

Claire Schlaikjer

Visual Arts Honors Thesis

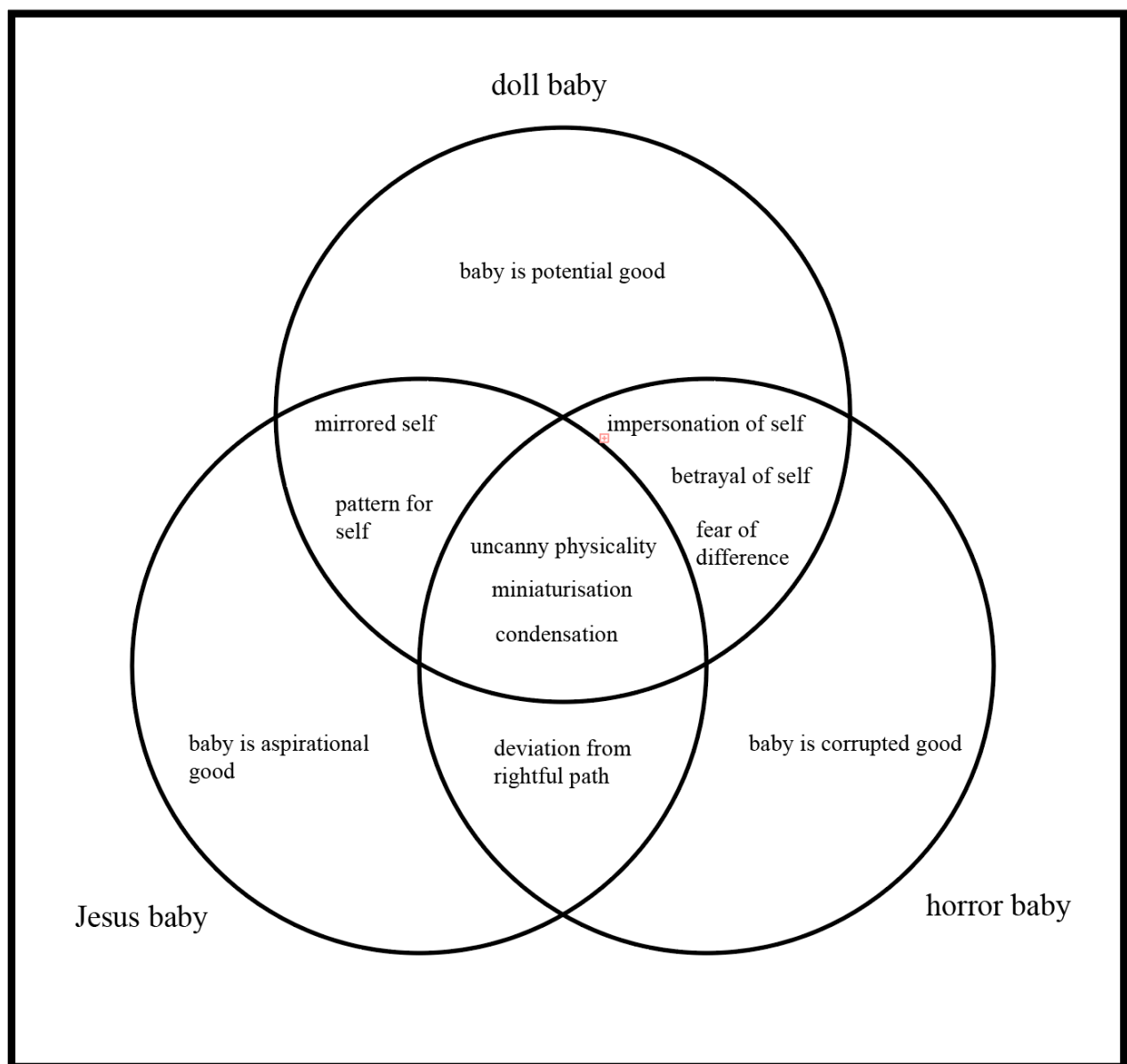
Brown University, 2020



### ***Imaginings of the Baby***

To begin with the baby seems only natural. The baby is the seed of humanity, a blank slate onto which multiple projections are possible, and its malleable image is transplanted across contexts, populating the ether with many different babies. At the origin of each is a default, undifferentiated being, impressionable and yielding, capable of goodness but equally susceptible to corruption. As such, representations of the baby center on its potential, whether latent, fulfilled, or abandoned. The doll baby smiles benignly from a child's arms; the baby Jesus administers an act of charity; the demon baby wields a bloody knife.

