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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

In an Exhibition of Miniatures, the Good, the Bad, and the Lego

by **Benjamin Sutton** on April 6, 2015 0

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Detail of Tracey Snelling, "Bad Girl" (2012) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Nobody can resist miniatures. From 18th-century dollhouses and contemporary architectural maquettes to ancient Egyptian reliquary artifacts, taking pleasure from peering down on diminutive worlds seems to be a universal human delight. After all, as writer Rachel Nuwer notes in her essay for *Feel Big Live Small*, an exhibition of miniature sculptures, videos, and photos at New York nonprofit apexart curated by Elan Smithee, they offer "a way not only to represent the world, but also to tame and perfect it, excluding the randomness and entropy of outside forces." Indeed, there's a sense that, because they present hermetically sealed idealized environments frozen in time, miniatures are small-scale escapist fantasies that shut out the problems and complexities of the real world. But, as some of the works in *Feel Big Live Small* make plain, miniature sculptures can ask enormous questions.

Citizen Brick, "Super Lab Playset" (2013) (click to enlarge)

Meanwhile, some pieces in the exhibition offer glimpses of small spaces that are downright somber. Foremost among them is Dante Brebner's "Underwater" (2010), in which the visitor, peering hard through rectangular cut-outs into a small white box on the gallery wall, can see the silhouette of a person floating just below the surface of the water while, far below, a life raft sits on the ocean floor. In Thomas Doyle's "Proxy (725 Bauer Ct.)" (2012), the same suburban sandbox scene is depicted upside-down and right side up, in one version with a family playing, in the other with soldiers inspecting the charred site after a bombing. These dark and diminutive landscapes upend the convention of the miniature, making us voyeurs who peek at scenes of death and destruction.

There are, however, a handful of works in *Feel Big Live Small* that do disservice to the notion that miniatures can be vessels for complex and challenging ideas. Chief among these is a tiny version of Walter White's meth laboratory from the *Breaking Bad* TV series by the Chicago-based customized LEGO seller Citizen Brick that's installed front and center. The sculpture reinforced my belief that LEGO, though it's a fantastic toy and hobby, just does not work as a sculptural medium. There are prints from campaigns created by Madrid-based advertising agency Serial Cut that don't look any less like advertisements for being presented in a gallery setting. Alice Bartlett contributes photos of tiny figures frolicking on her grassy nail art. These works sacrifice complexity and reinforce the cutesy, commercial side of small-scale sculpture.

Where are works by Mark Hogancamp, Wafaa Bilal, Lothar Osterburg, and others who create transporting and challenging little alternate realities? At times, Smithee's show makes the world of contemporary miniatures seem smaller than it really is.

apexart

Feel Big Live Small
organized by Elan Smithee
March 19- May 16, 2015

Joe Fig, "Self Portrait: Collinsville" (2013) (click to enlarge)

Thomas Doyle, "Redoubt, redux" (2011) (click to enlarge)

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Thomas Doyle, "Proxy (725 Bauer Ct.)" (2012) (click to enlarge)

Left: Tracey Snelling, "The Parade Ends" (2012); right: Tracey Snelling, "Bad Girl" (2012)

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Daisy Tainton, "Suicide Beetle" (2013) (click to enlarge)

Kendal Murray, "Family Style Smile" (2012) (click to enlarge)

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Left: Matthew Albanese, "Dark Zone" (2015); right: Matthew Albanese, "Dark Zone" diorama (2015)

Kendal Murray, "Esteem Dream" (2012) (click to enlarge)

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