

Getting Curious - Jonathan Van Ness & Freyja Hartzell

JVN [00:00:04] Come on Barbie, let's go party. Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness, and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. And this week we are getting curious about dolls. Freyja Hartzell teaches the history of modern design, architecture and art at Bard Graduate Center in New York City. She's currently writing a book about dolls, robots and A.I.. And, you know, I love all three of those things. She's also working on an exhibition called Dollatry. That name of that exhibition is everything. Freyja, how are you?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:00:36] I'm good. I'm so excited. I can talk about this stuff endlessly.

JVN [00:00:40] Honey. Well, you met your match because we are going to...we are, we're fucking going there today. Now, here's the thing. Obviously, Barbie is having a major cultural resurgence at the moment. Also, Barbies specifically—and dolls—for me as a very young queer child were really important to me and like my kind of coming of age and, like, develop—actually not really coming of age—but developing passions. So I found this like laundry basket full of my mom's Barbies, which I bet if I hadn't played with them so hard—because they were like original, major Barbies from like the sixties—probably would be worth like a gajillion dollars now. But I gave them haircuts, I gave them costume changes. I, I found these Barbies, and I felt so deeply in love. I became obsessed with hair. Barbies are what led me to thinking that beauty pageants were amazing, not because of like the misogyny, but because I just thought their like, hair was amazing. I loved the answers. I loved the walks. I just love everything about it. And I was like, just obsessed. And so Barbies really, for me brought me to hair, like, brought me to, like, the idea of, like, beauty and expression and I think ultimately allowed me to, like, make a narrative that was empowering as opposed to, like, making me feel bad about myself. So Barbies are like a big source of curiosity. Not Barbies, but just dolls are a big source of curiosity, expression, joy. I also think it says a lot about gender and the way that, like we're allowed to express ourselves or like encouraged to express ourselves. I also had this stuffed animal named Nicole, who is like the cutest, sweetest dog of all time. And then I had like Nikki Cole the second when my fucking brother is ripped off Nicole's nose. And then my mom gave her like a black yarn nose. It was like, different than her plastic nose. It was 1992, but whatever. I was obsessed. I think I actually wrote about Nicole in *Over the Top* because I was so obsessed. But like stuffed animals, dolls; big deal for me. I loved them. But, you know, again, just like gender, they are a spectrum because there's creepy dolls. There's Charlie's going to murder you dolls. Then there's like the gay who Stanford hooks up with in *Sex and the City*, who's obsessed with his porcelain dolls. And then Stanford breaks the one, and then he doesn't want to do him anymore. So sometimes dolls are, like, intense. You know what I'm saying? Freyja, they're just a major gambit. I just had to tell you, like, why I became obsessed so that we could, like, fall in love with each other at the very beginning of this podcast. You know what I'm saying?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:02:56] I love that. And I think that you're absolutely right. There's a huge gamut. And this is, you know, this is one of the reasons for me that I'm doing this, that it allows me I mean, just get ready for like 6 million terrible puns because it allows me to

play in all sorts of directions. But this is, this is totally it. And I think a lot of the things that you brought up, I mean, I'm still going back to I want to say like, are you sure you didn't watch the pageants because you love misogyny? That's my favorite. I watched them for the misogyny.

JVN [00:03:26] I was like I was really into misogyny as a four year old. It was like my favorite thing. No it was just like the asymmetrical dresses.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:03:32] Misogyny Barbie.

JVN [00:03:32] There was like big bangs. Like there were like huge, puffy fringes, like, just completely intoxicated me as a small child. And shoulder pads.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:03:42] Well, the hair, the hair is a thing. And I mean, this is like we can talk maybe more about this later on, but, you know, girls and adults looking back and thinking about, you know, hair and what the dolls allowed them to do with hair and all this stuff. This is a huge, huge part of all of this.

JVN [00:03:58] So but enough about my obsession with them. I want to start with—now that I talked for 8000 years—I want to talk about like your interest in dolls, because it's not every day. And I think this is like our first time we've ever had in 350 something episodes, a doll expert. So what's it like? Like, how did you come into being interested in dolls? Like, what's it like to study them? Like, what does one major in to become a doll expert, darling? Like, tell us everything.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:04:25] So I'm a design historian, and what I'm really interested in, in terms of design, is how we relate with objects that we use, but also how they relate to us and how they change our behavior and how they kind of influence us in various ways and like to the point of kind of understanding designed objects as like what we might think of as subjects, right. As something with agency, something that's got an agenda, something that's like making you behave in a certain way. And so that's what I've been focusing on for a lot of my career. And I got this idea and I honestly don't know where it came from, but I got this idea at some point that wouldn't it be cool to study dolls because in a way, they're like the quintessential example of this kind of object, right? That's baked into them. Like they're designed to have an impact on us. They're designed to kind of create a relationship with us. And, you know, your memories from being a little kid. My memories from being a little kid. I watch my own kids do this. There's a, there's a really like I would say, sophisticated way that children think about dolls or puppets or stuffed animals. For me, it was much more stuffed animals. I just had a few dolls, but they weren't the the...

