

# Gemma Browne has gone back to the childhood world of dolls to unlock the secrets of girl power, writes Cristin Leach

**M**odern life is driven by an unashamed celebration of youth. It's everywhere from politics to fashion; even feminism has been touched by its pervasive reach. In the past decade, the solidarity of women has been overtaken by the girl power phenomenon, the bra-burning leaders of the 1960s and 1970s replaced by immaculately groomed booty-shakers such as Beyoncé and Britney.

These new icons of feminism preside over multi-million-dollar pop empires and, rather than burn their underwear, boast cleavage-enhancing props as prime assets. They look uncannily like the Barbie dolls their predecessors sought to banish as suitable role models for young women. But they are more than acceptable to a new generation for whom sexy and successful are alternate sides of the same coin.

The dolls in Gemma Browne's latest series of paintings may have little to do with Barbie-style perfection but they have everything to do with questions of modern girl power. They are the round-faced playthings of a 1970s childhood, their provenance implied by one interpretation of the exhibition's title, *Twinkle*.

*Twinkle*, "a picture paper specially for little girls" published in the 1970s and 1980s, was deemed suitable reading material for little sisters whose big brothers got *The Beano*. *Twinkle* herself was an impossibly blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, who looked not unlike the dolls in Browne's paintings and who spent her time rescuing injured animals and making new friends. Hardly the stuff of girl power, but Browne might not agree.

Her first solo show in 2002 was entitled *Being Pretty is Everything* and consisted of portraits of lip-glossed and heavily eye-

lined, staring girls. Their presence struck a disconcerting balance between confidence and insecurity, power and impotence and they marked Browne as part of an emerging art movement: one that takes the lives of young women as its focus.

As with many modern trends, this focus on teens in art seems to have at least some of its origins in Japan, where girl photographers such as Toshikawa Hiromi, or Hiromix, as she styles herself, rose to fame in the late 1990s with diary-style images of their lives and those of their female friends. Ireland's Amy O'Riordan does it too. She hit the Royal Hibernian Academy's barometer of emerging talent, the Eurojet Futures exhibition, in 2002 with her fashion-shoot inspired compositions and close-ups of costume-jewelleryed hands rooting in cerise handbags on a girl's night out.

Browne, O'Riordan's senior by years, featured in the Futures exhibition the following year with her *Sugar Coated* series; similar paintings to those in the *Being Pretty* show, but with female subjects that seemed somehow more confident.

It's a theme the RHA appears to be pursuing; its *Teenage Kicks* exhibition at the start of this year also featured a number of female artists producing work in a similar vein, such as the Irish artist Ruth McHugh's photographs of a young girl applying make-up and images from the American Lauren Greenfield's *Girl Culture* project. With her latest paintings Browne appears to have moved the argument forward a little. Her doll portraits display a bland coyness that her teen-girl paintings could not. Instead of real people, these are empty shells of femininity, distilled from the core signifiers of wide eyes, long hair and rosebud lips.

In Japan, where they clamour for this particular kind of button-nosed kitsch, there is a



word for schoolgirl-style cuteness: *kawaii*. Browne's doll portraits are *kawaii*, influenced by the manga and anime-style animation of that country, but they have as much to say about her own Irish and British background as the cyber-doll personas of her contemporary Mariko Mori do about life as a modern young Japanese woman.

Feminism is almost a dirty word to



**Twinkle in her eye: Browne explores the modern female's obsession with self-image in her paintings, left**

Browne's new work points out, it's an obsession that has its origins in childhood.

With these doll paintings, she has traced our appearance-obsessed present back to her own childhood playthings. Her Sugar Coated series offered mirror-style images in which female viewers could seek out their own reflections behind homogenous staring eyes. These dolls seem like images of neat perfection until the viewer spots a dishevelled plait held in place with red string, a knowing look in an averted eye, and finds she is looking at a version of herself.

This work raises questions about female sexuality, but it has moved on from the male-gaze issue that inspired feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Cindy Sherman in the past. Browne's doll portraits, with their averted eyes, display something of that schoolgirl innocence in the guise of a come-on that inspired Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Sam Mendes's film *American Beauty*. Arguably however, like Marilyn Monroe's use of baby-doll-style sexuality, these were guises directed primarily at men.

Browne's art, like the girl power movement itself, is likely to be of more interest to women. It is driven by a desire to articulate the experience of being young and female. This may leave male viewers wavering between an attitude of slight fascination and total alienation.

Browne places her audience in a room surrounded on all sides by persistent peering eyes. Like the *Mona Lisa*, these dolls are giving nothing away, their pursed rosebud lips could be smiling or disapproving. They are mute, expressionless, but somehow in control. Like a gang of girls in a schoolyard they seem to be casting judgment on the viewer. Being singled out is the worst thing that can happen to a young girl. It is the essential irony of girl power's independent woman catchphrase that the biggest sin is to be made to feel different.

Browne addresses issues of power, but the struggle inherent in her works is not the battle of the sexes, but the power struggle that takes place between women.

Dolls are a potent symbol for such a consideration. They give young girls their first taste of power in the form of control. They also pander to women's inherent love of youth in that they never grow old.

Browne may be closer in age to Madonna than Britney but with her exploration of childhood imagery she has put her finger on what it is that joins these two generations of girl power pushers. At the start of their careers, both singers held enormous sway among a particular female age-group: pre-teens. Browne seems to be saying that our attitudes to life are shaped by our childhood experiences and the imagery we encounter at that time. It seems the Barbie-bashers might have had a point. □



today's female teens who take equality as a given and disregard out of hand the notion that in order to play with the boys it is necessary to become one of them. Now there's a new enemy and it's not the men, it's the enemy within: the modern female's obsession with self-image.

Nowhere is the question more visibly posed than in images of teenage girls, but as

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*Gemma Browne: Twinkle is at Kevin Kavanaugh gallery, Dublin, until September 25*

**Art** Girl power is child's play in Gemma Browne's new show of faintly sinister doll portraits