

LYLE RYE: DOLLHOUSES AS AN IMAGINATIVE SPACE FOR CREATIVE PLAY

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Lyla Rye is an artist who works and resides in Toronto. She closely examines familial relationships in many of the works she has created since the birth of her daughter, Lena. Much of Rye's family life is imbedded into the work she produces. In the video *Byte* (2003) Rye is singing into her daughter's mouth (fig. 1). This intimate interaction soon becomes shaken when the infant bites Rye's lip. Here, the artist is exploring the relationship between mother and daughter, while questioning the balance of power between the two. Another video that encapsulates Lena in a natural state is *Carnal* (2003) (fig. 2). In this particular video, Lena who was four at the time is seen licking ice cream off a spoon. The focus is on what is happening, with the camera closing in on the young girl's glowing face. These particular videos are not of special events. Rather the works reveal Rye's daughter in the activity of everyday family life.

The installation *Young Girl at an Open Window* (2004) features Rye's daughter interacting with a dollhouse (fig. 3). What first attracted me to Rye's work was this particular piece, as it reminded me of my own childhood. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to interview Rye over the phone. This conversation was most helpful for my analysis. In talking with the artist I came to understand more fully the particular context and significant of *Young Girl at an Open Window*. The objective of this essay is to integrate what I learned from Rye with my own response to this video and research into the history of the dollhouse and child's play.

Dollhouses in the late 19th century were built primarily for children, unlike those dating back to the 16th century that were adult collectibles.¹ Following this later adaptation of the dollhouse as a child's toy, the house in Rye's installation was built by her partner for this daughter, Lena who was five-years old at the time. Rye explains that the inspiration was drawn from visiting a school in Toronto, where they had plain dollhouses on view. The idea of the unpainted dollhouse was to permit children to envision their own fantasy, thus allowing them to develop a sense of their own imagination through play.

In the video, Lena is shown through the glass-less windows at the back of the dollhouse, where play and creativity can meet. As Rye explained to me, the dollhouse is not only where Lena plays but is part of the household, a place for craft activity involving the whole family. Rye's father made miniature furniture for the house out of wood, and Lena repurposed some of her own things for the house, a project that she continued for years. Therefore, it is not just a dollhouse for play but a collective experience in creating the house itself. There are many ways a child can interpret the dollhouse. It can be a place of play where imagination meets a narrative, perhaps about domesticity or even as Rye puts it an "ideal world where animals and humans may co-exist". In many aspects the dollhouse can also be a running parallel of our own world, which is the case with this particular dollhouse. Some of the furniture resembles the real thing and is made from wood, while there are other pieces assembled from Lego. This idea of mimicking

the real, goes back to the 18th and early 19th centuries in England, where architects would create these “baby houses” which were evidently led to believe to be copies of real houses.²

Rye has framed the setting of her daughter playing with the dollhouse, from the vantage point of a still image. The smooth complexion of Lena’s face is similar to the delicate complexion of the girls one can see in the works of the Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), who often depicted girls in a staged like domestic interior Rye has paintings such as Vermeer’s *Girl Reading Letter at an Open Window* (1657) or *Girl Asleep at the Table* (1657) in mind when she conceptualized this video.³ The only parameter for Lena while Rye filmed the video was that she plays from the back of the house only. This allows the viewer to gaze at the daughter (although not fully) as we do when viewing Vermeer’s women in the private sphere of the home. This arrangement however is unusual and provokes various questions. Was the intention of placing Lena in back of the dollhouse a way to suggest that children no matter how they try will always be outside the realm of the make believe? Or, was Lena looking in at the small dollhouse form behind as a means of emphasizing how play makes the child feel more adult-like in size? It is unclear as to why exactly Rye wanted her daughter to be placed like this. Perhaps it was a means of engaging the viewer, as we are to pause and speculate on this arrangement and question why this is the case.

In the article *The Dollhouse as Ludic Space*, Frances Armstrong, discusses how the dollhouse is not so much a ludic space but a glamorized storage area, since almost all dollhouses keep children firmly outside (only allowing their hands to interact with the dollhouse).⁴ The idea that Armstrong brings to light is similar to how Rye wanted her daughter to engage with the dollhouse. The interaction of play creates a contrast between her life-size daughter and the dollhouse that is miniature. Within this context one can understand how, Rye is also exploring the perception of space. As a viewer we are inside the dollhouse, a part of her daughter’s engagement with the toys and the house itself. Perhaps we are even the young girl’s toys, waiting to be played with. In our looking into the dollhouse we become small like the miniatures and the partial image of Lena from our vantage point is large.

As Lena interacts with the dollhouse, the viewer can see that notice the young girl is creating a narrative. This is emphasized by the girl’s moving lips. Rye has chosen to silence this out because she did not want the video to be just about her daughter’s fantasy, she wanted it to be more encompassing. This invitation to play as we watch Lena playing is accentuated by the girl’s activity as a life force. Lena’s figure is highly saturated in contrast with the dollhouse. Only when she picks up a miniature object does the thing that she touches become saturated. Lena enlivens different elements of the dollhouse through her touch, essentially giving life to that object and encouraging us to do likewise.