JVN [00:05:39] Yeah, I was a bigger stuffed animal queen myself and make them and arranging them on like the other twin bed in my bedroom that like, was inexplicable because like, I didn't have a like, like I do have two brothers, but we didn't sleep in the same room and like...but no matter if you fucked with my display of my fucking dolls, I swear to fucking God, you've never seen a six year old; I would... no, like I would go rigid as a board, hurl myself on the floor. Once my fucking mom hired a male babysitter, he

fucked with my dolls. He fucked with my stuffed animals...And he, he not only did he do that, but he also messed with my rock collection. I think this was maybe like my first sign of OCD, but it was really the dolls that got me. Now, I threw a temper tantrum because I couldn't believe that he'd crossed my boundary with touching my dolls. And in that temper tantrum I had to pee. But I thought if you get up to pee, you're going to have to stop throwing your temper tantrum. So what did I do? I peed right there on the floor. I just laid on my stomach and I peed right there on the carpet. Didn't move, laid in my own pee until my parents got home so I could tell him about what that fucking [BLEEP NOISE] did. Now we should probably bleep out his name, just note to selves.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:06:52] And I think peeing really contributes to one's protest, right? I think that's a really strong way to make clear that someone has crossed the line. I think that's absolutely legitimate.

JVN [00:07:00] I'm not fucking around; I will piss on myself right now, okay?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:07:04] Yeah. No, I mean, I got...I we must be kind of the same person because I would get very upset. First of all, arranging the dolls, arranging the stuffed animals; for me, it was also about care. And this is something that I'm really interested in, in my own project is like that these objects make you care about them and they...there's also a kind of a burden there. And this is probably just because I'm like a dark, miserable person. But, you know, but there's like a...you have to do it. Like, you can't just leave them alone. And even when I, like, I brought dolls down to my little closet here this morning to get ready to show you, but I couldn't just, like, put them in a box. Like I had to like, so I had to carry them. I had to set them. And I'm like 47 years old. So clearly this is embedded in me. But yeah, I mean, I—we lived in Germany when I was a kid and my grandmother, who was like my favorite person of all time, came to stay with us for Christmas. And she, I had my dolls all arranged in their little like vignette, you know, and she changed the arrangement and it was like I was so traumatized; I was so angry. And then like, it took me like 24 hours. And then I realized like, oh, how charming, like she changed the arrangement. Like how, you know, like she's playing with me and it's wonderful. But my initial thing was like, "Goddammit, like, I had this, like, I perfected this. Like, how could you?" So I'm very I'm very on board. I'm very on board with this.

JVN [00:08:31] You know? So ew, I hate that. So in your research and just generally like: what characteristics do dolls have and what makes a doll a doll, as opposed to like a stuffed animal or another toy or object like and also sub question: are stuffed animals also dolls or is there like some definitive distinction like a doll has to be human or something?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:08:55] What I've come to for myself, at least, is that it's kind of situational. So, you know what, what's the play like? Like, is this being played with as though it's a doll? Is it being played with as though it's a puppet? From my own work, as much as I'm I'm an incredible animal lover and I'm a stuffed animal lover, but for my own work in this project, I've had to kind of draw a line between humanoid figures and animals because otherwise I would never do anything. And I think the other reason for me that I want to stick to the kind of human likeness question, is that I think this work is really very

consciously about identity politics. And hopefully not in a kind of clichéd way, but just as a way for me to really center myself in discussions about who we are as human beings and what that means and how these objects are reinforcing that or how they're challenging that, or how we can look at them historically and see how people have understood themselves. So as much as, you know, I want to look at Teddy Roosevelt's teddy bear...and that's that's another story, right? But I think I think the dolls for me then, are something about, there's something about getting a likeness, whether it hits or misses the mark. And then also and I think this one is really important for me: they're about relationship and companionship and kind of trying to understand what that is. Like, because I think when we say relationship or companionship, we think about it positively, at least I would initially, right. But that's not; that's 50% of it, maybe. But there's also in relationship or in companionship, there are also a lot of negative aspects about relating to someone or determining where you stand in relation to someone, in terms of power. And those things are absolutely happening with dolls. And I think they...those those those moments of play, however they're recorded, whether it's photographs or film or diaries or period fiction, can tell us a lot about how people actually are: historically and now.

