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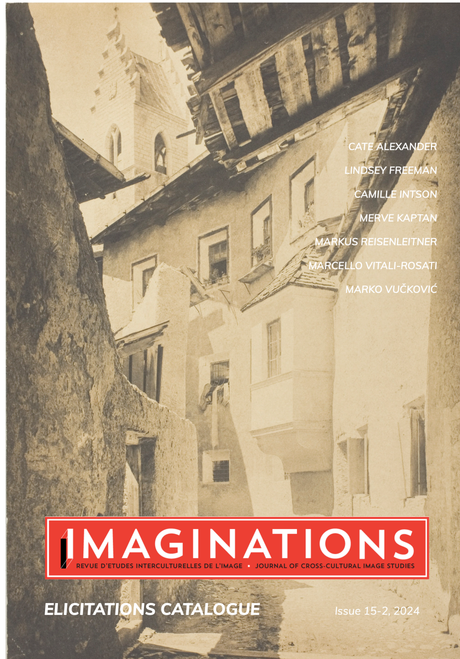

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SMALL ELEGIES FOR AMERICA

LINDSEY FREEMAN

Miniatures open us up to childhood memories, daydreaming, and nostalgia, but they can also alert us to the dangers and disappointments of our times. Many contemporary artists are utilizing small-scale artworks to represent difficult truths of contemporary American life, such as alienation, disenchantment, precarious housing, and economic insecurity writ large. In this essay, focusing on the artists Michael Paul Smith, Thomas Dolye, and James Casebere, the imaginations that encircle homes, neighborhoods, and small towns are complicated through utopian and dystopian art works that draw attention to past attachments to the future and the need for large changes now.

Les miniatures nous ouvrent aux souvenirs d'enfance, à la rêverie et à la nostalgie, mais elles peuvent aussi nous alerter sur les dangers et les déceptions de notre époque. De nombreux artistes contemporains utilisent des œuvres d'art à petite échelle pour représenter des vérités difficiles de la vie américaine contemporaine, telles que l'aliénation, le désenchantement, le logement précaire et l'insécurité économique au sens large. Dans cet essai, axé sur les artistes Michael Paul Smith, Thomas Dolye et James Casebere, les imaginations qui entourent les maisons, les quartiers et les petites villes sont compliquées par des œuvres d'art utopiques et dystopiques qui attirent l'attention sur les attachements passés au futur et le besoin pour de grands changements maintenant.

When we were children, we were also accidental geometers. The genesis of our spatial training came from the first places we lived. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes that our childhood homes are "physically inscribed"

in us.[1] In geometry, to speak of inscribed shapes means that they fit snugly in other shapes. Bachelard goes on to show how the process doesn't stop when we move out of these homes, but instead we take these impressions with us as long as we live. As we dwelled in those homes, they dwell in us.

When we move through the world, we exscribe the habits we honed in our first homes on each other and on the world. This all goes quite smoothly if our childhoods were secure, if cultures remained stable, and if social worlds tumbled out gently from one generation to the next, but for most of us living in the twenty-first century, the mutual dwellings—the homes inside us and the homes we live inside (if we are so lucky)—have become architecturally, emotionally, and socially incompatible. We question their very foundations. How can we confront the enormity of this?

One way to begin to grasp the current state of destabilization of American life, especially in terms of housing, is through thinking with miniatures. As Jack Davy and Charlotte Dixon write in "What Makes A Miniature?", a miniature that "resembles a particular thing can simultaneously be a representation of something else, something less tangible."[2] In this essay, I think with miniatures to get to the complex feelings of stress, distress, and disappointment held by a large swath of contemporary Americans unable to find consistent housing and supportive communities. Inside this swirl of mixed emotions there are elegiac feelings—sorrows of perceived lost chances, sadness at social connections that slipped away, and the sense that something beautiful that was just out of reach is now gone.

Susan Sontag writes that "being a spectator of calamities … is a quintessentially modern experience."[3] And while this is certainly true, making sense of these calamities is not so easy, as Sontag shows in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, her book exploring representations of atrocity. When a catastrophe is seen firsthand, the scale of the event can be hard to take in; when it happens slowly over time, such as the erosion of the chance at a good life that includes housing stability, it can be harder still to contemplate. When disasters are brought to our attention through texts, photographs, or films, it can be difficult

to feel the immensity of the losses, even if they register on a factual level. More than an exercise in morose mini-mimesis, miniatures that draw attention to the housing crisis and loneliness of this particular moment can help us to think through how we got here through triggering emotions, memories, and affects that we can then begin to decipher and critically assess.

