

# Misadventures in Reborning: A Newbie's Quest

By Katharine Schopp

What happens when a doll collector discovers reborn dolls and decides that she must learn how to create these beautiful works of art, despite the fact that she has little painting experience and virtually no sewing skills? It's simple. She goes on a quest. She seeks out not the "divine secrets of the ya ya sisterhood," but the divine secrets of the "ga-ga" sisterhood, a sisterhood of women who know the secrets of how to turn vinyl dolls into life like babies; dolls so real that they look like they will sit up and gurgle "goo-goo" and "ga-ga".

My quest for these secrets led me to the Canadian Reborn Artist Fellowship, a group of kind hearted, witty, and talented ladies who know the secrets involved in creating these divine dolls. I was warmly welcomed into the group, even though I was a newbie with more optimism than experience. While they created one of a kind baby dolls that looked so real you'd swear they were breathing, I scoured the second hand stores searching for a practice doll.

I found one, a small citi-toy doll with a gaping mouth, lying in a heap among other abandoned toys. I brought him home and set to work, experimenting with acrylics and oils because my genesis heat set paints were still somewhere in the mail. I tried every painting technique from every tutorial I could find on that small doll, and quickly named him Frankie; with his bright blue lightning bolt veins, he could easily pass for Frankenstein's baby.

The mohair was still somewhere in the mail when the 30 felting needles I'd ordered arrived. I eyed Mac, my 3 year old standard poodle. Mohair is goat hair, and if people could use goat hair, why couldn't I use poodle hair, I reasoned. Mac's black velvet winter coat was long and curly, perfect, I thought, creeping toward him with the scissors. I snipped a few of the silky strands, washed them, and sat down to root, using size 40 needles.

By the time the head was rooted there were only 6 needles left of the original 30, my fingers had sustained puncture wounds, and tufts of dog hair were floating throughout my living room... but the hair looked great. Frankie was sporting a head full of

luxurious black curls...and Mac was in love. Puppy love. I don't know whether it was because of the poodle hair, or because of the overcooked rice sock I'd finally used to try to soften the head (and thus break fewer needles), but my dog was clearly besotted. Whenever I'd turn away Mac would steal the doll head and gently carry it to his dog bed, where he'd sit and guard it, quite diligently.



While Mac guarded the head I focused on the body. Although I'd only sewn one thing in the almost 30 years since high school home-ec, and I still needed to read the directions to figure out how to thread the sewing machine, I decided that I'd start with Jeannine Holper's anatomically correct body pattern. The pattern was for a doll with full limbs and I was working with three quarter limbs, but I figured I could make up the rest of the pattern myself.

It almost worked. I had to do everything twice, but I finally had one cute little anatomically correct body. The only problem was, I couldn't figure out how to attach the limbs. I'd never used joints before. Not those kind of joints, anyway. There were three pieces to each joint, instead of the usual two. I figured one piece must go inside the body, one inside the limb and... hmm...well, the third piece must go in between the limb and the body.

Nope. I figured wrong, and Frankie gained a last name: Blair. As in Linda Blair. I was having flashbacks of "The Exorcist" while watching poor Frankie's limbs rotate 365 degrees.



I dressed him, and he looked cute if you didn't look too closely, or if you kept the pacifier in to hide the bright pink gaping mouth, or if you didn't pick him up to see his windmill imitation. I posted pictures of a baby that only a

mother could love, or a father (in this case, a dog father)...and the wonderfully kind artists in the Canadian Fellowship told me I did fine.

While working on baby Frankie Blair I'd collected an assortment of play dolls, and had also ordered 4 doll kits. I decided to try a Berenguer play doll. The genesis heat set paints had come in and I was eager to try them.

When it came time to set the paint, I was excited. I had the oven thermometer. I had the timer. I had the heat gun. And, even though I'm known for burning water, I was confident that I wouldn't burn the doll. This doll would turn out. This time, things were going to be different.

My mother called while the paint was setting. We talked until my timer went off. "Hang on Mom," I said. "I have to get my doll out of the oven."

"That reminds me," she said. "I have to check on my roast."

