

ARTFORUM

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By David Frankel

Aneta Grzeszykowska

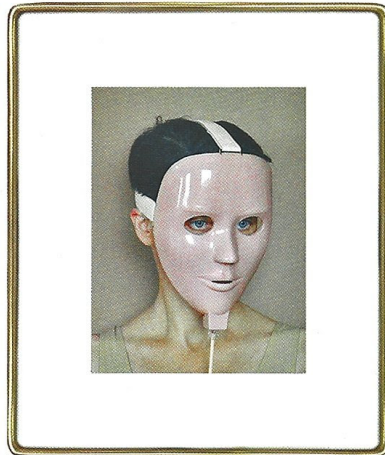
LYLES & KING

The doll is a long-standing device in modern art, from Hans Bellmer to Laurie Simmons and Greer Lankton. You could call it a shortcut to the uncanny and surreal, but that wouldn't do justice to its lasting power to unsettle—and if you doubted that power, the Polish artist Aneta Grzeszykowska's show would have given you the lie. Other artists kept coming to mind as I walked through this exhibition—Claude Cahun, Sally Mann, Grzeszykowska's compatriot Alina Szapocznikow, Arthur Tress, Francesca Woodman—along with movies: Charles Laughton's poetic frightener *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), for one, as well as various Frankenstein and golem films and almost any horror film starring a corpse. But Grzeszykowska's photographs—charming, morbid, disturbing, funny, and forlorn—distinguish themselves from the various precedents they summon.

For a 2017 series of pictures, "Untitled (Model)," Grzeszykowska hired two friends—special-effects makers for the movies—to create a silicone bust of her, lifelike down to its hair. Apparently showing stages in the bust's manufacture (the painting of the lips, the shaping of the eyebrows), as well as the final outcome, those images have to do with the construction of a woman's identity, as well as with a stranger sense of the identity so built as both living and dead—*undead*. For her new series, "Mama," 2018, Grzeszykowska upped the stakes by giving the model to her young daughter, Franciszka, to play with as a doll, then photographing them together.

Simultaneously touching and dark, the images both expand and explode the relationship between mother and daughter, adult and child. Most obviously, they invert and subvert the usual power structure of those relationships. Since the Aneta doll is a bust, a head and torso without hips or legs (and for that matter with arms cut off at the elbow), Franciszka, though a child of, I'd guess, six or seven, is the taller of the two. She is also abnormally and sometimes gleefully in control: Perhaps she'll decide to take her mother for a walk, wheeling the bust through a field in a little cart. Perhaps the two will take a swim, the girl more sensually alert to its pleasures than the mother, who floats inertly, eyes open under the water, as if drowned. If child has temporarily become mother—and in one memorable image Franciszka holds Aneta's head and body to her own legs, fusing the two visually—her caretaking skills seem haphazard; we fear a little for Aneta, inanimate though she is. But beyond just reversing the girl's and the woman's relative strengths, the photographs more provocatively confuse their identities. And given the equivocal status of the silicone figure, which is at the same time both highly faithful and hardly convincing, the element of play—Franciszka seems to be having a good time—commingles with a sense of mortality.

The exhibition also included five works from a series called "Beauty Masks," 2017, self-portraits of Grzeszykowska wearing various cosmetic masks that might seem everyday in the salon but here recalled Jason in *Friday the 13th*. Without denying the interest of these works or their place in Grzeszykowska's larger program, the "Mama" group was the main event in this show. Among their many ambiguities, the photographs left unclear to what extent the scenarios Franciszka engages in were her invention and to what extent her mother's. Probably a mix, I would guess, but certain images seemed "artier" than would have occurred to a child: a view of Aneta's face half covered by leaves, say, recalling the poet John Webster's lines about the "shady groves . . . [where] leaves and flowers do cover / the friendless bodies of unburied men." Images such as this one, though, didn't seem to me the most suggestive in the series. When Franciszka puts a cigarette to the silicone head's lips or smilingly holds her hands over its eyes from behind, or when the two wear matching blond wigs, life and death, youth and age, child's play and the artifices of adult identity combine in highly challenging ways.



Aneta Grzeszykowska, *Beauty Mask #10*, 2017, pigment ink on cotton paper, 23 7/8 × 19 1/4". From the series "Beauty Masks," 2017.

—David Frankel