

THE NEED TO KEEP

By

Amanda Kelly

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

Thesis Advisor: Will Sawyer

May 2024

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Will Sawyer (Apr 25, 2024 18:54 EDT)

04/25/2024

Will Sawyer

Date

Thesis Advisor 
SungEun Park (Apr 26, 2024 11:37 EDT)

04/25/2024

Stuart Robinson

Date

Committee Member


Lori Nix (Apr 25, 2024 14:16 EDT)

04/25/2024

Lori Nix

Date

Committee Member


SungEun Park (Apr 26, 2024 11:37 EDT)

04/26/2024

SungEun Park

Date

Committee Member

ABSTRACT

My creative research delves into the interplay of compulsive hoarding, accumulation, and mental illness. In my MFA thesis, "The Need to Keep," I draw from personal experiences and the narratives of others to create miniature scenes that serve as windows into an often misunderstood world.

Rather than aiming for exact replicas, my sculptures are assemblages of various concepts that reflect the challenges of living with mental illness. The overwhelming accumulation of possessions depicted in my work represents the unsafe living conditions and impaired daily functioning often experienced by individuals with compulsive hoarding disorder. Beyond physical clutter, I examine the emotional impact of hoarding, exploring how objects can hold memories, provide comfort, and shape our identities. Through thing theory, a subset of critical theory that explores human-object interactions, I contemplate how objects influence our behaviors and relationships.

The medium of miniatures offers me a unique outlet to process and convey the complex emotions tied to hoarding. I challenge the traditional dollhouse by depicting gritty and chaotic scenes. Rather than seeking perfection, I capture the messy reality of life. Instead of using figures in my work, I suggest human presence and a lived-in space by carefully placing items with traces of wear. Every item, from a half-empty coffee cup to a discarded magazine, is a silent cue to the past. My work serves as a sculptural lens that magnifies the significance of specific objects. The viewer becomes an investigator as they search for contextual clues and meanings within each scene. Ultimately, my work prompts reflection on the personal connections we form with our possessions and why we need to keep them.

Amanda Kelly, MFA

Department of Art, 2024

Radford University

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my thesis committee at Radford University—Will Sawyer, Stuart Robinson, SungEun Park, and Lori Nix, for their guidance and support.

Additionally, thank you to Kathleen Gerber for her thoughtful advice and Logan Singo, Ashleigh Hillen, and Leslie Asenov for helping with my exhibition installation.

A very special thank you to my wife, Briana Sepulveda Kelly, for her belief in me, patience, and constant willingness to discuss my work. I wouldn't have been able to finish my thesis without her. I love you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"[I]magination in miniature is natural imagination which appears at all ages in the daydreams of born dreamers."

-Gaston Bachelard¹

My paternal grandmother's dollhouse was brimmed with miniature furnishings and accessories. As a child visiting her house, I'd bring a miniature as a gift, and in return, she'd hide a micro chocolate bar somewhere in her dollhouse for me to find. She let me play in the attic area of the dollhouse, which was filled with tiny children's toys and games. These cherished memories remained with me, though they faded in and out during my teenage years. In college, following my grandmother's passing, my family decided to pass her dollhouse on to me. During a gathering at my aunt's house after my grandmother's funeral, we unpacked the boxes of miniatures together. Among the extensive collection of wooden furniture pieces was an intricately crafted wooden chest made by my uncle, delicate lace curtains, a handwritten inventory list cataloging every item in the dollhouse, and, of course, the tiny chocolate bars. That evening held special significance for me, as it coincided with the early stages of my miniature journey. Just the year before, I had purchased a dollhouse kit and begun documenting my creative process on Instagram. Inheriting this family heirloom validated my passion for miniatures and made me proud to be an artist and miniaturist.

Tiny Beginnings

As an art student at the Fashion Institute of Technology, I stumbled upon a newfound fascination with miniatures while browsing YouTube for my Japanese Art class. It was there that I came across the channel "HMS2- ハムスターのミニチュア工房 2 (Hamster Miniature Workshop 2)," where I watched in awe as the creator meticulously assembled a miniature kit step-by-step.²

¹ Bachelard, "Miniature," 149

² Youtube, "HMS2 - ハムスターのミニチュア工房 2 - YouTube."

Instantly captivated, I researched miniatures and dollhouse kits, only to find limited options. I purchased the Willow dollhouse kit from the brand GreenLeaf and embarked on constructing my first dollhouse in the confines of my dorm room (fig. 1). I also began documenting my progress through a miniatures-specific Instagram account called “Pandaminiatures,” which I still use to this day.