As I have written elsewhere, "when the gigantic ... threatens to overwhelm us completely, we turn to miniature."[4] Miniatures enhance our ability to take in information, making things that might be too overpowering when experienced through other media, such as documentary photography or video, more intelligible. Small-scale models force us to look closely, and at the same time, they can allow us to do so without the guilty feelings of voyeurism that can sometimes come with photography or film. As Susan Stewart writes: "the miniature becomes a stage on which we project, by means of association or intertextuality, a deliberately framed series of *actions*."[5] Through their affective infrastructures, miniatures of catastrophe and lonely endings serve as reminders of the ways in which we can be harmed by individuals or institutions and how we can fall out of intimacy and sociality, but they can also help us to remember the ways in which we are implicated in the hurt and care of and for others.

Miniatures hold our attention through a replication of cultural architectures and gestures made small, which are processed through the imagination, memory, contemporary technologies, and social relations. Miniature worlds draw us close. And by bringing us "in," they bring us into immediate contact with parts of our interiority that are lit up by the encounter, where "values become condensed and enriched."[6] As John Mack writes in *The Art of Small Things*, "The processes of creating small things are not simply technologies for reducing scale but also imply a corresponding exaggeration of content."[7] Miniatures, created through minifying processes, have magnifying capabilities.

In this essay I think with miniature artworks from three contemporary artists: Michael Paul Smith, Thomas Doyle, and James Casebere. All three work with similar motifs, including: houses, neigh-

bourhoods, nuclear families, small towns, suburbs, and swimming pools, with atmospheres that exude loneliness, nostalgia, and resignation. Although each artist does this in his own way, all three depict small, elegiac architectures infused with the expired dreams of progress held by past generations, which become layered on the present-day nightmares of ecological, economic, and domestic insecurity. What we see in the work of artists such as Smith, Doyle, and Casebere are the exposed beams of greed and grief at the heart of the contemporary American housing crisis and the ongoing failure of the United States to provide stable grounding—both material and emotional—for the majority of its citizens. At the heart of this crisis, is a failure to understand that times have changed.

THE ARCHITECTURES WE BUILT AS CHILDREN

For over twenty-five years, Michael Paul Smith created the fictitious town of Elgin Park, a dreamy place set in the American Midwest in the mid-twentieth century. Elgin Park exists as an immense collection of forced perspective photographs staged by placing diecast model cars and handcrafted architectural miniatures in the real-life spaces of Winchester, Massachusetts. In the images from Smith's imaginary town, fragments of a prosperous America are layered with some of the darker ambiguities of the age. For example, in one photograph, there's a handsome two-toned red and cream station wagon at the A&P on double coupon day, an illustration of Americans' love of a deal, supermarkets, and abundance. In another image, we see a silvery-blue El Camino with white-walled tires parked jauntily in front of the Superette, promising style, along with groceries, speed, and convenience. Another photograph features a toy store at night after closing, its bright banners offering a colourful contrast to the gray and empty street. The shop is full of eye-catching items, including a poster of a tiger on a pink background, a candy-red truck, and even a seaplane suspended from the ceiling, but what causes me to pause is a Pinocchio doll in the corner of the window. Pinocchio, much like Elgin Park itself, gives off the appearance of a toy about to spring to life at any moment. The most foreboding photograph, to me, in the entire series reveals a mysteri-

ous research building at the edge of town, where I can imagine all kinds of secret experiments conducted by men with serious glasses and austere haircuts draped in white coats. The images that make up the town highlight particular dreams and material desires intrinsic to many twentieth-century Americans; they are scenes of near-fulfillment for a predominantly white middle and upper-middle class world with the nuclear family at its core, but they leave a space for something still wanting, which makes them mesmerizing.

This wanting is similar to "the desire to animate" that Stewart identifies when writing about toys, where "the desire is not simply to know everything but also to experience everything simultaneously."[8] It is a desire for possibility, maybe for a different life, or maybe for just more of the life suggested in the scenes—a Pinocchio who does become a real boy, triple coupons, extra superette, longer fins on your shiny automobile.

