



Christmas At Home, 2020

Magic in Miniature

The Doll's House Art Gallery, Macclesfield

Tom England



It's the winter of 2020, and the North West is locked down. Many are stuck at home on furlough, or have lost work, or have simply jumped ship. Children have been learning from home – or haven't been. The evenings feel longer than usual, and darker, and colder.

On buses, in shops, people scrutinise each other, checking who's wearing a mask, or socially distancing, or hand sanitising. Six months into the pandemic, fence-peering and curtain-twitching has become a competitive sport. Families squabble over the small print of the ever-changing rules, what a *bubble* really means, over the endless negotiations about what makes each other *feel comfortable*, whether it's all, in fact, bollocks.

When they can come to a compromise,

they gather in yards or gardens, around fire pits, clasp mulled wine or brews, eye-measuring distances between chairs, breath rising in swirls in the freezing air, trying to think of news to share which isn't Covid-related. More often they don't bother meeting up at all.

Driving the fifteen miles down the A34 from Macclesfield to Levenshulme to see my mother never used to feel like a chore. Now, plunging into the darkness is like readying for a trial. All families have challenges at different times – but this different. No-one I know smiles much anymore. No-one has anything to say, or to share. It's hard to think more than a couple of weeks in advance, to make plans. The speculation is that Christmas *will be cancelled*. Maybe that would be a bloody relief.

One evening, though, it's different. My mother's eyes light up as she tells me about... well, what was it exactly?

A gallery of doll's houses? No.

A gallery decorated like a doll's house? No.

An exhibition of paintings of doll's houses? No.

Something else, something marvellous, hidden down a normal Levenshulme street, a window of magic, glowing amidst the darkness and the cold.

And all at once it's the summer of 2022. While Covid is still bouncing around, the North West is like a different place. In spite of the rising energy prices, the rolling

political crises, the looming economic recession, there is a sense of hope and possibility again. *The Doll's House Art Gallery* has now moved from Levenshulme to Macclesfield, and continues to provide magic in miniature to passers-by. Lovingly designed, maintained and curated by Lisa Fitzgerald, the gallery exhibits a series of solo-artist shows, group exhibitions, and open-calls in miniature, displayed inside a gorgeously repurposed doll's house, in the window of a Park Lane weaver's cottage.

Fitzgerald is driven both by a love of all things miniature, and a genuine passion for community and connecting people. The gallery, she is quick to point out, was

probably the only accessible cultural venue in Manchester during that winter lockdown. Lockdown created distance in even the most tight-knit communities. Homes became prisons. Neighbours became strangers. But the gallery, like those felt tip rainbows displayed in windows the summer before, created connections, sparked conversations, both on the streets and online.

The 1:12 scale of the space invites endless possibilities for playing with perspective, light, and colour. Heather Skowood's 2021 installation, *Minimalist Meditations*, includes finely crafted wire sculptures, which are at once delicate, but cast looming shadows over the tiny figures. In Becca Smith's 2022

installation *Intramural Growth*, monstrous tree trunks rise through the floors and ceilings, surrounded by prints of paintings of Macclesfield forest, recalling Hockney's vivid 2006 paintings of Wolgate woods. Though tiny, they seem somehow oversized and immersive, in rich reds and greens. Quite simply, such installations dazzle and delight, combining an artistic approach which is both fun but also exciting.

Fitzgerald's dedication to community art means that for most of the summer, the gallery has been showing work by members of *Macclesfield Community ArtSpace*, a charity run in Sutton Mill. Over a series of 'Make-it Mondays,' artists from a range of backgrounds and skill-levels created pieces in miniature for display between July and September. The gallery's motto claims *Art is vital for meaningful life on Earth* – and art as an action, as an experience, is at the heart of the gallery.

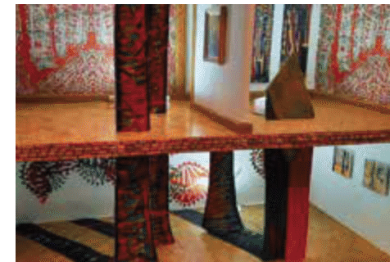
Perhaps it was that sense of a world becoming smaller, more confined, which first found resonance in Fitzgerald's project. While different artists provide the backdrops from exhibition to exhibition, her tiny doll-figures are ever-present – often with their backs to the viewer, or preoccupied with something out of sight, beyond the walls.

And similarly, maybe it's our hunger for magic, illusion and playfulness which allows *The Doll's House Art Gallery* to keep sparking the imagination of its curator, the artists, and its visitors. Peering in the window at this tiny marvel as the traffic rumbles down Park Lane, you feel like you have stumbled upon something special, something secret. You half expect to spot a Borrower pacing the gallery floor, or Tinkerbell frowning and stroking her chin in front of one of the paintings. It is an invitation to look with a child's eyes again, to believe in magic, in fairies. Like all art should.

Jon Turner's *House of Curiosities* is showing at *The Doll's House Art Gallery* until 20th November 2022.



Minimalist Meditations,
Heather
Skowood, 2021



Intramural Growth, Becca Smith, 2022



ArtSpace Takeover, 2022