The doll baby, Jesus baby, and horror baby emerge as prevailing categories of babies frequently encountered in Western culture. This taxonomy attempts to consolidate these patterns by identifying their commonalities and differences. The cute caricature of baby as a doll tends towards increasing realism, which becomes the perverse realism of horror baby, which evokes the otherworldly capabilities of Jesus baby, whose image tends towards kitsch and saccharine as it circles back towards the doll baby.



*Figure 1 Taxonomy of Babies*

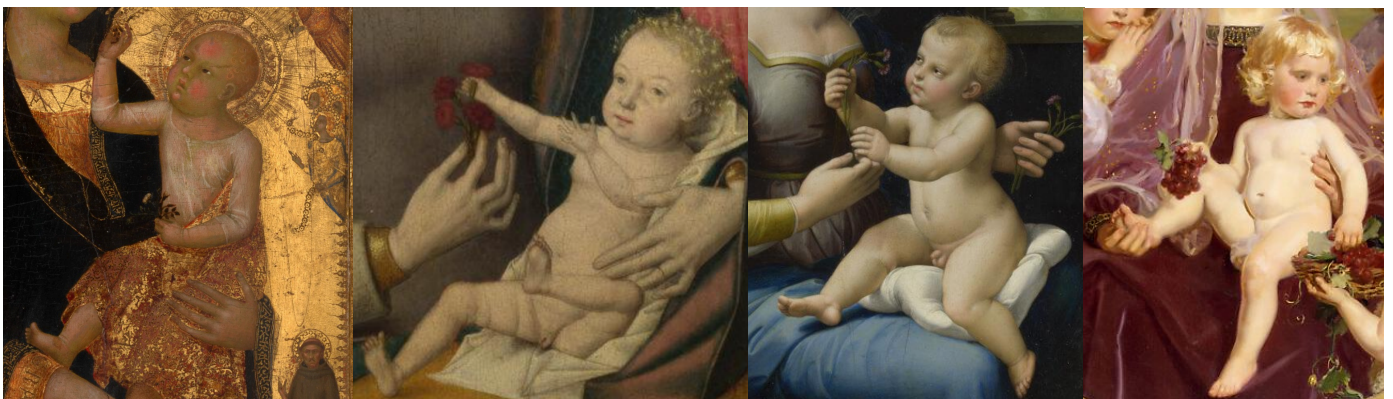


Central to each categorization is the baby's anomalous physicality, present in life but frequently exaggerated in representation. The lure of the miniature applied to the human anatomy produces a condensed form with seemingly infeasible proportions that are both comic and uncanny. The baby is an ill-proportioned reflection of the self that fascinates with its similarities but unsettles with its differences. Its miniaturization magnifies its values or faults, and the combination of infancy and possibility frequently yields babies bestowed with advanced capabilities. Representations of the Christ child often depict him actively engaged in situations of great symbolic significance, conferring onto the baby an uncommon degree of physical independence and ceremonial grandeur. In spite of an oversize head, improbably supported by plump limbs, the baby is depicted standing in elegant composure. There is an insuppressible humor in seeing a baby exhibit such adult or alien characteristics, and the miniature aspect is at the fore of the baby's appeal.



### *Jesus Baby*

Overwhelmingly, we recognize the baby as the Christ-child – a baby bestowed with divine wisdom and capacity. So familiar is the figure of baby Jesus in the West that the form of the baby almost invariably invokes associations with Christ and Christianity. The baby hovers between contexts of biology, nature, self, toy, kitsch, but always with the possibility of relation to Christ. An engagement with the representation of the human baby necessarily relates to representations of the baby Jesus. This leads us to the history of Christian art, which in the West is nearly synonymous with the history of art.



The image of the human baby throughout Western art not only demonstrates the extent to which the history of art is wedded to religion, but also charts variations in style and taste resulting from the development of technique in observation, representation, and painting. Not only may we discover the history of the baby through art, but also a history of art through babies. The Christ child begins his trajectory as flat, greenish, and disproportioned, or else lumpy and squinting. Through modern eyes he often looks like a shrunken elderly man, with fat creases like wrinkles, vacant eyes and thin limbs. Gradually, through centuries and across borders, he becomes luscious and smooth. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an opening of artistic possibility and context offers him up as a symbol prone to sentimental idealism, as well as satire.

