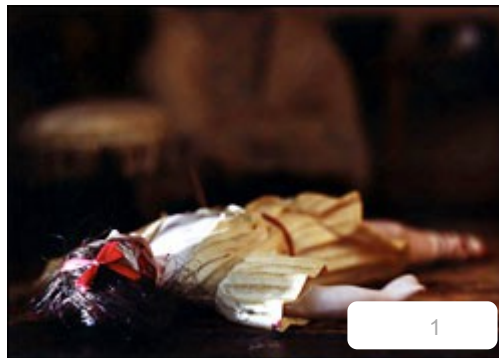




# CSI in a Doll's House and the Contagion of Obsessiveness

BY VINCE ALETTI

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*Botz's Parsonage Parlor (2004)*

*photo: Courtesy of Bellwether Gallery*

Corinne May Botz photographs domestic-crime scenes: dead bodies, spattered blood, overturned furniture, uncanny stillness. Like any good investigator, in the course of nosing around for clues, she records each scene from a number of angles—some quite cramped, others oddly aerial. But she has an unusual advantage: These bedrooms, kitchens, garages, and parlors are all miniaturized sets constructed in the 1940s and '50s by a rich, eccentric criminologist named Frances Glessner Lee. Lee, who founded Harvard's Department of Legal Medicine in 1936, based these 18 dollhouse-size re-creations on actual crimes, and intended them to be teaching tools for detectives—in her words, "as exercises in observing and evaluating indirect evidence." She called her precisely crafted tableaux the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death and invested them with an obsessiveness that feels at once inspired and demented.

That obsessiveness seems to be contagious. Since discovering the scale models nine years ago in the Baltimore Medical Examiner's Office, where they're still used to train police officers, Botz has produced more than 500 color photographs. Twenty-three of those pictures are at Bellwether; another 100 or so are in Botz's terrific new book, *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* (Monacelli Press). All of them are compellingly creepy, if only because of their almost suffocating but utterly matter-of-fact intimacy with death. Like Laurie Simmons and David

Levinthal, Botz makes the most of her material's tendency to seesaw between fact and fiction, believability and sham. But in her case, she's had access to an extraordinary readymade already packed with Hitchcockian narrative and enough decorative details to fill a vintage *House & Garden*. Botz became so familiar with these tiny spaces that her pictures exude a homeyness all the more disconcerting when you notice the bloodstains on the rug and the body under the bedcovers. She hasn't just preserved Lee's meticulous mix of primness and voyeurism, she's given it a whole new life after death.

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