



# The Creator of **Reborn Babies**

Story and Images Michelle Meehan

When Cathy Brady was a young girl she didn't really own many dolls. But for the past 16 years the East Maitland woman has literally been surrounded by them after embarking on a chance career as a reborn baby doll artist.

For those who have never come across them before, "reborn" babies are soft vinyl dolls, which have been transformed by a doll artist to look like a real baby.

Perfect to the last detail – including tiny veins, mottled skin and even a touch of glistening saliva around the mouth – you would be hard pressed at first glance to pick the difference between a living baby and a high quality reborn doll.

With a long and successful career as a portrait artist behind her, it is little wonder the dolls created in Cathy's home studio are so incredibly lifelike.

"That's my portrait background (the realism of the dolls) and I think what drew me to them in the first place is that I could really enjoy painting these from a portrait artist's point of view," she said. >



"I always did a lot of portraits of children so painting a doll was just a little bit different. I really enjoyed it and I like the life-size nature (of the dolls), if they weren't life size there wouldn't be that realism.

"I've been painting for about 28 or 29 years. I had an extensive art career before doing the dolls, I've exhibited up and down Australia, I've exhibited in America and other places overseas and I used to do back-to-back exhibitions with galleries.

"One day I was out with a friend and we went to a craft fair. I saw baby dolls in the distance and I couldn't move all morning. I was just transfixed. They weren't done very well but the idea was magnificent and I thought 'I've got to have a go at that'.

"I only wanted to make one though, so I made one doll, her name was Sarah.

"Everyone that came to my house to have their portrait sitting saw Sarah because she used to live on the coffee table in the basket and they'd say 'Where'd you get that beautiful doll?' I'd say I made Sarah – 'Oh you've got to make me one' – and that's how it began, it wasn't planned at all."

Creating a reborn doll is a long and sometimes arduous process.

Cathy begins each doll with the separate vinyl parts, adding layer after layer of heat set oil paint to create the baby's delicate skin tone, complete with veining, capillaries, milk pimples and mottling.

After that comes the more obvious features, including finger nails, eyelashes, eyebrows and hair, with the latter either being painted on or painstakingly added strand by strand using baby goat mohair and a micro rooting process that takes many weeks or even months to complete.

"The doll for me to make from beginning to end will take anywhere from five to six weeks, sometimes longer," Cathy said.

"Everything you see other than the silicone vinyl parts, everything you see I've had to do.

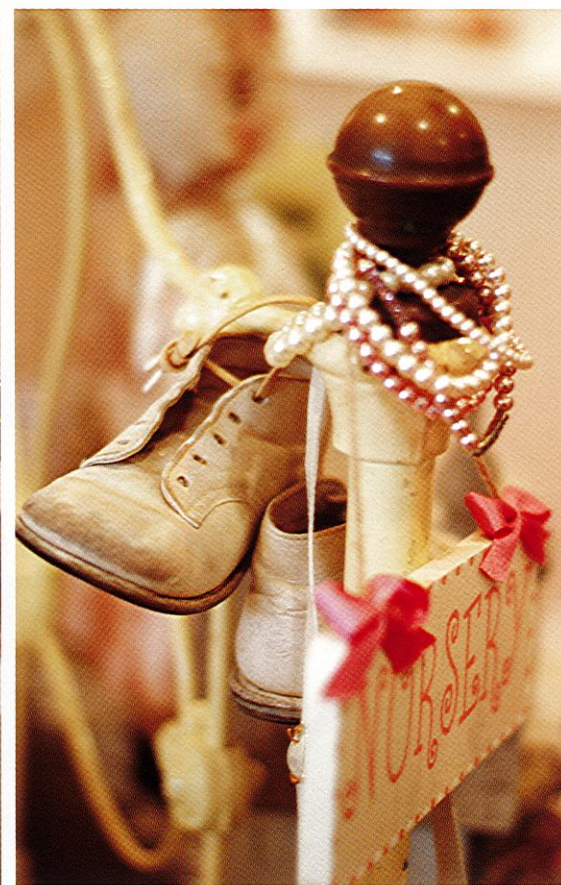
"Every strand of hair is hand applied one at a time, that's very laborious, and the eyelashes are the same.

"There are countless layers upon layers, upon layers of paint. I'll use anywhere up to 150 colours and they get broken down into palettes. What group of colours I'm using depends on what layer I'm working on. I can use anywhere up to about 50 firings, which breaks down to about 30 or 40 palettes of different colours.

"If you don't do the layering you won't have the transparency and it won't look real. If you put opaque paint on it will look like a doll straightaway because it won't have the depth of the skin tone. You want to be able to look through the skin because our own skin's very translucent.

"It's a lot of work and the higher the realism the more layers and the longer it will take, so some dolls can take 11 or 12 weeks."

For that final touch of realism the dolls are weighted throughout with glass beads, while the newborns also have



a "floppy" neck that you have to support, just as you would when holding a real baby.

This is particularly important when Cathy makes dolls for use within the Australian film industry, which she has been doing since 2012.

While you would be hard pressed to spot it, her dolls have made appearances in everything from films such as *Underground: The Julian Assange Story*, to television commercials and popular Australian series including *Neighbours*, *House Husbands*, *Offspring*, *Love Child* and *A Place to Call Home*.

"I think 85 per cent of the time or even more than that, you can't even tell they're using a doll," she said.

"Sometimes you can because it's not moving and you're thinking about it, but one of the babies in particular I made for *House Husbands* for a newborn scene, even though I knew it was my doll, I couldn't tell (when I was watching it on television) - they use them very well.

"They're weighted so you can't fake it when you're picking it up, it is heavy. When they're holding it, it looks like they're actually holding a baby because it's making their arm hurt and they do have to support the baby because its head flops. It's not like a doll where the doll's stiff and they've just got their arm around it, they've got to cradle it properly so that in itself makes it look more realistic.

"The weight is a really important factor of the doll, not just to give it a heavy feel but to make it be a particular way, so if it's not weighted right, it's not going to be right. It's more than just the paintwork (to make it look real)."

But it's not just the film industry keeping Cathy busy. Right from the beginning demand for her dolls has been incredible, with everyone from doll or art collectors through

to your typical little girl clamouring to care for one of her reborn creations.

There's also a number of less traditional markets, with dolls offering an outlet for healing and nurturing among church groups, trauma centres, sexual assault support groups, nursing homes and women with an intellectual disability who cannot have children of their own.

Cathy said she is overwhelmed when she thinks about the number of dolls she has made over the years, and the amount of joy they have brought to their owners.

For the little girls in particular Cathy creates a whole experience when they pick up the doll from "the nursery", filling in the birth certificate, giving them a "clinic book" and then, during the school holidays, holding a baby clinic for them to bring their doll back to for a check-up.

"I've made a lot of dolls for so many types of people and I love seeing people happy," she said.

"It's actually hard to get your head around how much joy they bring. And it stays with people, it's not just something that is fleeting, it's not like getting a new PlayStation and the novelty wears off; the novelty doesn't wear off, it just continues to grow and that's a beautiful thing, that's a memory, that's a big part of your life.

"People do love them and treasure them. They bring a phenomenal amount of joy to people and you can't get any better than that.

"I've had a pretty extensive career with my art, but the babies are my heart, without a doubt." 📍

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