

Hey there, Barbie Pond

A front yard filled with dolls with a take on current affairs — this is a Washington attraction immune to the lockdown



Timekeeper (From left to right) The installations change with the season and even respond to current events (below) Barbie the boxer having a go at the novel CORONAVIRUS IMAGES COURTESY: BARBIE POND AT AVENUE Q

In the quiet residential neighbourhood of Washington DC's Logan Circle — on Q Street NW, precisely — there's a row house that stands out from the others. While most houses have colourful flower displays and manicured plants in their front yard, this one features an installation of Barbie dolls sticking out of a fake pond. The Barbie Pond on Avenue Q changes themes with the seasons and keeps up with current events. When I visited the pond in October, Halloween was just around the corner and I was greeted by topless dolls with skulls for heads, seemingly trying to claw their way out of their graves. Barbie's friend Ken, too, was a skull-head who sported only a strategically placed leaf. Yet another larger doll — which was literally a bag of bones — wore a flashy pink bikini-top. It was quirky, almost bizarre, and yet undeniably entertaining. Perhaps more so now than ever.

While the world is only now learning to socialise while distancing — Italians are making music from their balconies, while we're creating a cacophony, with utensils, from ours — the Barbie Pond has always been ahead of the game. This cast of dolls has been distancing like a pro since the Pond's creation in 2014. That's why even as the pandemic shutter's DC's most beloved monuments and museums, this site, listed as a 4.6 star-rated 'tourist attraction' on Google Maps, continues to stay open 24/7.

A recent installation places Barbie in a boxing rink, aiming her gloves at the novel coronavirus. Yet another new installation has Barbie grabbing her dinner-to-go from a local eatery. Even as the pandemic takes its toll on the restaurant industry, the installation urges viewers to support local restaurants. Joe Flood, a local who lives in the vicinity, is one of many admirers who stops by this yard installation about once a week. He particularly looks forward to it in these times. "During the lockdown, it offers a rare bit of entertainment in the neighbourhood," he says.

For those who aren't in the area, the Barbie

Pond Instagram page, with a whopping 17.9 K followers, offers a few laughs, and something to think about. For others, the Pond itself is something to look forward to post the pandemic; a follower who goes by the username *bigg_ike* says he "can't wait to stop by once this whole Rona thing is over". In some cases, the Barbie Pond's replies are as amusing as the visitor comments; when *esses_dc*, referring to the dolls huddled together in an Easter installation, writes, "No social distancing?", *pat* comes the reply, "Not enough room".

Over the years, the installations have touched on a variety of subjects — from social to political. These dolls have opinions. To start with, they're anti-Trump, and there's also been an installation that saw a Trump doll being flushed down the toilet. Some installations have called to "end hate" and racial discrimination. The pond also celebrates Pride Week, and most posts sport the hashtag #instagay.

Like most vocal celebs, these dolls, too, have haters. Sometime around St Patrick's Day in 2019, a clutch of topless dolls angered a neighbour who left a sign that read: "This is not Entertainment it is Pornography. Unite as a neighborhood + demand its removal. What example is this for children". The curator(s) clicked a picture of the message and uploaded it on the official Instagram page. The subsequent comments just asserted the attraction's popularity. (And the neighbour's rising unpopularity.)

In keeping with stardom, the Pond guards its privacy; even Google could not lead me to the curator. On my visit in October, I'd chatted with local resident Ryan Obermiller. Despite living on the street for 15 years, and walking his dog regularly past the house, Obermiller hadn't a clue who created Barbie Pond. He's also never actually seen the installations being made. Obermiller said, "It's probably installed in the middle of the night; you wake up in the morning and just see it!"

I message the Instagram handle, and much to my surprise I get a response.

While the curator still maintains a cloak of anonymity, (s)he explains that it all began when (s)he simply left some "cake head dolls, or half-dolls used for cake decoration, by the pond". The curator elaborates, "People began photographing these dolls, and actually leaving dolls on my steps. I then started adding themes." Later the founder was joined by two friends who "have many good ideas, and do much of the carpentry". Typically, the team changes the theme once a month or "more often if there are fun things going on".

When I ask about the increase in the number of visitors post lockdown, the curator confirms there's more traffic, "particularly those with young children, who stand out there for quite a while". Turns out the Barbie Pond really is thinking of the kids. So much for the hater(s)!



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