JVN [00:11:25] Yeah, I feel like I especially see that, or I also see that with gender, like so much in kids. Like I was naturally really into Barbie. Like, I really wanted like Barbie, but like my brothers were really into, like G.I. Joes and like wrestling dolls. And that I think, was something that, like, really alarmed my dad, especially, like this intense interest that I took in Barbies. But I think that especially like, you know, with gender so we can get into that like at any time. But I do think that like, is that something in your research that you see historically, too, like that there were more dolls for girls than dolls for boys? And like, is there any literature or is there any evidence of like there being concern about, like girls playing with boys dolls and boys playing with girls dolls?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:12:15] Yeah, for sure. And I think some of it, you know, the stuff that I've looked at in the 19th century and again, this hasn't been exhaustive at all, but what I've seen in the 19th century is that it's there's more...there might be more overlap in terms of girls and boys playing with the same dolls. However, the play seems to be different. Girls play with dolls—and, you know, I'm talking about the U.S. and England, probably the sort of the European and American world right now—the girls play with dolls tends to be very prescriptive. So it's about: fashion dolls are teaching girls to, how to wear their clothes and what materials their clothes are made of and how to choose them. And and about comportment and lady likeness and all of this. Or, you know, doll houses are teaching them how to run a good household, all of this stuff. You know the trope of the doll tea party right? This is absolutely a 19th century thing and it's about how to, how to be ladylike. Boys might be playing with the same dolls, but they're like hitting them against a tree or they're like hanging them with a noose or they're and, you know, and there's lots of fun when you start to dig into this, and a friend of mine and a really amazing scholar, Robin Bernstein, who teaches at Harvard, has written a book called *Racial Innocence* that deals a lot with the 19th Century and Black Dolls.

JVN [00:13:45] Okay, I'm so this is okay...So literally on TikTok a couple of weeks ago, I saw this video of this guy going to a garage sale and like, there was like a trending sound. It's

like this like creepy trending sound that was big on TikTok a few weeks ago, but he starts panning to all of these, like, creepy ass, like blackface dolls from the... but then there's people buying them! Like two weeks ago on TikTok, like white fucking people buying them, like so, and there is like, there's like, salt and pepper shakers, and they were like, just those, like, racist ass things that you see from like... but what the fuck was that about? I mean, just like basically...like, what does that mean then? Was it about racism, too?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:14:26] Well, yes, for sure. If we go back to that idea of dolls as pedagogy; dolls, as teaching kids how they're supposed to behave. They're absolutely a kind of group of Black dolls in the 19th century. They're called Mammy dolls or Dinah Dolls—like, someone's in the kitchen with Dinah—that are part of the dollscape. You know, it's like you have you have this doll and that doll and this other doll, and then you have your Dinah doll or your Mammy doll, and that's the doll who takes care of the other dolls, like with Raggedy Ann, you know, the Raggedy Ann Dolls and Raggedy Ann and Andy. This comes from a series of books about Raggedy Ann and Andy. My mom read me these stories. I actually read them to my kids, too. But what we don't know as much now is that in those stories and when the dolls were manufactured, there was Raggedy Ann, Andy and Beloved Belindy. And beloved Beloved Belindy was the Mammy doll who took care of Raggedy Ann and Andy and all the rest of the dolls and her—if you look at you can go and look these Google Beloved Belindy—this is absolutely the kind of stereotype of blackface. It's a cloth doll that demonstrates blackface. So I think, you know, there's a lot of really, really troubling, but also, I think, you know, troubling and also, things we need to know.

JVN [00:16:00] When I think about like my dad and my mom's generation and also even us, like we played with Raggedy Ann. Never heard about late Beloved Belindy until now. But we should know that that's where that comes from. And that and it is so dehumanizing and it like and it starts the dehumanization process in kids, in that time, really early and makes it seem like playtime.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:16:27] It's...what do I want to say about it? I mean, I think using the word problematic over and over again is problematic. But from a historical point of view, the Black dolls, especially in the U.S., I mean, Black dolls were being manufactured in Europe as well. But the narrative of enslavement was largely absent from from that. It's not that there weren't problems with those dolls. There were certainly; I mean, one of them would be that for many of them, for porcelain dolls, for instance, the molds that these German and French manufacturers used for making the heads were exactly the same molds that they were using for white dolls. So the facial features were all the same, it was just the color that was different. But, you know, in the U.S., looking at these Black dolls is a huge, huge, huge resource for historians who want to try and figure out how, exactly as you said, how children were indoctrinated into fulfilling the power roles that the adults wanted them to fill and not not having a choice. So that's you know, in a way, I feel really lucky that I don't...that that research can inform my project, but I don't bear the entire burden of doing it from scratch because there are really great scholars who've been, who've been working on it. So I feel really privileged that I get to kind of stand on those shoulders a little bit.