Figure 1. Michael Paul Smith, The 1959 El Camino in Profile (Elgin Park, 2011)

Every photo of Elgin Park creates a tender and slightly unsettling microclimate of yesteryear in 1:24 scale. The combination of atmosphere, artifice, and reality create an illusion that feels lived in, somehow real, even though we know these are fabrications. Smith is proud of the fact that he doesn't use photoshop or other digital manipulation software. Instead, he positions his models in such a way that the atmosphere appears natural, and then he takes photographs with a simple, two-hundred-dollar point-and-shoot camera. Smith was not formally trained as an artist or photographer, but he has a unique and varied employment history, and as a result, a wide variety of skills, which he brings to his art. He has worked as an architectural model-builder, illustrator, postal worker, wallpaper hanger, and museum display designer. Smith is a talented craftsman, but he also has an uncanny ability to create ambiance of bygone days. His photographs have a consistent mood where the not-quite-real past—miniaturized—is weirdly representative of the feeling of a childhood that both was and wasn't part of American history. This is memory work for memories that don't quite work. His photographs create the backdrop for an alternate history, where America could be a place good enough to be nostalgic for.

With Elgin Park, Smith invented a whole world—one that seems to expand as soon as we enter it, then to close us within its sphere. He refers to this opening and enveloping quality as "spookiness."[9] This spookiness is a particular flavour of the uncanny that is produced through interaction with miniature things. The feeling can be eerie, like in Elgin Park where you become transfixed by the sensation of a temporal stretchiness, as if you are looking at vanished time. With this diminutive town, Smith creates "a past that can be all the more spellbinding," because as Walter Benjamin writes, "it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the time of a childhood."[10] It matters that the childhood Smith wishes to fashion is *a* childhood, and not a complete replica of his own, even if his past undeniably permeates Elgin Park. Smith grew up in the 1950s in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, a steel-mill town just north of Pittsburgh, bordering the Ohio River. Sewickley comes across as the per-

fect town to miniaturize, measuring just one square mile. Its smallness creates the illusion of knowability and containment.

The landscape of Smith's youth is at the heart of his work and provides both a historical referent and an emotional tether for Elgin Park.[11] The childhood he taps into is a dreamworld of small-town America steeped in victory culture following World War II.[12] It is a place of security, inventiveness, and material wealth for normative white Americans longing for upward social mobility. As Smith defines the era: "The 50s and 60s had a sense of hope about them. Television had come in, new cars came out every year and everyone avidly looked at science fiction hoping to get a glimpse of what the future would be like. The future was tangible, and it just made it worthwhile getting up in the morning to see what was going to come down the pipe next. It was an amazing time."[13] This spirit of American optimism colours the magic geography of Elgin Park, but shades of loneliness and apprehension seep through as well. Today, the future no longer feels so optimistic or hopeful for most of us, as it did for Smith in his youth, and of course for many Americans, the United States never elicited this kind of promise. In our times marked by ecological crisis, political division, and the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic, it's hard to be excited about what is "going to come down the pipe next." Will it be a new form of acid rain? A never-seen-before dangerous flu? Another crime committed by a president? Another murder of a Black citizen? More misogynist legislation? For me, the separation between present-day America and Smith's quaint twentieth-century scenes saturates them in an anxious radiance.

Smith's own upbringing had its share of darkness mixed in with the comforts of growing up in what has been called the "American Century." He was bullied for being gay, and there was a history of violence in his family that included murder and mutilation.[14] Although the details were never clear, there were missing family members and hints of foul play. As part of his model-making practice, Smith built the house he grew up in, a process he described as a kind of therapy.[15] The small version of his boyhood home added an element of realism into the mythological space of Elgin Park. The replica took

Figure 2. Michael Paul Smith, Research Building Parking Lot 1958 (Elgin Park, 2009)

longer to make than many of his other creations because he went deeper into the interior than he normally does. Smith made every effort to reproduce as faithfully as possible the contours and quirks of the space. He took care with the details, such as tracking down the exact shades of pink and gray floral wallpaper that had adorned the walls, in order to reproduce them in miniature for his model. He also painstakingly sliced faux-wood contact paper with an X-Acto knife to mimic the wood-grained linoleum that his parents put down over the original pine plank floors, which had been painted in a deep burgundy.[16] Sparing no detail, he even carefully affixed the original house number "239" to the façade.

Smith's attempt at working through memory with a model of his childhood home, and Elgin Park more generally, resonates with the Italian artist Alice Pasquini's sculpture of an abandoned dollhouse, which she sees as an enactment of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's theories of play, creativity, and transitional spaces. Pasquini describes her deserted dollhouse as an example of the fact "that time

Figure 3. Michael Paul Smith, Another Giant Head (Elgin Park, Childhood Home, 2011)

does not change [us] and that the architecture we built as children are the same ones we inhabit as adults."[17] For Bachelard, it is not only our dollhouses, but our first homes, that we always live inside (as they live in us). In a meditation on the spaces of our early addresses, he writes: "The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands."[18] All those latches, doors, and rooms of our first homes are intrinsic to the formation of our habits and haptics. Those spaces work on us our whole lives, like the language of our youth, where instead of sentences, we translate all the spaces we encounter back to this first way of knowing and feeling our bodies in space.

