

# ALL dolled up



A designer for Anna Sui dresses vacant-eyed, impossibly skinny models in thrifted vintage.

By **Marcia Froelke Coburn**  
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**RUNWAY READY**  
Barbie doll Daisy Adele poses in an outfit from Tiny Frock Shop's Carousel of Colour collection, launching Thu 9.

In Pamela Thompson's Deerfield studio, dozens of models wait. They have blond, brunet or auburn hair, pulled back in ponytails or falling loosely to their shoulders. One has a classic bob—a Katie Holmes meets Victoria Beckham look. They sport cat eyes, pouty lips and perfectly arched brows. Their legs are impossibly long, as models' legs tend to be, although this group is more curvaceous than what is normally seen at a fashion shoot. I can tell this because—for the moment—the models are completely naked.

The models are dolls—mainly Barbies. Some are from Mattel's Fashionista line, meaning the dolls have jointed bodies that can hold different poses. Sometimes, Thompson pops the head off of a classic Barbie and puts it on a Fashionista body. She demonstrates with a quick snap of her wrist. Now that Barbie can strike a pose right out of *Vogue* or *Elle*, one hand behind her head, one leg arched to the side.

The reason behind this interest in doll flexibility is Thompson's current line of work: running Tiny Frock Shop ([tinyfrockshop.com](http://tinyfrockshop.com)), an online resale shop for doll clothes. But it isn't anything like eBay. Thompson, 42, creates a high-fashion world where style, current and vintage, merges with fantasy. She finds old doll clothes and accessories at flea markets or online, refurbishes or reworks them if needed, editorially curates them based on current fashion trends for humans, and resells them for 25 cents to \$32.50 a pop. Many of the cheaper pieces she buys in bulk; she tries to keep the markup low "so that kids can buy as well as collectors." She makes the most money from reselling good-condition vintage and full looks, shoes and jewelry included. Tiny Frock Shop most closely resembles a cross between a luxe fashion magazine and a prestigious runway show, with still-action photos of dolls in chic outfits and sparkly jewels walking runways or modeling in photo shoots.

The site also features trend forecasting for Barbie based on the seasonal Fashion Week shows from New York, Paris, Milan and London. Thompson even writes profiles that tell the back stories of the models, in the dolls' own voices. ("I started in Europe when I was 14. I am from a small city in Poland....," says Larysa, who is 12½ inches tall.) "There are a lot of people selling used doll clothes online," Thompson says. "But they're not doing it in a fashion-forward way. They're not doing it the way the fashion industry works."

Thompson should know. After growing up in Wilmette, she got her degree in fashion design from University of Wisconsin–Madison and spent her senior year at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. During her 15-year-plus fashion career, she was the head designer for Betsey Johnson and, later, Heatherette. She also continues a ten-year collaboration with Anna Sui, working on graphic-tee designs.

In 2010, after the birth of daughter Lily, Thompson and her husband (an artist who paints portraits of squirrels) moved back to the North Shore to be close to family. Lily, now 3, rekindled Thompson's dormant love of dolls and their clothing. "Plus there are very few fashion-design jobs here," Thompson says. So she started thinking of how to create one for herself. She taught herself photography on her husband's Olympus. One year later, she launched Tiny Frock Shop. Her target audience is not just little girls or doll collectors, but also young moms who fondly remember their days with Barbie and want to pass on the thrill to their daughters. She sells 30–40 pieces a month, and business is growing. Coming soon: a line of menswear modeled by Ken dolls.

Thompson starts her editorial looks by tearing pages from fashion magazines to go on her inspiration wall, a vertical pin board. She



**ADULT'S PLAY**  
Pamela Thompson  
in her home.  
Below: "Models"  
post Polaroids,  
complete with  
their height, on  
[tinyfrockshop.com](http://tinyfrockshop.com).

also posts to Pinterest ([pinterest.com/tinnyfrockshop](http://pinterest.com/tinnyfrockshop)). From there, she identifies trends and makes a list of what current designers' work fits that trend (e.g., Miu Miu bubble skirts or platform Louboutin shoes). Next, she combs her extensive inventory of clothes to see what stock she has and lets inspiration take over.

Take Garden Party, the collection Thompson is working on when I visit the basement studio in her house. Her inspiration is the recent flowery, flowing work of Rodarte, Jason Wu and Proenza Schouler. She opens a closet door, revealing a meticulously organized space with labeled bins and boxes holding thousands of articles of doll clothing.

"I'm thinking of using this for one Garden Party photo," she says, pulling out a doll's vintage sundress, with a fitted bodice and full skirt in a delicate print—an early 1960s style that looks very Anthropologie now. Another possibility is a hand-crocheted dress that Thompson found at a garage sale. It has tiny cap sleeves, a delicate collar and a billowy skirt. "You just know someone's grandmother made this dress for her Barbie," she says. Completing some of the looks will be the doll-size jewelry that Thompson makes from vintage baubles she selects at flea markets. Check her website now for the result: magazine-quality photos of dolls lying in the grass or walking through a field, wearing clothes you wish you could squeeze into.

This fall, Thompson will begin selling the entire package—a doll with redone hair and painted-on makeup, along with a Thompson-styled ensemble or two, likely for \$40–\$80. "Some people just need help with their imaginations," she says.

