

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NEWS RELEASE

The University Gallery of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst is pleased to present From the Lives of Dolls, the first major survey of Ellen Phelan's doll imagery, created by the artist between 1985 and 1992. Phelan's collection of dolls provided the inspiration for these evocative expressions that reveal the secret places of human emotions. Using the dolls as her models, Phelan composes arrangements within her studio, proceeding to render psychologically charged narratives that address the powerful themes of self-identification, cultural roles and memory. The exhibition, which was guest-curated by Marge Goldwater, includes 41 drawings and 11 oil paintings which evolved from the drawings and were created by Phelan in the last year. Ellen Phelan: From the Lives of Dolls will be on view at the University Gallery from November 7 through December 18, 1992, with an opening reception on Saturday, November 7th, from 4 to 6 p.m.

Ellen Phelan achieved a reputation in the 1980s for abstract landscape paintings, luminous and atmospheric works that were formally inspired by such historical sources as Antoine Watteau (French, 1684-1721), J.M.W. Turner (English, 1775-1851), and Camille Corot (French, 1796-1875). At this same time, the artist was producing gouache drawings rendered from her own observations of nature during trips to Norway, Ireland and Belize. Phelan eventually came to consider these drawings as starting points for another series of oil paintings which served as ethereal mementos of the sensations she experienced on her travels.

In the mid-1980s, while still engaged with her landscapes, Phelan began a series of works on paper depicting dolls in a manner that animated not so much their bodies as their psyches. This seemingly different direction is, in fact, a continuation of Phelan's artistic predilection for evoking moods. Atmospheres which infused childhood play with dolls are here described with the talent of a masterful artist and the experiences of a grown woman. In one of the earliest works in the present exhibition, Applause (1985), a formally gowned diva stands beside a smaller, androgynous looking companion. Both figures have their arms outstretched in acceptance of the accolades bestowed by an unseen audience. Although the relationship between the two characters is ambiguous, the innocence and vulnerability of the unformed, smaller figure, in comparison to the developed refinement of the larger, is underscored by its isolated shadow against the brightly lit background. As is typical of Phelan's doll series, Applause is imbued with a psychological choreography reflecting the complexities of human nature.

In a process that parallels the production of her landscape paintings, Phelan recently began a series of oil paintings based on the watercolor and gouache drawings of her doll imagery. The Gallery's exhibition provides an opportunity to compare the earlier drawings with paintings created in the last year. From the Lives of Dolls includes selections from Phelan's series of brides, singers and performers, mothers and daughters, 'Blond White Woman' drawings (based on the Farrah Fawcett doll) and characters perceived to be marginal such as drunkards and clowns. Sentimental or frightening, sad or ridiculous, Phelan's images of dolls convey the humor and vulnerability of being alive.

After its presentation at the University Gallery, From the Lives of Dolls will travel to the Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal, where it will be on view from February 17 to March 17, 1993 and to The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu from April 6 through May 30, 1993. An illustrated catalogue of the exhibition, with a preface by Marge Goldwater and essays by Richard Armstrong and Peter Schjeldahl, will be available at the Gallery after November 7. The exhibition and catalogue were made possible with funds from the Douglas S. Cramer Foundation and the Massachusetts Cultural Council as well as the UMass Arts Council, the University Alumni Association and Friends of the Fine Arts Center, a membership organization.

Ellen Phelan was born in Detroit in 1943. The artist has had recent one-person exhibitions at the Alright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (1991) and the Baltimore Museum of Art (1989). Her work has been shown in numerous group exhibitions, among them Re:Framing Cartoons, Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus (1992); Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1992); 1991 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Minimalism and Post-Minimalism: Drawing Distinctions, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire (1990). The artist lives and works in New York City, and Westport, New York.

The University Gallery, located on the lower level of the Fine Arts Center, is open to the public Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. The Gallery is also open during evening performances held in the Fine Arts Center Concert Hall.