To visit Elgin Park is to experience what Freud called "the factor of the repetition of the same thing," which mimics the feeling of "some dream-states."[19] In Elgin Park, specific cars, houses, buildings, and even numbers return again and again. One of the things that repeats is the address "239," where the number functions as both a synonym and synecdoche for home. Before Smith recreated his childhood res-

Figure 4. Alice Pasquini, The Unchanging World (photo Alessandro Sgarito7)

idence in miniature, he had already been working with the house number on a different structure. In fact, 239 hangs on one of his most used and photographed models, a mid-century bungalow painted in the same muted green tones as the house he grew up in, offering a numerical, chromatic, and even stylistic nod to his first home.

In the bungalow 239 there are rugs which are tiny copies of those once owned by his parents, as well as dollhouse-sized crisp linens and a tan-and-green plaid bedspread reminiscent of that earlier era. The kitchen features period-appropriate miniaturized food canisters and birch plywood cabinets sitting above a shrunken simulacrum of linoleum from a 1955 pattern from Sears. The house is also equipped with a folding ironing board, a porch rocker that rocks, along with a glider that really glides. The bungalow is featured in many of the photographs of Elgin Park, which adds to the dreamlike feel of the place. Like other buildings of this meticulously made miniature town, the house does not stay put, but instead moves around, appearing within different scenes and against changing backgrounds and topographies. It is with these recurring, mimetic, and movable mod-

Figure 5. Michael Paul Smith, 55 Oldsmobile with Bungalow (Elgin Park, 2008)

els that the town starts to feel paradoxically quite large, while space and time seem loose and shaggy around the edges.

Even when Smith focuses mainly on exteriors and surfaces, one of the most compelling things about this ersatz, nostalgic Midwestern town is how realistic many of the images look—at a glance they pass as historic photographs. Some of this is the result of Smith's spatial knowledge, honed during his letter carrier days. He intimately understands how city streets are laid out into patterns for traffic and pedestrians, at what precise angles buildings would face the street, and the peculiar beauty of the modern geometry of parking. The figure of the well-parked vehicle is often the focal point of Smith's scenes. The model cars he utilizes are from the heyday of American automobile culture chosen from his extensive collection to fit the mood of each particular photograph.[20]

There are no representations of people in Elgin Park, and as a side effect the cars carry the emotional weight. Although some viewers have sworn that they have seen small out-of-focus figures in the im-

ages, this is only the work of their imaginations or the aftereffects of a reverie.[21] Smith deliberately constructed his photographs without people in order to allow for a feeling of openness that lets viewers place themselves in the town.[22] Elgin Park conditions "visitors," in the terminology Smith uses, by gently disrupting their senses, in a way that may not even be noticeable to them. Through this interruption of the normal perceptions of lived space, Elgin Park becomes strangely habitable, at least in a daydream.[23]

In his work Smith strives to reach the emotional register he calls "okness," but there is something fragile and contradictory about Elgin Park. It is an imaginary town with a name pulled from the Utopia of nowhere, bearing the qualities of, in Smith's words, a "neutral place," a place with "no conflict."[24] "The Neutral," following Roland Barthes, is something that "outplays" or "baffles the paradigm." The neutral is not something benign, or passive; it can "refer to intense strong, unprecedented states."[25] The neutralness of Elgin Park can feel almost hallucinatory. To visit is to be immersed in an idealized town that carries an aching uneasiness. By Smith's design, there is no outward conflict, but there is an unmistakable diffuse tension in the work. This tension cannot be resolved, but it is productive—it works to show the shifts in culture over generations and the fantasies of other times that continue to nag at our present.