JVN [00:18:03] Has your research taken you to, like, the creepiest doll, the most murderous doll, like you're most Chuckiest doll? Someone who dressed up as the doll to murder people? Like someone who is too obsessed with dolls, like what, not like, really more sexually, but more just like, murderously. Like, has it taken you to a murderous place? Not personally, but learned about one.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:18:23] You know, in many ways, I'm at the beginning of this project, and that's sort of like, you know, like cat years. That's like in academic year. So I've been doing it for a while, but like, I still find myself. I feel like a novice in a lot of ways. And I'm actually...I recently did a, a research residency at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York, which is sort of like, in the U.S., our major Toy and Doll museum. And it is it's absolutely incredible if you're ever in Rochester, which I have to plug as an amazing city, like I was not convinced before I went, but it's like a wonderful, artsy city. You have to go to the Strong Museum. And so that was sort of my major like boots on the ground research activity. But, you know, I've also like, I, earlier this summer I went to a doll hospital in Connecticut where I live, which with an amazing woman who collects dolls and who also repairs dolls for people. So you bring her your broken doll and she's like this incredible artisan who is able to reconstruct all these, like, old historical dolls. But, you know, you find like, when I got into a conversation with her, I mean, I have my own neuroses, right? But I kind of approach this person's like, "Whoa, this person's, like, really focused on this really weird thing." But of course, I got into conversation and I realized she's completely brilliant. And there's also this thing that I think, you know, for me, it's it's something that drives the research in general, but especially in this project is like: love. I mean, it's love. It's like love for the subject, love for this weird thing that happens between you and the doll. And, you know, every time she talks about a doll, like her face lit up and I could see she was having, like, all these kind of visions of, like, what this doll does and like, where it came from and all this stuff. So I think the project has taken me into a lot of collaborations with really incredibly talented and interesting people. And that's that's a big deal. In terms of creepy and weird, which is a wonderful thing: a few different things. For instance, like this first, the clip that I want to play is, is Thomas Edison's talking doll, which was, I think the first talking doll. And it has, I believe, I'm probably going to get all this stuff wrong and people are gonna be like, "You don't know enough about Thomas Edison's doll," but I think it has a wax cylinder inside, which is where the, where the recording is. And so this idea of like looking at this inanimate thing that's also talking to you. It's disjunctive, right? It's uncanny. It's like we're not expecting that to happen. But when you hear this, and we can play this clip. you'll also get why.

JVN [00:21:19] Freyja, I think you should say roll the, roll the tape or roll the clip.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:21:23] Roll the tape.

DOLL AUDIO [00:21:26] I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.

JVN [00:21:39] What the hell are they saying?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:21:41] This children's prayer, right? Now, I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the soul, the Lord my soul to take. So I mean that...I mean, the prayer tells you a lot, first of all, right? This is like just exactly what we were talking about, right? That we're...

JVN [00:21:58] Okay, but that makes me feel really old because I remember saying that prayer, too.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:22:04] Yeah. Yeah, it... I mean, that's. I mean, that's how I know it. I didn't pray it, but I certainly...

JVN [00:22:08] I fucking did pray it. That's how, that's how religious my shit was.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:22:12] Do you still pray it?

JVN [00:22:13] No, I, I don't. Not that one. Not that one. Although I do have an agreement with Jesus and God...whoever. If that is what's checking out, we have an agreement that, like, 24 hours ahead of time, I can be like, "Oh, my God, I'm so sorry. I like forsake, and I didn't fully commit. Like, I fucking take it back. Like I'm going to stop being a naughty girl and like, I'll be a good girl." So we have that agreement. So it's going to be fine. It's going to be fine. Yeah, it's gonna be fine. Okay so...

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:22:47] So yeah, but so, so kids have they they are listening to the prayer that they know really well, except it's being like, shouted by an old lady out of a doll. I mean, no wonder, like, it's, you know, this, this thing we just looked at it said they only were manufactured for like six weeks because they were so terrifying. But I think this is like a bigger, it's part I mean, you know, getting back to your original question about creepiness, right? It's part of this bigger question of what makes something creepy. And, you know, we whole we could have a whole other podcast about the idea of the uncanny, which is really about that, right? Like, about like, why do certain things come across to us just off? Sound is one of those things. So we're not expecting sound. And then if the sound is like also completely off in terms of the visual, then we're like, "Whoa, okay, like something's weird here." And then the other thing, at least for me, is facial expression. And I've been really interested in the fact that most dolls, though not all dolls, have one single facial expression frozen for all time, and it's neutral, or it's happy, or it's sad. Actually, I can show you a sad one in a minute, which is kind of an amazing thing to me. But at the doll hospital, this woman showed me a doll that she was working on fixing from the early 20th century, and it had basically rotating facial expressions. So it had like six faces that could rotate. And so, you know, if you, if we had to sort of name expressions right, it would be like happy, sad, angry, sleepy, dopey, you know, like but it was like some of them were like kind of in between, like, you know, like one eye was open and that was like, okay, so here's a doll maker who's attacking this problem, right? Like, this is we have this problem: dolls don't change their expressions. So kids have to be really imaginative and like, project onto the doll what they want it to feel. But we're going to fix that by like creating this rotating head that, you know. But I think, you know, I was completely fascinated by this thing. I just wanted to look at it forever. But it was totally creepy. I mean, you know, it was like, "What

expression do you want now?" Click, click, click, click... you know? So I think things like that where it's like we're trying it's almost like we're trying too hard, like we're trying to get these dolls to do the things that we do, but they're not gonna. And, you know, this is, you know, also that I'm interested in robots and A.I. and and that's a big, big thing there as well. Like how close can an artificial being get to us? And this is everywhere in the media right now. You know, movies are coming out and we're talking about ChatGPT and all this stuff. And and the anxiety is like that they're going to replace us. Which I feel like, I feel like that's the anxiety of all ridiculously anxious people about everything, right? It's like we—whoever we are—we're going to be replaced by them, whoever they are.