Figure 1: Amanda Kelly. *My first dollhouse*, 2016. Wooden dollhouse kit by Greenleaf.

I quickly became part of the miniaturist community, joining a local club in Manhattan, where I was the youngest member. Through the club, I discovered artisan miniatures, new skills and techniques, and dollhouse shows. At the first show I attended, Philadelphia Miniaturia, I

encountered Lady Delaney's avant-garde miniatures, including dinosaur skulls, peculiar curiosities, and mouse bones. Inspired by her work, I began making unconventional and different miniatures. While I appreciate the artistry of traditional Victorian-style miniatures, I prefer realistic and modern pieces.

Subsequent research led me to explore the works of other visionary miniaturists, particularly those who crafted abandoned and dystopian miniatures. Artists like Lori Nix and Kathleen Gerber depict post-apocalyptic scenes of forgotten libraries, sand-engulfed subway trains, and dilapidated beauty shops. Their work is incredibly inspiring. I've had the privilege of working with them on a project and consider them friends. Artists such as Sam Durant, Rick Araluce, and Frank Kunert have also helped to shape my creative practice.

Scale and Other Terms

While some might consider miniatures mainly toys for children, the broader dollhouse and miniature community is mainly comprised of adult collectors and artisans. A *miniature* is a small-scale representation of an object or scene. When talking about miniatures, *scale* is often the first topic to be brought up. *Scale* is the ratio between a miniature and real object's sizes, commonly expressed as a fraction or ratio. The most common dollhouse scale is 1:12, which is widely produced and commercially available. A scale of 1:12 means that 1 inch equals 1 foot, making it simple to calculate. For example, a 7-foot door in life-size is 7 inches in 1:12 scale. Other popular scales in the dollhouse community are 1:24 (half scale), 1:48 (quarter scale), and 1:144 scale (dollhouse for a dollhouse scale). There are also different scales for different subgroups of model making. The train model community, for example, refers to their scales as *gauges*, with HO and N gauges being the most popular (1:87 and 1:160 scale, respectively). Scale is essential to miniature-making as it grounds the miniature scene in reality.

Steven Millhauser writes, "The miniature...has a special and rather complex relation to detail. The very fact of the smallness demands in us an increased attention[.]"³ Miniatures offer a

³ Millhauser, *The Fascination of the Miniature*, 131

unique opportunity to engage intimately with them, as their scale allows for close examination with the naked eye or a magnifying glass. This proximity fosters a distinct relationship between the miniature object and the observer. Some artists, like Lydia Ricci (fig. 2), defy traditional notions of scale in their miniature work. Ricci, known for crafting miniature sculptures from discarded materials, doesn't adhere to any specific scale in her work. Instead, she focuses on the underlying concepts behind each piece. As Ricci explains in her artist statement, "I cherish an electric bill from 1986 the way others would covet valuable family jewels—then I sculpt it into, say, a tiny sleeper sofa that fits into an outstretched palm or a lacy bra that stretches across an expanse of wall."⁴

While *miniature* is an umbrella term for anything small, a *dollhouse* is a miniature replica of a house or building, typically furnished.⁵ Often considered a children's toy, the dollhouse has become a blank canvas for artists.⁶ Due to space constraints, I tend to create room boxes and vignettes. A *room box* is a compact display enclosure resembling a single room or interior space.⁷ On the other hand, a *vignette* is a small, concentrated scene or composition within a larger context, often employed to convey a particular mood or narrative.⁸ A *diorama* is a three-dimensional model depicting a scene or landscape, is usually enclosed within a glass case, and can be life-size.⁹ Dioramas are commonly used in history museums and other educational spaces. When starting a miniature piece, how it will be displayed is crucial. The choice of what to show versus what to hide can change the narrative. This selection process allows me to magnify the significance of certain items or clues in a scene. It also allows viewers to relate and fill in the rest of their experiences and thoughts.¹⁰

⁴ Ricci, "ABOUT — LYDIA RICCI."

⁵ Wikipedia, "Scale Model."

⁶ Wikipedia, "Dollhouse."

⁷ Wikipedia, "Room Box."

⁸ Wikipedia, "Scale Model."

⁹ Wikipedia, "Diorama."