### *Fèves and Frozen Charlottes*

The miniaturization of the baby is enacted two-fold in the tradition of the tiny baby dolls hidden inside “King Cakes” to celebrate Epiphany. This tradition is believed to have originated in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, France, to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany when the Three Wise Men came bearing gifts 12 days after Christmas. The celebrations featured a circular cake, in which was hidden a fava bean (*fève*), pea, or coin, to represent the baby Jesus. Receiving the share containing the hidden object was believed to grant luck in the coming year. In the 1870s, the *fève* was replaced by a porcelain figure. These evolved into various forms beyond the baby Jesus, from series of saints or hand-tools, to pop culture collectibles.

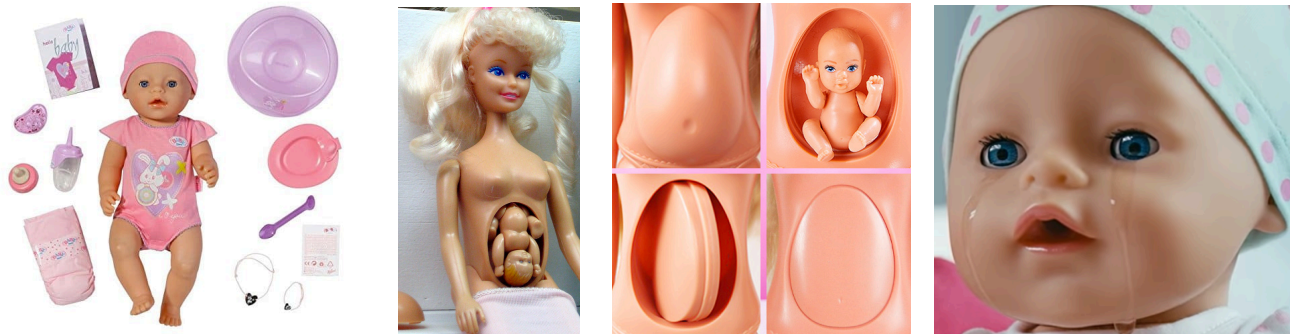


*Fèves (left) and Frozen Charlottes (right)*

Single-piece dolls, largely manufactured in Germany, became popular around the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Used as bath dolls or inside Christmas puddings or Epiphany cakes, these dolls later became known in the United States as “Frozen Charlottes”. This was based on a cautionary folk tale where a young girl froze to death for her vanity after refusing to cover up her pretty dress.

The *fève* tradition continues today in many forms. Novelty plastic babies proliferate as king cake babies, perhaps most recognizable from Mardi Gras King Cakes in New Orleans or Rosca de Reyes in Mexico. The baby is often linked with containment, and the desire for the unknown concealed object intensifies the allure of the coveted miniature baby.

### *Doll Baby*



Dolls are a translation of the fascination with one's own narrative identity into a physical counterpart through which the owner may enact their fantasies. Dolls may lie anywhere between crude representation and alarming realism and still command the same potency in the imagination. Due to their prevalence in cultural constructions of girlhood, dolls inevitably relate to aspirations of motherhood, and perhaps the most frequent image of dolls is of babies.

Doll babies engage with a spectrum of idealized plump pinkness, and shrieking, leaking, viscera. The phenomenon of increased demand for realism in baby dolls sees a desire for a closer reflection of reality in one's fantasy object. American Girl dolls offer customizations and matching outfits to match girl to doll, making it both a baby and a younger self. Plastic dolls can pee, cry, and defecate. "Reborn" dolls take realism to the extreme, and even the opportunity to model a silicone baby in tribute to or memory of a living baby. These and are often intended to more closely simulate the experience of having a baby and emphasize a specific relationship with the doll as an individual.

### *Horror Baby*

The perverse and the appealing often come side-by-side. It is a rough and unmarked path between doll baby and horror baby, and often the distinction is ambiguous. When dolls stray, they are quickly marked as "creepy". Old dolls with eyes that blink with a titling of the head, missing limbs, chipped paint. For many, horror baby is the ultimately compelling form of the baby, where the fear and fascination of the abnormal converge in the perverted and corrupted form of an evil baby. Unlike doll and Jesus baby, horror baby hold no appeal for me.