JVN [00:26:02] You mentioned earlier about likeness. How does likeness fit into, like, the study of dolls? And like, what does likeness mean in your research?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:26:10] As I've been thinking about likeness, I mean, I think my biggest question about likeness from the beginning was why is it important? You know, why do we need...I mean, it's certainly about validation. We want to be validated. We want to know that someone out there somewhere, feels and thinks like us. Maybe someone out there looks like us. And that's certainly a big part of doll making is about...and also now, in an age when we're really we're really focused on the idea of representation; that somebody out there looks like us. But I also started to think in the last couple of years about, you know, is likeness really about the visual? Is it about appearance or is it about other things as well?

JVN [00:27:00] Yes, but in a sentence, what does likeness mean?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:27:06] I think it means reflection of...it's an object that's reflecting the subject, in some way. But I think that the open ended part is: in what way? Right, so I think there could be likeness without visual appearance. You know, I think there could be likeness in somebody who's like your soulmate, right, there's maybe there's a likeness there.

JVN [00:27:28] I wanted to ask earlier about, like and is disability representation and, like, likeness becoming more like, talked about and accessible in like, the doll and toy world or, or does it still seem like really underrepresented?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:27:43] I think, I think yes. I mean, I think it certainly lags behind. There's a there's a great British company that—maybe they're an organization, not a company, I don't know what they are really—but they're called A Toy Like Me. And they do a lot of work with with toy manufacturers to kind of push the agenda of disability representation in toy making. So it's very much, I think it's very much on the table right now. In a few weeks, I'm going to a conference in Manchester, England, that's all about disability and I'm going to talk about dolls and disability.

JVN [00:28:25] I know that like people like Candace Owens are like so, like, exhausted by it. But I do think dolls are such an important thing because it does introduce kids to like new ideas in like in a way that they can like, comprehend better and like, it just like, makes things like less, you know, shame filled or like isolating or like othered when we can introduce kids to like, diversity early. I think dolls are such like a beautiful way that we can

do that. And instead of us being threatened or like, exhausted by that, like it's actually a really beautiful teaching tool, like, or at least it can be when we like, allow for like diversity and expression to like be shown in dolls.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:29:04] That's also a really good point about likeness, right? Like, likeness is also a normalizer. This point of when you see yourself in an object like that, there is that there is a kind of normalizing and I think you're absolutely right for disability that you know rather than...for instance, my kid, my kids, you know, they have seen enough kind of you know, they've seen different kinds of ethnicity in dolls. They've seen disability in dolls. So they don't skip a beat; like they don't say to me, like, "What's wrong with this doll?"

JVN [00:29:35] What's your sense of how dolls for girls have evolved over time, like really making dolls that are more for girls like, you know, more for girls? And what are some examples of dolls that like, especially defy gender norms?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:29:49] Yeah, yeah, sure. There's a there's a lot in there and I have probably too much to say, but I think, you know, I actually want to kind of make...it's funny because I was I was apprehensive about the Greta Gerwig movie and I was probably like one of the last people in the world to see it, but I'm actually completely in love with it. And the the the opening scene, right, the parody of 2001, which is like, so crazy and amazing and funny and brilliant; it does this thing which is great, which it shows like, you know, girls have been like playing with baby dolls forever. And then all of a sudden there comes Barbie and they're not playing with baby dolls anymore. They're playing with a doll who you could say was a peer, except she's not a peer, right? She's somebody you actually have to look up to. She's like your cool teenage babysitter. And so I think there's part of it is that, part of it is about what what is the relationship of the doll to the girl? Is it asking for nurturing, so the notion of a baby doll... Is it a peer?

JVN [00:30:52] But back to that idea of like, were there dolls that were like defying gender norms or like any dolls, like, you know, because like, because when I was young, if you you're a boy playing with Barbie, like, they were like, what's up with that? Especially if you weren't like taking her shirt off to, like, jam her boobs on something like. If you were just like, "Oh my God, I love her hair," like me. Like, was there anything in history that was like that, that was like word on the street: like, if your boy plays with that doll, like, or like your girl's a little tomboy, if she wants to play with G.I. Joe's like or like she's going to like... Was that ever a thing?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:31:22] Yeah, Well, there's there's a couple of things that I find really, really interesting that I wanted to share. One of them, actually is a, is an audio clip. But I want to show you real quick, if I can, let's see if I can get it to work. So anyway, there's this doll. It's called Gay Bob. It was designed in 1977 by a guy called Harvey Rosenberg. And it comes in a box and at the top of the box, it says, "Come out of the closet with Gay Bob." The first world, the world's first gay doll for everyone. And he's wearing like kind of he's wearing jeans with a like kind of a high waistline and a gorgeous '70s like plaid shirt with a big wide collar. And he's got a gold chain.

