrounded by an admiring staff. She was sick from continued drug use, and down to 90 pounds, but the curators told me how impressed they were by her dry wit, creative process and work ethic. Her old friend David, who accompanied her to the opening, felt she must have known the end was near.

At the same time, back in New York, Goldin opened her retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art. She chose a photograph featuring Greer as her exhibition poster; it was plastered all across the city. And so, Greer died as she had lived, an inspiring muse and gifted artist who stimulated the art world with her crafted conceptualism and explicit, unapologetic humanity.

The Mattress Factory is mounting a permanent display of Lankton's *It's about Me. . . Not You* installation in the summer of 2007. Her dolls, doll photography, and sculptured body parts will live on as unique objects in their own right, as reflections of Lankton's life, and as examples of the East Village era in which they were created.

JULIA MORTON is a New York-based curator and writer on the visual arts. Her first book, *Amalgam: Kent Williams*, was published in 2006.

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