### ***The Baby As it Entered My Life***



I bought my first baby in a New England gift shop circa 2013. I was descending from the peak of a tasteless plastic garbage phase, but hard-bodied brightly-colored novelties still held an irresistible lure for me, and I was surprised by the level of detail on a baby so small (2cm). I would later realize that this was a fortuitously high-level starter baby. Indeed, such detail was unusual in a plastic baby, but furthermore its upright pose was already that of a hovering divine being, arms outstretched, fingers loosely pointing. It was far more expressive than the alternatives, which had either faces blobbed with color, and rigid outstretched limbs or flailing fists. Furthermore, its finely articulated figure pays delightful attention to the tiny details. The baby has an enigmatic half-smile, swollen baby's belly, back and butt dimples, knee creases, hair grain, and breathlessly small toes.



I bought a trove of 100 excavated Victorian-era ceramic dolls, most of which were fractured. I liked how these duplicates were distinguished by their missing pieces, and I planned to build body prostheses and attachments for them.

### ***The Baby As it Entered My Work***

In both cases, I was drawn to these babies for their miniature scale, their frozen, enigmatic poses, and their blank, duplicated forms. They offered a lot of potential as characters in my work, and I began incorporating them as subjects from Sophomore year.

In many of these previous works there are recurring themes of containment, interior spaces, uncanniness of scale, and crystallized scenes and gestures that distill a narrative into a single frame. I was also already interested in deriving humor from depicting babies performing un-babylike actions. So, through repeated reinterpretation, I became very interested in the baby and its different forms. My own babies lie between doll baby and Jesus baby, with an emphasis on the miniature aspect. The ceramic dolls are Frozen Charlottes, and plastic babies are perhaps most familiar as king cake babies, and are thus each closely tied to the Jesus baby.

### ***Christianity as Narrative Structure***

As mentioned, the Jesus baby easily comes from the richest reservoir of visual interpretation, and these representations exist to provide a point of access into the narrative of Christianity. As well as being interested in the form of the baby and the way it is depicted, I am also more broadly interested in the narrative structure of Christianity and its material counterparts.

At the center of Christianity is an inexhaustible continuous narrative and I am interested in the ways in which this is manifested into discrete and diverse forms. Votive objects, painted altarpieces, statues, writing, music, and architecture have always supported and disseminated Christian ideology. These works began as pieces of fine craftsmanship and intense labor, but the confluence of Christianity and mass production yielded the religious kitsch. Catholicism is deeply tied to materiality, and objects are afforded sacred status in relics, symbolic, or other devotional devices. Personal votive objects, like rosaries and altars, have always offered an access to faith outside of the Church, but as production capacities accelerated religious iconography and motifs could be transplanted into any commercially viable context with rapidly increasing ease. Where previously oil paintings and wood carvings provided an attainable but precious personal access to God, plastic and printing supplanted the individually and laboriously hand-crafted. As such, the line between authentic holy object and disposable trinket became more indistinct. Objects sold by churches and those sold by Urban Outfitters may be difficult to distinguish at first glance. Each appropriated image borrowed to market some product is using the vast reservoir of visual motifs provided by centuries of image and object-making developed to disseminate Christianity.

The success of these motifs is their recognizability, their visual cohesion, and the borrowed weight of an extensive narrative tradition that can manage to survive outside of its original context. The use of these motifs may be to expound the stories of Christianity, to sell stuff, or describe a counter ideology. The charged significance of religion and the bloody history of Christianity inevitably offers ample room for its subversion into political messages or polemical artwork. Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* is perhaps the most obvious example. It goes without saying that the reception of such uses of religious iconography is hugely dependent on their cultural context. The extent to which Christianity has been appropriated into the commercial lexicon and public holidays in the West makes satirical and commercial use of Christian iconography markedly different that of minority religions'.

Wholesale Jesus figurines at World Church Fair	Bulk bags of novelty plastic babies on Amazon
Plastic Nativity Sets in Churches	Christmas decorations
Votive candles	Prayer candles printed with celebrities dressed as saints
Religious statuettes	Dashboard Jesus bobble-heads

Growing up in England I frequently encountered these forms in museums, churches, schools. These situations were rarely explicitly religious and so instead the formal characteristics of these objects were foregrounded. Even without knowing the exact story an object is representing, you are still aware that there *is* a story, and there is a resulting inherent significance in the object. I was interested in the possibility of this as its own formal structure offering rich and varied visual reference points, and in exploring how successfully this

structure could be extracted from the original content whilst still supporting the same implication of weight.