JVN [00:32:07] Come on Gay Bob!

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:32:08] And he's got a purse...Gay Bob is awesome. So, you know, and this is very much like a normalizing thing, right? Like kids, every kid, I mean, the fact that it says gay for the world's first gay doll for everyone, right? It's not marketed towards like men in their twenties or even like kids or it's like everyone should like and, you know, Gay Bob comes in a box that's his closet and he and you take him out of it. So it's really it's kind of wonderful and Gay Bob is absolutely going to be in my, in my show. There's even—NYPL (New York Public Library) has a Gay Bob archive. So, I mean, there's a lot to do with Gay Bob. The other one that I wanted to have a clip from, is the Barbie Liberation Organization. Barbie Liberation Organization was basically a group of people who decided to kind of prank the toy industry. And they they switched the voice boxes of Teen Talk Barbie. And here we get back to talking dolls right in here, how they're so weird. They switched the voice boxes of Teen Talk Barbie and a G.I. Joe doll. And they did this for Christmas 1993. So, like, some kids ended up with a Barbie that said, like, you know, "Dead men tell no tales." And and then some kids ended up with a G.I. Joe that was like, "Let's go shopping." And so, you know, that was obviously an intervention that wasn't like a toy manufacturer thing. But I think that's pretty, pretty interesting. So I don't know if you...do we want to hear that clip?

JVN [00:33:47] Yes, roll the tape.

BARBIE AUDIO [00:33:48] Hey, I'm Teen Talk Barbie, the spokes-doll for the BLO. That stands for the Barbie Liberation Organization. We're an international group of children's toys that are revolting against the companies that made us. We've turned against our creators because they use us to brainwash kids. They build us in a way that perpetuates gender based stereotypes. Those stereotypes have a negative effect on children's development. We have set up our own hospitals where we are carrying out corrective surgery on ourselves. Now we say things like this: [In G.I. Joe Voice] Troops attack that cobra tank at that command post. Vengeance is mine! [In Barbie] I donated my voice to a G.I. Joe because they want to be free, too. They don't want to say all that violent war stuff.

JVN [00:34:47] So the Barbie lib... what was their name? The Barbie Liberation who?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:34:51] Barbie Liberation Organization or BLO.

JVN [00:34:54] And they pro... and they programmed that themselves or they, like, made the factory like. Like what happened?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:34:59] They did it themselves. They hacked it, like they before we said hack in this way, ever.

JVN [00:35:04] So they did it on purpose to like Mattel or whatever?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:35:07] And they also I mean, so they did that and then they like they did this kind of like espionage, right? They like sneaked into the toy stores and like put these boxes back on the shelf.

JVN [00:35:19] Okay. I love that story, that's so good.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:35:20] If you go on YouTube, you can see video of like these kids talking about getting these dolls. And some of them are like, some of them are really outraged. More the moms are outraged. Some of the kids are like totally jazzed about it. Like they think it's the most wonderful thing that ever happened.

JVN [00:35:48] I want to just briefly go back to Chucky, creepy dolls and also the idea of like why some kids will, like, kill or harm their dolls, like, even if, like, they're not scary. What is the deal with that? Is that just like a normal like the kids are just trying to figure things out or they could be a serial killer, but hopefully it's more of the first?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:36:08] You know, I'm actually really, really interested in this. The thing about harming and killing dolls and also robots. I think the overarching heading for this is power relations; that kids are in many ways and certainly much more historically than now, are pretty powerless. They're put in a position of subjugation just by default, by being a kid. And so what do they do? They they beat up on their pets. They beat up on their dolls. And in history, like in the 19th century, they beat up on servants or enslave servants, right. So all these categories of people and thing that somehow sit lower than they do in the power structure. And it's it's a, it's also a way—I mean, if we look at it maybe a little bit more kindly—I think it's a way of kind of asserting control, right. Like as a kid, you don't have control over much. Your parents are kind of, you know, determining what happens next and where it happens and who it happens with. And you have control over your doll. And so I think that's that seems pretty natural to me. I think the other thing is, like you just said, experimentation, like, right. Like what happens if I do this? And that's actually why, you know, I think it's really important for kids to play with physical dolls, not just to play virtually. You know, there's a lot of ways online that you can play games that kind of deal with doll-like things. But I think it's really important for a kid to realize, like, okay, when I pull my doll's head off, like the head is off, it's off now. Or like when I make my Kate McKinnon weird Barbie, it's that's what she's going to look like now. The hair does not grow back, you know. And I think that's a that's, that's learning.