Smith's final contribution to the mythology of his miniature town was a message, resembling a postcard, addressed to those who follow his art: "I've moved to Elgin Park!" written in a buttery-yellow script against a periwinkle-blue background of sky hovering above a photo of a single-family home with a shiny maroon-coloured car in the driveway. Smith had pancreatic cancer and organized to have this message posted after he passed away. His last work as an artist fit perfectly with all the representations of Elgin Park that preceded it. The image carried an air of quietness and tenderness that faced squarely the difficult realities of life and death. On the postcard is Smith's model of the bungalow, house number 239, a citation of his childhood home transported into the gentle haunting, uncanny space of Elgin Park, "the most visited fake town in the United States."[26]

Figure 6. Michael Paul Smith, Moved to Elgin Park (Elgin Park, 2019)

STANDING ABOVE SOMETHING SO DELICATE

Thomas Doyle creates sculptures featuring houses that symbolize the fantasies of economic safety and middle-class confidence in the United States slipping away.[27] In his art, we see the homes many Americans were socialized to desire emerge from an effluvium of decay or teeter on the edge of the abyss. His sculptures contain human figures, but they have no facial expressions; it is the houses in his works that radiate feelings ranging from contentedness to despair. The homes show everything, as if the affective valences they usually contain have been externalized and transformed into architecture. Houses function in the scenes as characters, almost as family members. The small human figures, by contrast, give off

the impression of being universally oblivious to what is happening around them. When the houses are under duress, the people usually go on, unbothered. It is only when they are caught at the steps of something collapsing that they extend themselves, their arms stretched for someone or something beyond saving.

The one- to two-inch human figures Doyle uses in his sculptures come from a German model train company. They are mostly people waiting for trains; the kind of waiting that takes place in what Barthes calls "dilatory spaces," narrative spaces of gesture and delay between the beginning and the ending that refuse to come to a conclusion.[28] These are figures designed to live in readiness and expectation, or boredom and resignation. They are handy to use out of the box as raw material, but their bodies are rarely in the exact position Doyle wants, so he basically remakes them. He takes them apart, removes their limbs, repositions their arms and legs, glues them back together, sands and then repaints them. Once reconfigured, they are then positioned in the scenes: German postures corrected for American nightmares.

While Doyle's sculptures contain both houses and human figures, they do not resemble dollhouses. The interiors of the homes are only visible when they are blown to bits or sawed in half, like small echoes of Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting*. Further, the feeling one gets when looking into a dollhouse, the sensation of spying on a secret world of domesticity and often, familial bliss, is absent in these works. Instead we are made aware of a something that has been cooking for a long time, a microcosm of America stewing, like Sylvia Plath writes in *The Bell Jar*, in its "own sour air."[29]

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk theorizes that every social form has its own "bell jar of purpose," where "people form a social sphere, come to understand themselves in that space, form and reform it."[30] But what happens when the atmosphere sours, time and space start to slip away, or, if you've never been able to fully understand yourself in those forms in the first place? Doyle's works offer a hefty skepticism about what kinds of renovations can happen in ongoing emergencies. His sculptures are documents of an Ameri-

can suburban ideal grown nightmarish and turned topsy-turvy. They draw our attention to the false sense of security brought and bought through consumption of the American dream. The scenes seem to mock the whole endeavour of private property and the imagined financial soundness that comes with home ownership. Models of the family home are cracked open, and there the vertiginous nerve of class stability is exposed for what it is—something that hangs like a live wire, alluring, but dangerous, and difficult to grasp and hold steady.

In Doyle's sculptures, the tiny houses, rendered in 1:43 scale or smaller, are always in danger: frequently, they are crumbling or partially destroyed; sometimes the houses are sinking into the earth in a great concavity; occasionally, they are already completely subsumed; and often, they are flung into the air or about to fall from great heights. For example, in the sculpture *Tremble* a once-beautiful home, painted in seafoam green, is bookended by two strong trees sitting on a foundation that looks anything but sturdy. The house is all alone without neighbours. The vulnerable structure is surrounded by a narrow ring of grass, and large chunks of earth appear to be in the process of falling into a void. A miniature man in a dark red jacket and khaki pants reaches for a tiny woman wearing an apron over a pink dress on the porch; she is holding on to a pillar for support. It is not clear that their hands will meet. It looks possible the man will fall to his death. The piece further pushes the viewer to question if it would even matter if these two manage to connect with each other. The house and the whole little world we see here feels destined to collapse, to crumble into a pile of snarlings at the bottom of a bell jar creating a small puff of dust that will momentarily rise and then settle into a portrait of nothingness.

Some of Doyle's sculptures appear to explode rather than implode. In *A Corrective* a golden-yellow house sits in a perfect circle surrounded by debris. The broken fragments and ruined objects that wreathe around the house seem to be the exact quantity of materials that would be produced from an explosion set in the heart of the home. A small human figure—a blonde girl in a pink dress—stands on the lawn with her head bowed inside a halo of destruction. She occu-

Figure 7. Thomas Doyle, Tremble (2012)

pies a middle zone between the safety of home and the rubbish-laden chaos of the world. The figure of the white child, so often used to signify the promise of the future, is here either what is to come or what remains of something broken or destroyed. In Doyle's work any idea of innocence is irrelevant and useless. He shows how we are all

Figure 8. Thomas Doyle, Tremble (detail, 2012)

Figure 9. Thomas Doyle, A Corrective (2010)

caught up in this precarious moment, how we are all implicated and affected by the multiplying catastrophes of our times.

