Most children own a doll of some kind. Maybe an action figure, a stuffed furry bear, a porcelain princess. Some of these dolls wind up on shelves like proto-works of art, but others remain close to their owners, serving in the roles of partner-in-crime, confidante, bedmate and best friend. The inanimate creatures come to life in the eyes of their guardians, taking on the personality traits, fantastical and ordinary, ascribed to them.

Most of us, however, eventually leave our childhood playthings and their imaginary personas behind. Maybe it’s a matter of physically growing out of them, realizing with more clarity the improbability of our blossoming relationships. Or we just get occupied with other things, like people -- real people. And as for the few adults who seriously engage with dolls later in life, they’re often looked upon with furrowed eyebrows and a watchful gaze.
Perhaps this general suspicion is why Morton Bartlett, despite spending countless hours constructing and photographing incredibly lifelike dolls of children, died without mentioning them. The 15 dolls, and some 200 photographs depicting them, were discovered by antique dealer Marion Harris in 1993. She bought them on a whim at the Pier Show, a big New York antiques fair, and was told they were removed from the house of a man recently deceased in Boston’s South End.

There are three boy dolls in total; the rest are girls, approximately aged 8 to 16. Made with the help of medical growth charts and anatomy books, their proportions are entirely accurate. The detail is astounding, with toenails and fingernails and teeth and tongues just as they should be. The girls contain fully realized genitalia. The boys do not. Both genders are dressed up in outfits expertly stitched and knitted. Their body parts are removable, so the dolls could change outfits without causing a mess. In spite of all this precision, though, Bartlett’s dolls still look like dolls -- not people.

What kind of a man would devote years of his life -- from 1936 to 1963, approximately one year per doll -- to such an uncanny passion? The answer, at least according to Bartlett, is a relatively conventional one.

Bartlett was born in Chicago in 1909. He was orphaned at the age of 8, and adopted by a well-to-do family in Boston soon after. He received a top quality education, first at Phillips Exeter Academy and then at Harvard University for two years before dropping out. He worked some odd jobs -- gas station attendant, furniture salesman -- before settling into a career in graphic design and commercial photography.
Two years after Harris discovered Bartlett’s trove of dolls, she brought them to the Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan. While the uncanny tale of the found, masterfully crafted works fit the usual “outsider” bill, the story of the artist did not. Bartlett was not some eccentric loner locked in his home, isolated from the world. His friends swore he didn’t express any deviant sexual tendencies or inclinations. He was highly educated, lived in Boston and worked in a creative field. His normalcy only makes his one “transgression” all the more mystifying.

Regardless of his relatively normal biography, Bartlett has been hailed as an outsider genius, his work mentioned in the same breath as Hans Bellmer or Henry Darger. And though Bartlett’s dolls were well made, it was his photographs that, many argue, capture the height of his craft.

Small, black-and-white photographs, dramatically lit, feature the dolls -- and some human subjects -- in hauntingly innocent scenarios. A girl of around 10, slouched in a sofa chair, immerses herself in Grimm’s Fairy Tales, an enthralled and devious grin spreading across her face. In another, a doll girl of around five sits across from her stuffed puppy, pointing a finger at him in stern admonishment. She’s wearing socks, her legs are spread, and you can make out the trim of her underwear from beneath her dress.

Bartlett’s dolls, despite their anatomical exactitude, don’t necessarily try to pass as real. In the photographs, however, the line between animate and inanimate becomes seriously blurred. The artist, with the expertise he acquired as a commercial photographer, crafts scenarios that look alternately real and fake from one blink to the next.
Bartlett’s images display the camera’s ability to freeze true life and life-like moments with the same sense of veracity. It’s in these photographs, which capture neither quite intimate memory nor repressed fantasy, that the viewer loses grip on what’s real.

There are many ways to process Bartlett’s work, none of them quite satisfying. Many read Bartlett’s art as a way to create the family he never had, his 15 life-size dolls becoming surrogates for his lost childhood and unrealized kids of his own. “Bartlett has been viewed as a lost child who grew into a gentle Gepetto,” Roberta Smith said in 2007. Gepetto would be the most generous literary comparison to Bartlett; others have suggested Pygmalion’s Henry Higgins or Lolita’s Humbert Humbert. The combination of playful eroticism and pure innocence in the works does derail from the usual family portrait. As Ken Johnson wrote in the Boston Globe: “Looking at these dolls is like seeing through the eyes of a pedophile.”

In 1932, still years before Bartlett made his first doll, he composed a short autobiography for Harvard’s 25th anniversary report. It read: “My hobby is sculpting in plaster. Its purpose is that of all proper hobbies -- to let out urges that do not find expression in other channels.” Aside from being quite the ominous alumni update, the brief glimpse into Bartlett’s thought process hints at the repressed compulsions at the core of his work, whatever those may be.

As any good Freudian knows, what is familiar in the past and repressed in the present often returns to disrupt us in the future. This is the story of all that’s uncanny, all that infects our safe spaces with a whiff of something old, loved, turned sour. My favorite theory about Bartlett’s dolls is that they are manifestations of his own inner child, perhaps a little girl, innocent and precocious, who never got to express herself any other way.
When he died in 1992, Bartlett instructed that his estate, worth $300,000, be “divided between orphan charities.” Of course, he really left much more: a trove of hypnotic photographs, 15 masterful sculptures, and the mystery of a seemingly harmless man with a very unusual passion that is equal parts inspiring and unnerving.

“Family Planning: early photographs and archival material,” featuring two of the doll sculptural heads and a series of photographs made circa 1955, will be on view at Julie Saul Gallery in New York until December 23, 2015.