JVN [00:38:01] What have you learned about yourself from your research that you maybe didn't expect?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:38:07] Yeah, no, I love this question. I mean, I get to talk about myself. No, but I do, because there are some things that I didn't expect. One of them is, I think, kind of when we're talking about play like that, I've I've learned...I sound like a commercial for my topic. "I've learned the value of play." But I have! I've learned that I, it is okay to slow down. It is okay to mess around and try things out. And, you know, a lot of the research that I did at the Strong Museum, I would call that play. I was taking dolls out and putting them on the table and walking them around, changing their clothes and like seeing

how they worked. And and then, you know, in just in terms of conceptually to like just trying out ideas, like, does this make any sense? Does that make any sense? It's also, it's I think it's made me a little bit more compassionate. Just because I—like you—when I first kind of encountered some of this adult doll play, I had an automatic kind of, ewwww...sounds like Lucy Ricardo: ewwww. But, I've really come to not feel that. I've come to feel: if that is what makes you happy, if that is your self-care, like by all means, you know, do that. And the other thing that is nice is I've been able to play more with my kids and I... my daughter and I have been—I'll show you this too—we've been playing with these Creatable World playsets from Mattel. And I know we were talking about gender earlier and I really, really love Creatable World because there are these sets; there's it's one doll, but they have multiple hairstyles you can do and they have multiple kinds of clothes. So they're really designed to be gender neutral. But like, you know, sometimes I think when you say neutral, you go to this baseline of like boring, like nothing, like what is neutral, right? But they have amazing wardrobes. And so my daughter, Brinya, and I found that we had to get multiple ones of these so that we could have all the clothes and we could like, you know, do fashion contests and stuff. So that's, you know, that's something too that's been a big bonus from all this.

JVN [00:40:21] I love that. Okay. So let's say someone's listening to this and they just become like freaking obsessed dolls or they're like, I also no longer have the heebie jeebies, like, I am fucking going full in to my doll obsession. How can we shop for and engage with dolls like a doll expert? Like, do you keep your shit like humidity controlled things are you just like, touching it with unwashed hands? Are you like, are we humidity controlled or are we temperature controlled? You're just like, "Honey, life's short fucking play with your dolls."

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:40:45] All of the above. I mean, "Honey, life's short, fucking play with your dolls," I think that is definitely my approach, because that's my approach to everything these days. Like, I'm just...the preciousness is too hard to maintain. I mean, talk about OCD. Like you got to let some things go. I think the, that stuff, like the preservation stuff, that's really the museum's job. And I can tell you that the Strong Museum is cold and dark for this reason and it's not really true. I mean, obviously it's it's gorgeous. But like, all of that stuff is, I think for the, for the serious collectors. And I'm I'm just not a serious collector. I'm much more of a player.

JVN [00:41:25] But if you spend like ten grand on some rare ass doll from the whatever years like, don't play with her like that if you want to keep it nice. But if you...

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:41:33] Exactly. Put on your nitrile gloves and your...yeah. And don't have her under direct sunlight. I mean, even the dolls, I have big windows here and the dolls that I brought that have like 19th century clothes; I'll put them back in the dark for sure. Because, because that's the first thing with textiles. They will bleach out pretty quickly and they tend to craze like, like ceramic glaze, you know. So some of them you see and their faces are all cracked. And of course, that makes them look creepy. But that's about play, you know, somebody's banged that thing and the material has started to crack. So, you know, you would treat it like you treat any precious thing.

JVN [00:42:10] Okay, I'm still thinking about from the beginning, though, Dollatry, your exhibition. It's going to be major. You mentioned it. We're excited about it. Also, new book. Tell us about both projects; when's the book coming out? When does Dollatry open?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:42:22] Yeah, so Dollatry, Dollatry opens in February of 2025, and that's...

JVN [00:42:27] Writing down....

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:42:28] At Bard Graduate Center Gallery. It's not a huge exhibition. It's kind of, it's designed as though it were rooms in a dollhouse. So, you're going to walk through, you're going to go to the nursery, the dressing room and the playroom. And actually the play—I mean, I'm not going to go long on this, but the play room is a recent addition because I was going to have a bedroom. And what I realized was that when you have a bedroom in a show about dolls, as much as you'd like to explore topics of adult doll play and like human figures and all of this, you also have people like Mattel who you want to lend to the show or you have like, you know, kids who are going to come. And and I really wrestle with this because I actually thought it was important to kind of consider, you know, adult size human figures as part of this discussion. But what I finally decided was that: that's for my book. Nobody has to read my book if they don't want to. If they don't like that idea, they can stay away from my book. But I want everybody and their mother and brother and sister and cousin to come to my show and I don't want to have anything in it that's really going to be off putting for them. So, yeah, I mean, the show is really about, you know, to simplify it hugely: it's about likeness, as we've talked about. It's about identity politics. It's about showing dolls in this kind of cultural, social and political lens, not just about like collecting beautiful dolls throughout the ages. The dressing room is about self-fashioning, so it's about clothes, but it's also about fashioning the body. That's where some ideas about body positivity or even body difference, prosthesis, that kind of stuff comes in. And the nursery is really about the birth of the doll. So what does that mean? Is it like, you know, the Cabbage Patch Factory where the dolls jump out of the cabbages?