A prominent theme in Doyle's art is the creep of nature over human civilization after a disaster. In these spaces, the garden has gone feral and the forest has run rampant; nature is actively eating everything in its path, including human homes. We can imagine that these homes once—both symbolically and concretely—provided order and protection. For example, in the work *Beset*, we see a house and a group of people, who appear to represent a family—its inhabitants—who have been almost fully swallowed by greenery. We do not know how long the natural world has been gnawing at this dwelling, but we do know it is no longer fit for human habitation, and that the people, now half-vegetal, no longer seem fit to be housed either. The scene has a strange air about it, an image of paralysis, where folks just stopped living as they had been and let the dirt, vines, and moss devour them and their whole world. It is a disaster in slow motion.

Many of Doyle's sculptures are spherical and enclosed in glass, which creates a distance between the scene and the viewer, but para-

Figure 10. Thomas Doyle, Beset (2013)

doxically draws us in. As Walter Benjamin writes about toys, "the smallest and most exiting" are "those you can't touch because they're behind glass."[31] Glass creates split worlds by sectioning off what's behind, while at the same time invites looking in, which can take the form of either voyeurism or witnessing. Glass has a magical property: it steals attention. For evidence, just watch a shopper walk a street lined with stores, and then observe how the items displayed behind shop windows are made all the more alluring, sometimes lit-

erally halting the shopper in their tracks and coaxing them to consider what is behind the glass.

Miniatures, like glass, work as lures for looking and invitations for study. A dollhouse, for example, can inspire the contemplation of all matter of homes we might have lived in, admired, or even noticed for one reason or another. When glass and miniatures combine, attention and contemplation are magnified. This dual process interrupts the feeling of a normal flow of time, and simultaneously makes time and space more mesmerizing. The glass containers and the small spherical worlds they hold make us aware of fragility, and how little effort it would take to smash this small world of model characters and their fictive lives, and by extension the larger American lives so many of us keep trying to live.

UNSLEEPING DESIRE OF AMERICA

James Casebere captures the shift from suburban malaise to suburban anxiety in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis in his photographic series *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY)*. The series is composed of tabletop models that are set against composite digital backgrounds and then photographed. He created nine model homes as a start, then quickly made many more, building out in all directions in order to mimic the effects of suburban and exurban sprawl. The models were originally handcrafted, and then as the series grew, they were made with the help of a computer program that smoothed out some of the rough edges, although they were still based on the original design. The model houses are made from simple stuff—wood, cardboard, plaster, and cheesecloth—but in the photographs they appear almost immaterial, ethereal. Actual Dutchess County residents would likely recognize their neighbourhoods in the images, but any realism Casebere conveys is affective, rather than material. These models are designed to look like models; they are dreamlike architectural rhymes, but not miniaturized replicas of the buildings they represent. For Casebere, "it's the gesture that counts, not the realism."[32]

In these photographs of Dutchess County made phantasmagoric, we never see humans, or any other creatures for that matter, but somehow the exterior of the homes (all we ever see) are exceptionally tidy and the lawns immaculately maintained, almost perversely so. The absence of people despite the evidence of human activity—lights in windows, burning fires, a bicycle leaning against a wall—creates a disquieting space. Casebere's images are portraits of what the novelist Thomas Wolfe calls the "unsleeping desire of America," which is shuttered behind facades, lonely and secret.[33] Collectively, the images produce an out-of-body and out-of-time experience, a kind of vertigo, that lets thinking loose, but also makes thoughts feel unmoored, like the fuzziness that comes with a bout of insomnia, or the space between dreaming and waking.

It is not possible to tell that the skies are added in post-production, but there is something about the artificialness of the cosmos that matches the cookie-cutterness of houses. In Casebere's little suburb, the light is often soft, like the light of morning or evening. Although, occasionally, all is candescent, as if a lamp was turned on in an interrogation room. The scenes are candy-sweet, but they create a feeling of emotional isolation and longing; this is a place where intimacy is perpetually deferred. In Casebere's *Dutchess County*, the suburban imaginary is on full display, stealing a bit from both the urban and the rural, without being quite either one. Everything conforms to a familiar pattern, but the typical nature of the scene feels exaggerated, and too ordinary not to be something else, too. Plus, it is important to remember that normalness is always sinister in a violent country.