As Rye explained to me she wanted to also play with the idea of time and space in the real world as compared to the imaginative space of the dollhouse. In this respect time becomes disjunctive, as in the excerpts in the video where her daughter is at two places at once. This disruption alters our preconceived ideas of a traditional dollhouse and how it can be controlled to teaches to children, girls in particular, about domesticity. Other subtle incongruities contribute to this rupture, for example, incongruities for

example, the dirty dishes in the sink to make the viewer think and interpret (fig. 4). Certainly, Rye is contrasting the ideals of traditional domesticity represented by a dollhouse with the realities of daily life. Susan Stewart, author of *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, explains that “the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its “use value” transformed into the infinite time of reverie.”⁵ With this in mind we can understand how Rye’s *Young Girl at an Open Window* explores the space of a dollhouse within a contemporary context, and by doing so links the “real” world with the miniature world. Rye has created an idealized space that is altered into a fantasy space through play. The artist’s outlook in this miniature creation of the dollhouse is the opposite of the traditional dollhouse that was created to replicate wealth and domestic order.

Frances Armstrong has explored children’s literature in an attempt to better understand when and how children played with dollhouses. She explains that the first detailed textual reference to children playing with dollhouses comes from the 1780s when literature for or about children became common.⁶ What can be said about the nature of children playing with dollhouses? According to Armstrong, “it was only until 1850, that baby-houses were considered to be family heirlooms, and how a girl played with them was normally influenced by family tradition rather than the games played by her contemporaries”. In comparing this finding with the present day, we can say that the idea of dollhouse play has not shifted, since it is still related the child’s observation of her own family at home.

Armstrong’s article includes a picture of a dollhouse that is illustrated from Elizabeth Prentiss’s book *Little Suzy’s Six Birthdays* (1854) (fig. 5). As the story goes, the young girl, Suzy receives a dollhouse for her 5th birthday, which was made by her father, with contributions from her mother, as well as her extended family. Suzy has involved her brother in a dollhouse game, thus engaging both genders in play. The dollhouse is not a showcase object to be admired but a source of amusement, a creative way for the whole family to interact with the house. Similar to Rye’s dollhouse it is a collective family project, where everyone is involved in the process.

In conclusion, Lyla Rye has presented the viewer with an interactive dollhouse that highlights the incongruities of domesticity in contemporary society. The placement of Rye’s daughter allows the viewer to interact with the child’s play in the dollhouse and question our notions about the space and time of imagination and reality. The function of the dollhouse for Rye’s daughter (who is now eleven) has now shift, as she no longer uses it for creating narratives. The dollhouse has now taken on the role of “show and tell” acting both as a collectable which was the original purpose of the dollhouse and a memory of Lena’s play as a younger child.

FIGURES

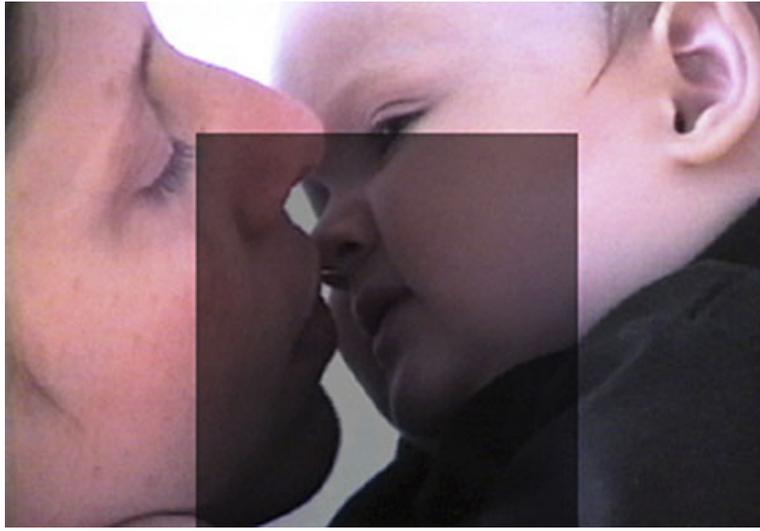


FIG. 1

Lyla Rye. *Byte*. Video still. 2002.



FIG. 2

Lyla Rye. *Carnal*. Video still. 2003.



FIG. 3

Lyla Rye. *Young Girl at an Open Window #6*. Still from excerpt. 2004.



Figure 1. Father looks with modest pride at his handiwork, but perhaps someone should keep an eye on little Robbie. From Prentiss, *Little Suzy's Six Birthdays*. Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books, Toronto Public Library.

FIG. 4

Illustration from Elizabeth Prentiss, *Little Suzy's Sixth Birthdays*, 1854. Osborne collection of Early Children's Books. Toronto Public Library.

ENDNOTES

¹ "The Forster Family Dollhouse: A Child's Plaything, an Adult's Collectable, A National Treasure- Canada's Got Treasures." *Les Musées Du Canada: Museevirtuel.ca | Canadian Museums: Virtualmuseum.ca*. Web. 13 Nov. 2010. http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/tresors-treasures/?page_id=3435.

² Flora Gill Jacobs, *A World of Doll Houses*, (New York: Gramercy, 1965), 52.

³ Lyla Rye, "Young Girl at an Open Window" Gallery 44 Vitrines, Toronto, 2004.

⁴ Frances Armstrong, "The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920." (*Project Muse* 24, 1996) 27.

⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) 65.

⁶ Armstrong, 25.