JVN [00:44:25] Cabbage Patch Dolls! How dare I not—Jesus Christ—at this point in the podcast? Fuck! But their dolls are just such an expansive universe!

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:44:34] Yeah.

JVN [00:44:36] They really are.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:44:37] They are. They are. They touch everything.

JVN [00:44:39] Now, what does, what does the phrase dollatry mean to you?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:44:43] Yeah. So this one I really owe to my friend Robin Bernstein at Harvard because she, I was, she was at a conference with me recently and she brought up this word dollatry, which is actually, I believe, a 19th century word. And it really is like a take

on idolatry. So it's like the worship of dolls. But I love it because to me, I mean, yes, my show is about the worship of dolls, but it's also it also suggests to me like total immersion, like you're in dollatry. I want, I want my visitors to feel like they're entering a completely other world where dolls are king and queen and everybody else. And so that's kind of what it means to me. It's like when you come in this door, you're in dollatry. Like that's that's that's your mental state as well as your, like, physical place, if that makes sense.

JVN [00:45:34] Absolutely. I liked it because it reminded me of faggotry but but yeah it's yeah absolutely. Right now we're all up in this world we are focusing on Dollatry; what is, but what's next...we do like to get a little...what, where's your research taking you next?

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:45:52] Yeah. Yeah. No, it's a good question. It's funny because I told you about this conference that I just went to with all the doll people who, like, I really did find my people. I was like, oh! Because I thought I thought, you know, potentially they could be like they could be either just a big mess. I mean, don't tell them I said this, but or they could be like really sucking the life out of everything and like, making it all dull. And they were neither. They were like brilliant, creative, open, chill; like they were just the nicest people. And so a lot of their work was really inspiring for me. And one thing that I... a presentation that I saw was about this woman who's a a doll maker. She has been making a line of toys, so she's a toy maker, toy designer. She's made making a line of toys that are designed to be played with outside. And they're, so they're biodegradable. So if you leave them outside by mistake, they'll biodegrade, which is fabulous. But they're also, she's from New Zealand. And this range of toys is all about the creatures that live on the forest floor. And so they're like they're like kind of hand sized, like you could hold them in your hand, but the actual creatures are really tiny. So you take these things outside to play with them in the forest. But you're also then kind of prompted to look for these little real creatures that are that are running around. Like one is called a velvet worm. And some of them are like predators, but they're like tiny predators. And some of them are like, you know, they're they're fungi who are like decomposing things. And and I loved...we should probably go back and I should remember her name. You should stick it in there. But, you know, I really loved this idea of toys that, they get the child outside. They encourage the child to create a magical world. But it's based in ecology. It's based in the environment, because that's the kind of play that I was doing as a kid. But I didn't have toys that were designed to do it with me. And I think when I saw that something in me was like, "Okay, this is this is the rest of your life." Like, not necessarily that I'm going to study toys that make you go play in the woods, but that there's just so much; there's such richness to this larger field. And it's really an interdisciplinary field. I mean, it's like scientists and designers and sociologists and like everyone you can imagine is involved in this stuff. And that just really felt like home. And so I think, you know, I'm imagining when I started this research, I thought, oh, it's going to be like this discrete doll project. I mean, like, I do dolls and then I'm going to go back to like studying German designers or whatever it is, in my sort of training. But after that conference and after that presentation especially, I just felt like, no, no, no, there's like so much here and there's so there's such high stakes for people who are really chill and playful. Right? Like, this is she's doing this for kids, obviously, but just for the environment. It's like can get kids to have a real stake in what happens to us and we're in trouble, you know? So I think that just seemed to me like, how can I have some kind of role in getting us out of trouble,

even if it's like the tiniest little role, and also do something that is going to hold my attention forever because honestly, I get bored easily. So, you know, I need to have something that will do that for me, but also allow me to contribute. And I feel like this is this is what it is.

JVN [00:49:28] Honey! You're amazing. And I love your scholarship. I cannot wait for everyone to come see Dollatry. Can't wait for the book. And thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious.

FREYJA HARTZELL [00:49:37] Well, thank you, this was a ton of fun and clearly I could talk about it for the rest of the day. So it's good we have a cut off.

JVN [00:49:44] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. You can follow us on Instagram @curiouswithjvn. And can I just say, our social work has been so good. We are just slaying over there. So give us that follow. You can catch us on here every Wednesday and make sure to tune in every Monday for alternating episodes of Curious Now and Pretty Curious. Still can't get enough honey? Neither can I. You can subscribe to Extra Curious on Apple Podcasts for commercial free listening, and our subscription only show Ask JVN where we're talking sex, relationships and so much more. Our theme music is Freak by Quinn. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. Our engineer is Nathaniel McClure. Getting Curious is produced by me, Chris McClure and Allison Weiss with production support from Julie Carrillo, Anne Currie and Chad Hall.