In *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY), #1* the homes appear to bob like swimmers in a sea of green. The houses and streets are neatly ordered, but they are set on the rolling hills characteristic of the Hudson Valley, a place where human efforts towards symmetry ride on the waves of an ancient topography. A vigorous docility colours the atmosphere; the only hint of movement is a light grey car on the top of a hill, just on the edge of escape from the neighbourhood near a dense clump of trees. We cannot see if the vehicle has a driver, and it seems equally likely that the car will head off to the

Figure 11. James Casebere, Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #1 (2009)

city or the countryside, or that it might simply roll down the hill, a ghostly vessel controlled only by gravity.

Casebere's series shows the waning of an exuberant American way of life in delicate hues. With cheery colours, like those found in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, he creates an uncanny landscape filled with McMansion style homes and grass as lush as cashmere. In *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #4*, the faintest rainbow graces the bright sky, a soft echo to the colours of the homes it arcs above. Meanwhile, the same grey car occupies the same grey space of road, while down the hill an American flag snuggles its pole, barely showing itself, and a couple of sturdy-looking wooden swing sets signify the desire for a future that is healthy and fun. The neighbourhood is an upper-middle class dream; it is not a place of extreme affluence, but a place where an above-ground pool is fine enough.

In *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY), #8*, the neighbourhood looks as if it sprung from the edge of a ruler. There's a small, well-maintained road flanked by sidewalks separated by a slender

Figure 12. James Casebere, Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #4 (2010)

stripe of grass, while more gentle stripes, which appear to have been created by a lawnmower, corduroy the landscape. Already-made driveways sit adjacent to lots waiting for homes to take shape: a small portrait of an America ever hopeful for ongoingness. Snuggled next to homes, satellite dishes signify the possibility of news and stories from elsewhere, a technological promise of wide connection without leaving the living room. The yards and wooded area just beyond the development are dotted with trees sweatered in the red, orange, and yellow shades of fall, while windmills are lined up like toy soldiers at the perimeter, stilled, but coiled and hungry for energy.

Casebere's focus is on the neighbourhood as a whole, and individual homes are important chiefly for their conformity to the overall aesthetic. It is important to note that the houses are not identical; they reflect the owners' desires, but in their subtle differences we see a lack of originality, or at least an embrace of the concessions to the genre: suburban home. The houses seem to share a reserved sense of

Figure 13. James Casebere, Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #8 (2010)

belonging, as if they've made some kind of pact, while at the same time concealing a secret, separate life. Each image of this oversaturated landscape depicts an alternate reality that we know as our own. Not a place where, as Bachelard writes, "the house's entire being would open up, faithful to our own becoming," but a place where things feel closed, where we are on the outside, not even able to look in, our futures becoming something else.[34] Yet in our outsideness, there is a lingering feeling that we were once inside, or that we somehow belong in there, by the hearth; as if we have been accidently locked out, but for a very long time. Or maybe the feeling is closer to an amnesia where we can only remember our childhood homes, not where we sleep now.

NOT A SUBTLE TRUTH

At first glance, artworks created in small scale can seduce us with an invitation to mastery that taps into our formative years spent controlling toys and creating worlds for our dolls and action figures to inhabit. Miniatures can invite nostalgic feelings of childhood that provoke memories of malleable experiences, pretensions to innocence, and a sense of protection. While the sweet, lulling iterations of miniatures get the most popular attention in our culture of distraction, there is a whole other universe of miniature artworks that demand thinking and feeling on different registers. These are the kinds of artworks I've been concerned with in this essay.

Smith, Doyle, and Casebere show that a miniaturized scene can represent an enormous amount of a social world paused in time. As Susan Stewart argues in *On Longing*: "A reduction in dimensions does not produce a corresponding reduction in significance."[35] Miniatures, like art works in general, can conjure a feeling of the times in which we live. As Stewart writes, they have the ability to amplify time by "means of a miniaturization of its significance," where "the miniature is the notion of the moment and moment's consequences."[36] The miniature artworks considered in this essay, which I call small elegies for America, have a double capacity: they cause a reckoning with a particular American middle-class longing for the past while simultaneously inspiring a drive to pre-emptively mourn dreamed futures, which already feel foreclosed. A theme that they share is that innocence is not a useful category for thinking through these precarious times. We are all implicated in this moment. They ask any of us interpolated by the feelings of anomie they provoke to contemplate: how did we get here? And then, hopefully, lead to thinking about how we might live differently to avoid more of this fate. The homes, neighbourhoods, and small-town geographies in these works convey the fact that much of American life is empty and deliriously lonely: this is not a subtle truth.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1. Michael Paul Smith, “The 1959 El Camino in Profile,” *Elgin Park*, 2011.

