

# The Dollhouse Gallery

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by Jacqueline Cooper

When I was about eight years old my grandfather presented me with a dollhouse over which he had spent many hours laboring. It was lovingly crafted, decorated, and detailed but like most fickle eight year old's the house held my interest for about a year. At nine I became bored, and, feigning an adult sophistication, I relinquished the dollhouse, placing it among other childhood objects in a corner of my cluttered bedroom until my parents dispensed with it during one of their frequent yard sales. All that remains now (and properly) is a memory of my grandfather's generosity; the object had performed its function for a year and then emptied itself of any intrinsic emotional currency.

The Dollhouse Gallery consists of a similar miniature dwelling and has been used by a number of artists as an alternative environment in which to address the

organization of space in reference to their ongoing practices. As owner of the petite building, exhibition programmer Jennifer Katell recalls that her property never realized its potential when she was a child, but is now able to function as an object in which to house the physical and conceptual relics of a number of contemporary projects. Given to Katell by her mother, the house was supposed to provide a physical framework for mother and daughter to negotiate issues of domesticity, emotional development, and play, during periods where both participants would decorate the house. As with many fantasies, the real world intervened and the play house was discarded. Its reincarnation as an alternative space has been due, in part, to Katell's mother returning it back to her daughter and allowing the gift to fulfill its potential as a container for others' desire.

A dollhouse is a psychologically charged object and it is to Katell's credit that the project refuses to allow for the pathologizing of its owner. With a background in museum studies and a foot in the

commercial world, Katell has provided a strict conceptual framework for her exhibition series: a program specifically designed to last for one year and split between solo exhibitions, group invitations, and curated shows. At the close of the year's schedule the project will be discontinued and exist only in a secondary form. (A book is planned and the

project is being documented in its entirety.) Although Katell argues that her presence is simply administrative, it is hard not to see her as the analytical umbrella for the exhibited works. While the space is freely given and the artists are encouraged to incorporate conceptual and physical reductivism into their ongoing work, the ghost of Katell's childhood remains present. This effect is further doubled by the physical location of the dollhouse, which sits in the space between the kitchen and the living room of her apartment.

Given these parameters the first three shows have produced a bifurcated approach to dealing with the given environment. The first, characterized by Martin Durazo's aggressive claiming of the space for his own, hyper-masculine persona, can be read as a type of home invasion, a violation of the fragility of Katell's spectral involvement with the property. Durazo's installation ripped out the contents of the individual rooms and replaced them with the debris of incarceration and the stain of physical violation. Rooms were filled with lubricant and the mechanics of interrogation were suggested by rubber gloves, syringes, and trace fluids, indicating the trauma of physical and psychological search. The second show allowed a diverse group of artists to explore their own relationship with the idea of containment. As part of an ongoing conversation about the nature of the "alternative/domestic" space in Los Angeles, the Dollhouse joins venues such as Domestic Setting, Bliss, and Lemon Sky, alternative spaces run from the homes of the respective curators. Among the Dollhouse's six invited artists, Stas Orlovski simply piled a number of casual drawings on the floor of the dollhouse living room in reference to the ephemerality of the altruistic notion of "alternative."

Most recently, David Schafer has taken a second approach to claiming the space by nullifying the physical, iconic nature of the object. Draping it in cloth, he eradicates the referent and forces the viewer to partake in a vicarious analysis of Katell's position to this project. Schafer interviewed the owner and then placed the resulting text in the illuminated attic of the building (the only room visible from beneath the blue and white pin-striped material which covers it). He then linked the childhood container of desire with the adult arena for the theater of the unconscious libido, the sleeping chamber, by extending the installation into Katell's present bedroom along an electric extension cord illuminating both chambers. The viewer is uncomfortably propelled into the private narratives of Katell's life.

Future exhibitions will include the systematic analysis of culture through the investigation of plumbing diagrams by the artist Margaret Morgan, and a group show involving three artists and curated from three separate cities. Katell cites this exhibition as an example of the fraught negotiation that takes place when the stakes of ownership are intensified by the limitation of space. The work may be anything but neighborly; it appears that the dollhouse does not engender a communal spirit but continues to act as an environment in which the epic themes of the individual unconscious are encountered in a framework which suggests how false the security of an idealized domestic environment really is.

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David Schafer  
Interview, 1998  
Dollhouse, cloth, light-  
bulbs, electrical cord,  
text, 60" x 60" x 72"