### ***The Irresistibility of Animals***



Every animal is delightful when considering its appendages or the possibility of living its life. In a way not far removed from the baby, animals appeal for their similarity and their difference. They also have a similar capacity for alternatively magnifying moralistic ideals and dislocating meaning into absurdity.

In Christianity, specific animals are bestowed with symbolic significance, often qualified with pure or sinful characteristics. Representations of animals in Christian art frequently have delightfully exaggerated forms that encourage these associations.

### ***Development of Thesis Work***

I entered this year with three main interests. The babies, the idea of constructing a scheme of objects pertaining to an inscrutable grand narrative, and producing these objects using a lot of different mediums.

- ☪ *Enshrinement of the Consecrated Source* – I started at the beginning, with the origin of the babies. This was conceived as a personal altar box that enshrined the source of all the duplicate babies, the core, the kernel, the one that seeded all the others. The baby is 3D printed from 3D scans I made of the porcelain babies, and one of the original babies comes out of its head. I was frustrated by some of the clunky inelegancies of this piece that are borne out of its imitation of originals of infinitely higher craftsmanship than I can achieve.
- ☪ *The First Supper (diorama)* – Continuing the mythology, I made this diorama, The First Supper. I imagined this to be the first banquet of the newly spawned babies. Everything is white and blank and undifferentiated. I designed and laser-cut baby furniture. I started using this motif of eggs. The babies are newly spawned, they are eating eggs. I blew these eggs – which in a previous version of this piece were illuminated from within. And then the whole thing is encased and contained in acrylic, and lit from below. I like the focus on predetermining a viewer's interaction with an object.

- ☺ *The First Supper (digital model)* – Again responding to similar frustrations with material imperfections, I recreated this scene in Maya. This produced a much smoother and less real version. Because it feels so much more physically artificial, the entire scene feels more contrived, and more starkly frames a narrative.
- ☺ *The First Supper (generative animation)* – Working with the same material, I rendered out some animation of the scenes. I took it into Max/MSP and created a short video piece using image filtering feedback loops with some liquid displacement simulation. In these three works I enjoyed translating these scenes and motifs into new forms.
- ☺ *The Faithful and the Solitary* – I wanted to move back towards more familiar or traditional techniques, so I got back into painting. To me, the bird is contiguous with the eggs. Again, I wanted to build up these visual motifs that allude to a fictional mythology that is never explicitly defined in full. The bird is inspired by Luzon bleeding-heart doves, whose feather markings make them appear to have a bleeding breast. I like the symbolic significance ascribed to animals, and I wanted to pursue this more.
- ☺ *The Worthy Lamb* – Then came the lamb. I constructed this plywood box with a recessed cavity, painted red inside and holding an original ceramic baby. This piece worked really well for me. The scale felt just right, the use of an original instead of 3D printed object made it feel more authentic and worthy. Obviously it is based in ideas of reliquaries.
- ☺ *The Beast Who Bears His Burden* – After the origin spawning, I imagined all the ways the babies could disperse and differentiate. Some could come and live among animals. This painting was based on a plastic toy donkey I had. The different figures emerged intuitively and then I realised that it looked like either some sacrificial or resurrective cycle where the baby is fused with the donkey.
- ☺ *Penitent Beasts* – This piece focused even more intently on the babies' relationship with animals. A baby-centaur, a baby born from the ear of a weasel, a baby head impaled on a hedgehog's spine. It is laser etched acrylic, reflected in the mirror below and projected onto the wall behind. These narratives were drawn from a Medieval bestiary, and they are all animals with sinful qualities or cautionary narratives.
- ☺ *Reliquary* – This was conceived as a portable reliquary, almost in the form of a medicine man's bag. It bears the form of a reliquary but also a house. Inside there is a place for each object, alluding to some specific ritual purpose.

For my exhibition, I produced an accompanying pamphlet. It is written in an alphabet I created and illustrated with diagrams pertaining to the different works. Like the works themselves, I wanted to create this inscrutability, which initially may confuse or distance, but has the possibility of being decoded and unraveled.

I am indebted to Paul Myoda, the Brown Visual Art Department, and everyone in the Honors program for their support and critique in the development of my thesis project.

Claire Schlaikjer