Figure 2. Michael Paul Smith, “Research Building Parking Lot 1958,” *Elgin Park*, 2009.

Figure 3. Michael Paul Smith, “Another Giant Head,” *Elgin Park*, a replica of the artist’s childhood home, 2011.

Figure 4. Alice Pasquini, *The Unchanging World*, photographed by Alessandro Sgarito.

Figure 5. Michael Paul Smith, "55 Oldsmobile with Bungalow," *Elgin Park*, 2008.

Figure 6. Michael Paul Smith, "Moved to Elgin Park," *Elgin Park*, 2019.

Figure 7. Thomas Doyle, *Tremble*, 2012.

Figure 8. Thomas Doyle, *Tremble* detail, 2012.

Figure 9. Thomas Doyle, *A Corrective*, 2010.

Figure 10. Thomas Doyle, *Beset*, 2013.

Figure 11. James Casebere, *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #1*, 2009.

Figure 12. James Casebere, *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #4*, 2010.

Figure 13. James Casebere, *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #8*, 2010.

NOTES

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (1994: 14).↩
2. Davy and Dixon, "What Makes a Miniature?" (2019: 7).↩
3. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (2004: 180).↩
4. Lindsey A. Freeman, "Catastrophic Snow Globes as Oneiric and Mnemonic Gadgets," (2016:1).↩
5. Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, (1992: 54).↩
6. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, (1994:150).↩
7. John Mack, *The Art of Small Things*, (2008:1).↩
8. Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, (1992: 57).↩
9. On "spookiness," see: Danny Yourd (2015) *The Man Behind the Mysterious Miniature Town.*↩
10. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (2002: 416).↩
11. Originally Smith did intend to make a model of Sewickley, but over time he realized it was the essence of a time and a place that he was af-

ter, not a particular town. See: Gail K. Ellison, "Welcome to Elgin Park," (2011: 10).↩

12. For more on "victory culture," see Tom Englehardt's *The End of Victory Culture*, 1995.↩

13. Ameya Pendse, (2013) "Crafting Scenes of Iconic America," Flickr blog.↩

14. Henry Luce, "The American Century," (1941: 61-65); Danny Yourd (2015) *The Man Behind the Mysterious Miniature Town.*↩

15. The model of Smith's childhood home was part of the exhibit *Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities* at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. June 7 – September 18, 2011.↩

16. Smith documented the process on his Flickr page: https://www.flickr.com/photos/24796741@N05/5508211698/in/album-72157604247242338/. Accessed 5 September 2019.↩

17. Alice Pasquini, "The Unchanging World," art show, January 19 – February 17, 2018, Philobiblon Gallery, Rome, Italy. www.alicepasquini.com/alice-pasquini-solo-show.↩

18. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (1994: 15).↩

19. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," (1919: 236).↩

20. Most of the model cars Smith uses in his photography are from either the Danbury Mint or the Franklin Mint; both companies are known for their quality and staunch attention to detail.↩

21. Gail Ellison, *Elgin Park*, (2011: 19).↩

22. Smith does occasionally photograph himself with his dioramas, but only in order to show their scale and constructedness.↩

23. On how dioramas reorder our relationships to the senses and make their spaces appear habitable, I am indebted to Kimberly Mair's essay "Transitory Formation and the Education of the Senses," *The Senses in Society* 7:1 (2012: 53 – 71), especially, p. 68.↩

24. Danny Yourd, (2015), *The Man Behind a Mysterious Miniature Town.*↩

25. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, (2002: 6).↩

26. Neil Genzlinger, (2018), "Michael Paul Smith, 67, Founder of a Beloved Imaginary Town, Dies."↩

27. The section title is taken from a comment made in an interview I watched with Thomas Doyle from Hunger TV (2013). The video is no longer available online, but was accessed by me on December 13, 2015.↩
28. Roland Barthes (1975), *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text*.↩
29. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, (1999: 185).↩
30. Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles, Spheres 1: Microspherology*, (2011: 57).↩
31. Walter Benjamin, “Berlin Toy Tour II,” (2014: 48).↩
32. Rima Yamazaki (2011), *James Casebere and Landscape with Houses*.↩
33. Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River*, (2016: 536).↩
34. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (1994: 14).↩
35. Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, (1992: 46).↩
36. Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, (1992: 46).↩