I laughed on my way to the oven, but when I took the doll out, I stopped laughing. The paint had disappeared. Also, the kitchen smelled bad. Really bad. Also, the Berenguer looked

weird. I took a second look. The eyes had melted.

I told my Mom I'd have to call her back, and then burned my fingers on the burned plastic eyes while trying to gouge them out. Thankfully, I'd ordered a dozen pairs of eyes and they'd arrived. An hour later, I finally had the new eyes in. I'd chosen hazel eyes and the doll did look a lot better with the new, albeit crossed, eyes.

The next day, the mohair I'd ordered came in the mail, along with more felting needles. I'd ordered 100 needles this time; better safe than sorry, I figured. I gave the doll a few more layers of paint, and then sat down to root, to the tune of "Get Into the Groove" by Madonna. As reborners know, Berenguers have grooved heads, and that particular Berenguer had a lot of grooves to get into. By the time the last groove was filled it was 7 AM. I'd somehow stayed up all night without even realizing, lost in some kind of bizarre rooting daze. I cut and styled the hair, put in a little top knot ponytail, added a bow, and stepped back to take a look. I'd done it! I didn't have another Frankie baby on my hands, I had..., oh my gosh, I had Pebbles Flintstone. Yabba dabba doo.



After a few hours of sleep I decided to tackle the magnetic pacifier. Frankie hadn't needed a magnet (due to his gaping mouth), and I was eager to try making one. My 12 heavy duty

earth magnets had come in the mail. I had pacifiers. I was excited. I grabbed the stack of magnets. Pulled. They didn't budge. I pulled harder. Nothing. I tried bending them. They flipped over, did a somersault and reattached. I couldn't believe it! Foiled by earth magnets! I sent an SOS to my new friends at the Fellowship, and they wrote back saying I needed to SLIDE a magnet off the top of the stack. I slid a magnet off the top and what do you know, it worked. I put the newly freed magnet

down on the table, put the stack down on the other side of the table and was almost hit by the projectile as the lone magnet flew back to the stack like a homing pigeon to its coop. Great. I tried again, and this time, I got it right. I glued



one magnet inside the dolls mouth, and put the head down. There was a clatter and a blur of silver, and I turned to see several paperclips stuck to the doll head. I've seen warnings on eBay; artists who use these magnets warn potential buyers against placing the dolls near computers or pacemakers. They

failed to mention paperclips, so I'll say it now. Do not put a magnetized doll near paperclips, not unless you need a little office helper who appears to vacuum paperclips with her lips. I eyed the fridge, wondering if the doll head would stick to it like a bizarre fridge magnet. It didn't.

After the magnet incident I wasn't sure about trying the eyelashes. I'd ordered lashes though, as well as the magic lash installer thingy, so I decided to give it a go. After a delicate struggle, I managed to pry the eyelashes away from their case. I grabbed the glue; read the warning: Use in a ventilated area. Fine. I opened the window, just a crack. The lashes went flying on a gust of wind. After a search and rescue operation, which took place on the floor under my kitchen table, I found one lash and the paint brush I thought I'd lost yesterday. On my way back up I hit my head on the table and simultaneously knocked Pebble's head over and off the table, and I realized something as I watched her roll across the floor. She doesn't have a neck ring. She just has a hollow neck. There's nothing to attach a cloth body to. I'm going to have to order a neck ring. I won't be able to finish her until it comes in.



In the meantime, I started doll number 3, and I'm really hoping that it's true what people say, that "the third time is the charm". This doll is another Berenguer, but, unlike Pebbles, this Berenguer is a kit. The Sandie kit, to be exact. The sculpt is soft and big, it has a neck ring, and best of all; it has no paint or grooves. It even has a premade body, which means no sewing machine (and no joints)! I have high hopes for Sandie. I've got her in the oven now; I'm just waiting for her first layer to set.



As I wait, and write, I realize I've discovered one of the secrets of the ga-ga sisterhood. It's waiting. There's a lot of waiting involved in the art of reborn dolls. It takes time, and patience, to make a doll that looks like a real baby. It takes time to learn, it takes time to get the things you've ordered in the mail; it even takes time to bake. In that way, I guess it's like a pregnancy. It gives a whole new meaning to having a bun in the oven. Oh! There's the timer. I have to go get my bun. Wish me luck.

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