



'In the Attic', mixed media, ht 66 cm



'Jewel Garden', mixed media, ht 71 cm



'Mandala', mixed media, ht 66 cm

THE UNIQUE ART DOLL MADE FOR ADULTS

THESE are not, for me, little people,' says American textile artist Charla Khanna of the dolls she creates. 'They are manifestations of the human psyche, the human spirit.' With the record set straight and any suspicion of fluff moved aside, I ask Khanna about the utterly convincing androgyny of her effigies. 'They are expressions of states of being,' she replied, 'so they need to be androgynous.'

Themes of such magnitude do not often find their way into the realm of doll-making, but in Khanna's creations one senses a thirst for something far more profound and meaningful than entertainment value.

Based in the artistic community of Taos, New Mexico, Khanna's dolls seem to reference the rich American Indian and Mexican heritage on her doorstep, alongside more far flung influences such as Asian and Indian motifs. But it is difficult to pinpoint the precise origins of any of these dolls. Most have oversized feet and wear a tuft of horsehair on top their heads, but it is the richly decorated surfaces of their garments, as varied as their features are similar, that bring these dolls to life.



'Sun-field Seeds', mixed media, ht 76 cm

The results command a language of their own, one that borrows from both the exotic and the familiar. Khanna always knew that she was destined to pursue an artistic career and has made dolls since an early age. At college she studied printmaking, but her doll-making remained an aside until, separated from her husband and with a young daughter to raise, she began to sell both her prints and her dolls. She soon found that the dolls were her best seller. 'It was an accidental career move,' she says with a smile that belies an acute awareness that so few are able to say this of their artistic endeavours. 'Today economics continue to determine aspects of her working process. She always works in series. 'This is not my hobby,' she explains, as if she has faced the assumption before that doll-making could not be otherwise. 'This is my living and I've discovered that when I produce a beautiful piece it's economically necessary for me to run it as a series. However, the more intricate they get, the more individual they are – even when they are part of a series. But number of pieces in a series is totally random,' she concedes.

Heads, hands and feet are formed from papier-mâché, coated in modelling paste, layers of gesso and an oil glaze. Watercolour is used for the features and finished with a coat of varnish. Hands, heads and feet are produced in batches during three-week sessions of intensive production. Khanna then allows time to 'live with the heads' in her studio, until she feels a head suggests a

direction or theme in which develop the piece. The first to admit that she cannot visualize these things in advance, she explains that embarking on each project and seeing it through to completion is her only way of knowing what each doll will be like. 'I begin with a very vague idea,' she says. 'I don't draw things out ahead of time. Working it out as I go along is what makes the process interesting. It's part of my creative motivation – to see how a piece will turn out at the end.'

But it is the garments rather than the bodies of these dolls that set each apart. In the mid-eighties Khanna took a break from what threatened to be a case of studio burnout by embarking on a second graduate degree; this time in fibres and textiles at the University of Michigan. While it was weaving she focused on, it was during this time that the gamut of textile techniques began appearing in her work. Occasionally she would employ patterned store bought fabrics, but for the majority of her work she now favours embellishing Dupioni silk, although the fabric often needs to be over dyed in her studio to obtain the particular colour combinations she seeks.

Khanna's themes are varied. *Daily Life*, for instance, was made in recognition of the sanctity of daily life and its mundane objects. Drawing inspiration from the Catholic tradition of Milagros, the small silver symbols that adorn the doll are her versions of the tiny objects which, when pinned to clothed figurines of the Madonna or Saints, are believed to act as a reminder that ensures one's prayers are not overlooked. In contrast, her patchwork dolls *Pinwheel*, *Tumbling Blocks* and *Wheel of Mysterie* are named after traditional piece work patterns and are less a response to the internal reflections of the artist than they are a recognition and celebration of the many women who created, often with little personal recognition, the intricate quilts that make up much of North America's more recent textile history. The rest of her pieces, such as *Jewel Garden* and *Mandala*, reflect more existential concerns. 'I am an introvert,' she says, 'so I am drawn to interior things.'

Have the dolls evolved over the years that Khanna has been making them? 'I do think my approach is more playful now than it was in my youth,' she responds. 'I make pieces that generally refer to the human condition, but recently I enjoyed doing a whimsical piece about a trick frog. That has changed.' What has not changed substantially over the years are the dolls' distinctive proportions. Khanna's earlier pieces were more attenuated. In referring to the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti and his standing figures: 'He seems to have just hit upon a form. I too have hit upon



'Pinwheel', mixed media, ht 71 cm



'Wheel of Mysterie', mixed media, ht 71 cm



'Tumbling Blocks', mixed media, ht 71 cm



'Daily Life', mixed media, ht 71 cm

the perfect form, for me. But in the back of my mind, the first question I always ask when starting a piece is, "if you were going to live with this doll, how would you want it to be?" Perhaps this is a strange question for an artist who keeps none of her own work, but her answer is one Giacometti would relish: 'I do not want them to be very emotional. I want them to be still points, emotionally speaking.'

Jessica Hemmings