

The Anti-Barbie by Virginia Postel

Yes, I spent my childhood playing with Liddle Kiddles, whose heads were roughly the height of their torsos and twice as wide. Yet never once, as a child or an adult, have I wished for a four-foot-high head. Toys exist in an imaginative world. Nobody expects them to be scale models of reality.

Except for Barbie, of course. Complaining about her unreal proportions is practically an industry. All right-thinking people seem convinced that Barbie instills in her pre-school fans a false and remarkably detailed standard of beauty.

Hence the widespread praise for Lammily, the latest anti-Barbie concept doll. A crowd-funded project from artist Nickolay Lamm (the source of her ungainly moniker), Lammily is based on the average proportions for a 19-year-old, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Average is beautiful,” proclaims her maker, who has raised more than \$370,000 in de facto pre-orders. Average is also supposedly “realistic” and “normal.”

In fact, average is neither desirable nor realistic.

Before embracing the reassuring claim that “average is beautiful,” consider the CDC statistics behind Lammily’s physique. Based on a representative sample of 118 people, the agency reports that the average 19-year-old female American stands 5 feet 4 inches tall. She has a 33.6-inch waist and a 14.1-inch upper arm. She weighs 150 pounds, giving her a body mass index of 25.5. That indicates that she is overweight. BMI is, however, a crude and controversial measure. Better are the CDC’s direct body-fat measurements. They confirm the same bad news: The average 19-year-old’s body is about 32 percent fat, just at the threshold for obesity.

If Lammily were true to life, in other words, she’d have rolls of fat, not a firm plastic tummy. Her figure would turn off both beauty-minded girls and health-conscious parents.

To make her excess poundage appealing, her creator has made his supposedly average doll an athlete. “She is fit and strong,” proclaims his website, showing the doll posed as a runner and standing with her foot on a ball. She isn’t fat. She’s muscular, with the kind of perfect bubble butt that requires great genes and many hours in the gym. The average 19-year-old may not have oversized thighs because she’s a budding Serena Williams, but it’s nice to pretend so.

Making average look unrealistically alluring -- Lammily also has oversized lips and eyes -- is a concession to market realities. “My doll is a cool-looking doll that just happens to be average,” Lamm told Fast Company. “Very few kids are concerned about body image like parents are.”

For those who are concerned with body image, average presents another problem: The average body doesn’t actually exist. Nobody is normal. Everyone is weird.

Two people with the average height and weight may have greatly different proportions: shorter or longer torsos, arms and legs; wider or narrower shoulders or hips; greater or lesser waist-hip ratios. “The average takes you to nobody,” says Susan Ashdown, a Cornell University professor of fiber science and apparel design and a leading researcher on improving the way clothing fits.

The CDC records just a few measurements per person, giving a doll designer like Lamm plenty of freedom to create the most appealing version of “average.” By contrast, scholars such as Ashdown use 3-D body scanners to map bodies in detail, giving them an appreciation for just how different individual bodies are. “There’s an incredible amount of variation, much more than we’re aware of,” she says. Celebrating one version of average as “normal” and “realistic” implicitly stigmatizes everyone who doesn’t meet that standard. Barbie doesn’t pretend to do that; Lammily does.

As a mass-produced product, a doll represents a single version of female proportions. Taken as a role model, any single standard excludes those with a different build. Celebrating “average” doesn’t solve the problem. Instead of trying to create a plastic role model, it’s both kinder and more honest to treat a doll as an object of escapist fantasy -- a plaything.

Barbie's popularity is waning, a fact Lammily boosters rarely fail to mention. But Mattel is in the business of selling play, not social commentary. Rather than heed critics who advocate grimly "realistic" dolls such as Lammily, the toy giant has moved toward more explicit fantasy, with its hit Monster High line. Sporting such preternatural features as blue skin, fangs and tails, these dolls offer a novel take on beauty. But they're nobody's idea of average.

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