

## Shooting the Angel in the House: Corrine May Botz' Photographs

BY COURTNEY BAKER

Photographer Corinne May Botz shows me her prints in the living room of her Brooklyn apartment—a space appropriate for the images of domestic life that are her work's focus. The relaxed environment, pierced only occasionally by her neighbor's operatic vocal endeavors, is a welcome contrast to the busy world outside. Botz, a New Jersey native, recently moved to New York from Baltimore, where she completed her undergraduate degree at Maryland Institute, College of Art. "Baltimore was a great city to go to art school in," she admits, "but I knew I would eventually end up in New York."

Fortunately, her Brooklyn home is nowhere near as chaotic as those depicted in her *Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* series. Begun in Baltimore, the project eventually turned into a seven-year exploration of the complex and troubling relationships between gender, space, and mortality. Her images attempt to make sense of those relationships by straightening them into logical, domestic narratives. The *Nutshell* photographs depict the quotidian details of the scale-models on which they are based—cans of produce on a kitchen shelf, a hastily discarded pair of shoes, the wear of a cheap linoleum floor. Through her lens these clues to a murder are transformed into documents of a life.

Botz set herself a tall task when she decided to photograph the tiny crime scene dioramas. Created in the 1930s and '40s by the wealthy and eccentric Frances Glessner Lee, the models are themselves fascinating objects of study. Some critics and reviewers have seemingly become as mesmerized as was Botz when she first discovered them in the Baltimore Medical Examiner's Office in 1997. Her photographs and extensive research on the models and their maker are featured in *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*, her monograph published last year by Monacelli Press. They have also brought her to the attention of unexpected publications, including *Entertainment Weekly* and *Dollhouse Miniatures Monthly*. Botz takes this in stride, perhaps content to find fellowship in a morbid obsession. "Since one of my main intents was to present Frances Glessner Lee's life and work, I'm thrilled with the attention she has received."

In her new photographs of haunted houses and agoraphobics, however, it is Botz's signature perspective and eye for composition that take center stage. The move from the *Nutshell Studies* to haunted houses is a logical one. "I

became interested in the idea of ghosts while photographing the crime scene models," Botz explains. "The models are frozen at the time of death, and I asked myself what would happen after the corpse was removed and the case solved. My answer was that the space would be haunted by a ghost. The idea of what the ghost is trying to communicate, and how it's attached to a certain place, is of great interest to me." One indeed notices both the absence of human bodies to arrest a viewer's attention, and the lack of visible evidence that would explain the supernatural significance of these haunted spaces. Only the architecture and furniture suggest the existence—past or present—of human life.





In *The Nutshell Studies* Botz often employed curious points of view, such as the low-angle perspective suggestive of a child's vantage point (*Unpapered Bedroom*) and the omniscient view-from-above (*Three-Room Dwelling*). She also proved adept at manipulating the depth of field in such a way that one wonders if an essential clue is being kept from us, just beyond the horizon of our gaze. Botz's interest in narrative is most evident at moments when viewers feel eager for an explanation or a suitable story. "I think the photographs [of mine] that elicit a narrative interpretation are the most successful. I don't see my photographs moving away from narrative because this is how I engage with the world. I'm extremely interested in point of view and storytelling." The images of haunted houses, indeed, reflect that interest, incessantly inviting the gnawing question, "What happened here?", while refusing to offer an easy—if any—solution.

Above: Corrine May Botz, *Parsonage Parlor (doll)*, (from the series *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*), 1998-2004, c-print, 40 x 50 inches (courtesy of Bellwether Gallery, New York)

Opposite: Corrine May Botz, *Farnsworth House, Gettysburg, PA* (from the series *Haunted House*), 2003, c-print, 30 x 40 inches (courtesy of Bellwether Gallery, New York)

Left: Corrine May Botz, *Blue Bedroom* (from the series *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*), 1999-2004, c-print, 40 x 50 inches (courtesy of Bellwether Gallery, New York)





Corinne May Botz, *Robyn*, 2005, c-print, 30 x 40 inches (courtesy of Bellwether Gallery, New York)

Botz's photographs can also be disorienting. Our sense of perspective, and often of reality itself, is destabilized. With no bodies as reference, the spaces pictured in the haunted house series can sometimes be mistaken for another crime scene diorama. This problem of scale first emerged in the *Nutshell* images. In discussing those images, Botz notes, "Most of my exhibition prints are large-scale—the biggest one in the show is seven feet wide by five feet tall. The photographs have a different impact when they're big. It's disorienting and sometimes difficult to tell if you're looking at a real room or a dollhouse." This magnification is not without deeper significance to critiques of gender and art making—the implications of which Botz is keenly aware. "By enlarging the female doll victims to a larger-than-life size I render them overtly visible. The photographs also take on a relationship with painting because of their large scale."

In her most recent series of works, which are in fact portraits of agoraphobics, disorientation takes on yet another meaning as the outside world is transformed into imminent threat. "I wanted to continue investigating gender and space," she explains, "and agoraphobia appealed to me as a very specific and interesting way of exploring this since eighty-five percent of agoraphobics are women. The agoraphobe has an extreme and conflicted relationship to everyday space that most people take for granted." These

portraits, along with portraits of her mother, her sister, and children at a camp specially designed for those with *Xeroderma Pigmentosum*, an allergy to sunlight, all convey a frankness and an intimacy that make the mundane appear mysterious and at times a little scary. "Portraiture is interesting because it involves the concerns and desires of both photographer and subject." Photographing agoraphobic women presented some unique concerns that affected Botz's process. "I find most of my volunteers over the internet. When arriving at an agoraphobic person's house to photograph her, the act of entering her space is an intrusion, a violation of the privacy she maintains. As many of the agoraphobic people I've met are also uncomfortable being looked at, the boundaries and conflicting needs inherent in taking a portrait are heightened. I have begun developing more extended relationships and a sense of trust with my subjects, often returning to photograph them multiple times."

As in each of her recent projects, Botz seeks "a way to incorporate her subjects' stories about selves and space." In doing so, she makes the familiar look strange and the strange look remarkably—and comfortingly—plain. ■

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