Miniature Artists Explain Why They Love Making Tiny Worlds

Alice Bartlett, nail art, 2012, Color photograph, 6.7 x 9 inches. All images and mini statements courtesy apexart

Tiny people perch on the tips of artist Alice Bartlett's felted fingernails. She's one of the creators featured in apexart's Feel Big Live Small, an exhibition that celebrates the art of miniatures and dioramas. From Citizen Science's Breaking Bad-inspired Lego playset, to Kendall Murray's dreamworlds encased in metal compacts, the showcase focuses on our "fascination with all things small," and delves into the technical challenges of crafting such compact worlds.

So, why work at such a small scale? Apexart asked each of the artists in the show to share a morsel of insight into their processes and motivations.
Matthew Albanese, Dark Zone, 2014

"My obsession with miniatures began at a young age. Playing with toys, action figures, and miniature replicas was an early vehicle to unlocking my imagination. It always seemed to me that the miniature was the most effective solution to experiencing visions of worlds and new perspectives that otherwise could not be achieved in life. As a photographer my dioramas are simply a means to an end. They give me the ultimate ability to control my environments while satisfying a need to simply work with my hands. I approach my work with a final vision of a photographic landscape. Capturing moments of atmosphere, light, and perspective, my images become an orchestrated series of miniature events that culminate through the lens of my camera, deceptively evoking the sublime forces of Mother Nature."
Citizen Brick, Super Lab Playset, 2013, Lego and ink (detail)

"For us at Citizen Brick the question of 'why the miniature,' never really existed. Our personal artistic practices had been pockmarked by work in miniatures and hyper detailed or specialized cultural ephemera, but the epiphany came when Joe Truplia figured out how Lego was printing on their product and that we could too. Custom Lego became the perfect medium to blend our interests in ephemera, printmaking, pop culture, toys, complicating preexisting cultures and signs, etc., and we could do it in a way that would access and delight an audience outside your typical gallery going public. It became a way to side step elements of an artworld conversation and see a different kind of artistic impact. Also, we love Lego and it's small."
Thomas Doyle

Thomas Doyle, Proxy, 2013, Mixed media, 12 x 12 x 5 inches

"In my experience, working at a small scale invites viewers into a personal, intimate relationship with the piece. At the same time, the very nature of small scales keeps us at a distance, unable to fully 'enter' the work. I am interested in mystery, and absurdity, and wonder, and I often juxtapose opposing elements and scenarios to warp and upend reality. Working in a small scale gives me the opportunity to create something that is both 'real' and 'unreal' at the same time. Conversely, the creation of small worlds gives us the illusion of control. In a world that grows ever more faster and chaotic, in a world in which we are bombarded with imagery, artworks in small scales allow us a place of retreat. where time has stopped."
Dante Brebner, *Underwater*, 2010 (detail)

"If you live in an environment of constantly increasing information, action, speed, and density, you can focus people’s attention in one of two ways: by going bigger... like with an explosion... or by going small. Put the world behind a tiny frame/screen (handheld technology perhaps) and suddenly, by focusing smaller and blocking out the imagined dead weight of the world around us, we can manage to take in even more information, do more, feel bigger, lighter, move faster... even to a pathological degree. The tiny scale and concealed presentation of my work appeals possibly to a similar kind of focus, but with more conspicuous physical effort and other antidotes. It cannot be viewed casually, easily, or all at once. It asks to be seen in person, for the viewer to slow down, look again... all with no apparent payback. No questions answered or narratives clarified. It is an invitation to pause, look with intent and with uncertainty, synthesizing pathways through these little worlds from one's own associations... and take note of the space we occupy while exploring a space we cannot."
Joe Fig

"My work explores the creative process and the spaces where art is made. I want to bring the viewer inside the artist’s studio. To share in the experience of a studio visit, a privilege most do not get. Ironically working in a miniature scale allows me to easily present a large environment. It allows the viewer a God’s eye perspective. There’s the sense of voyeurism or of reality TV, Big Brother, or The Truman Show. Miniatures evoke a feeling of wonder or awe. It’s like Gulliver’s Travels. It suspends reality taking you out of your surroundings and brings you into a new world."
"As a jeweler and insect preparator at the American Museum of Natural History, I'm surrounded at all times with tiny, important things that need special attention. From dollhouses to artworks to research collections, miniatures trigger a particular kind of protective impulse in me. I want to combine them, bring them into a world with its own story, and see what kind of sensations are created. Suicide beetle, Pooping beetle, Grand Victorian Lady beetle, Roadkill beetle- these twists on simple doll-style dioramas really get into people's heads, and I love that. Whether you're scared of or repulsed by insects, seeing them do something entirely un-insectlike seems to strike a nerve."
Kendal Murray

Kendal Murray, Esteem, Dream, 2012, Mixed media assemblage in metal compact, 8.5 x 8.2 x 9 cm

"My work with miniatures came from my interest in the role fantasy plays in the creation of the 'self,' in psychological experiences such as memory and dreaming, and the different ways those experiences are embodied and given meaning. The miniature is used as a metaphor for our inner lives where fantasies of "selfhood" are enacted through dream-like situations. The dream externalized in the form of a miniature. We long to explore worlds represented in miniature, but are denied physical access. So we project ourselves into those scenarios, identifying with the personalities of the tiny characters, reading the implied relationships between each of the characters and investing our own desires, into the pleasurable outcomes of the stories being told."
Tracey Snelling

Tracey Snelling, The Parade Ends, 2012, Wood, paint, charcoal, lights, lcd screen, media player, speaker, transformer, 21 x 24 x 24 inches

"I often choose to work in small scale because it allows me to capture an entire place or location. It lets the viewer become a voyeur, with permission to look into windows and behind doors that normally aren’t acceptable for viewing. I never build to scale; rather, I eye the location or my sketch of a place and translate it organically, often mixing different scales for effect. At times, I will combine small scale with large scale in installations to explore the idea of what is real, and how reality is ultimately subjective."

Lori Nix and Kathleen Gerber

"I consider myself a faux landscape photographer. My partner Kathleen Gerber and I build meticulously detailed model environments, and then I photograph the results. Everyday materials like foam, cardboard, paint, and glue are transformed into believable spaces. Working in miniature allows me the freedom to construct a world of my choosing, and tell a story of what might be."
Feel Big Live Small
organized by Elan Smithee
March 19- May 16, 2015

Lori Nix & Kathleen Gerber, Observatory, 2013

Feel Big Live Small will be on display at apexart until May 16, 2015