¹⁰ Foxhall, "Introduction: Miniaturization," 2



Figure 2: Lydia Ricci. *We Should Have Taken Better Care Of It*, 2023. collected scrap materials, 5" x 3" x 5". fromscaps.com

Artist and Miniaturist

While I embrace the titles of *artist* and *miniaturist*, I want to pay attention to a subtle yet significant distinction between the two. While being known as a miniaturist acknowledges my skill in crafting small-scale replicas, being recognized as an artist encompasses the multi-disciplinary aspect of my creative process. When labeled as “just” a miniaturist, I feel limited in the opportunities for experimentation with different mediums and conceptual frameworks beyond what’s expected. As an artist *and* a miniaturist, I can break free from those constraints and explore sculpture in all forms.

As an artist, I’m constantly confronted with the reality that my art may not be functional. As a miniature sculpture stands, it has no purpose other than to be viewed. Miniatures in the past have



Figure 3: Lori Nix and Kathleen Gerber. *Subway*, 2012. Archival pigment print, 30 × 38 inches.
lorinix.net

been used as toys or educational tools. However, my artwork is not for playing with, nor is it meant to be educational. Instead, I use miniatures as a visual device for my narrative. When planning my thesis, I wanted to avoid my work looking like museum dioramas. Much of my work ties into the dollhouse aesthetic; however, I've leaned into conceptual aspects through my thesis. I pivoted my work's context away from the dollhouse community and toward the contemporary sculpture space.

Empty Inhabited Spaces

In my miniature scenes, I prefer to omit the figure. For me, figures or dolls detract from the realism I strive to achieve in my work. Instead, I aim to create a liminal space that feels like someone has just left the room. The intentional absence of a physical human presence allows me to hint at a narrative without relying on figurines. I draw inspiration from Lori Nix's "The City" series and Frank



Figure 4: Frank Kunert. *One Bedroom Apartment*, 2016. Pigment print. frank-kunert.de.

Kunert's work (fig. 3, 4). Nix explores the passage of time and the human experience through the lens of abandoned structures. In her artist statement, Nix writes, "Devoid of people, these spaces become meditative and full of possibilities. The details in the buildings seem more pronounced, and these details point back to the humans who created them."¹¹

Kunert's work depicts surreal and often satirical scenarios, blending elements of humor, irony, and social critique. Kunert states, "I think that my worlds work better as projection screens when there are no actors. [...] What arise as a result are more spaces for fantasy and a floating state of excited calm [...] as if something might just be about to occur."¹² Without figures, his scenes become more universal, allowing viewers to project themselves into the miniature worlds. Like Nix

¹¹ Nix, "Biography."

¹² Kunert and Restorff, *Frank Kunert: Lifestyle*, 17

and Kunert, I seek to evoke a sense of mystery and narrative through the objects and clues left behind in a scene. A miniature scene's enclosed space creates tension between inside and outside, private and public.¹³

The Topic of Hoarding

During my childhood, the approach of the holidays meant a flurry of activity unlike any other. With anticipation mingled with a sense of dread, these occasions brought about a collective effort to clean and organize. "Organizing" often meant cramming things into another room and shutting the door. Even though it could be a multi-day ordeal, I enjoyed tidying up the living room where the Christmas tree stood. It was a brief respite, a moment of calm amidst the chaos, even though the stuff in the other rooms remained untouched. Creating that clean space, albeit temporary, offered child-me a glimpse of normalcy and comfort. However, I knew that once the holidays were over, the piles of things would inevitably return and cast a shadow over me again. The clutter wasn't just physical; it permeated every aspect of daily life. Play areas were scarce, buried under piles of trash and old computer parts. I spent most of my time in my bedroom, where the hoard never entered. The mess seemed to seep into relationships, too, as family members tried to help but mostly tiptoed around the issue. It was a childhood marked by isolation, as having friends over was out of the question due to embarrassment and fear of judgment.

As an adult, hoarding appeared unexpectedly, casting a shadow over my life in both the familiar and unfamiliar. Watching shows like "Hoarders" and "Hoarding: Buried Alive" felt like peering into a mirror with my childhood memories floating before me. Yet, as I watched the families grapple with the aftermath of years of accumulation, I couldn't help but feel a sense of empathy and understanding. Their stories echoed my own, highlighting the universal nature of the struggle against clutter and the impact it can have on individuals and families alike. After completing *Hoarder's Porch*, I felt compelled to tell these stories as they are not commonly shown outside clinical spaces.

¹³ Stewart, "The Miniature," 61

As an artist, miniatures offer a unique platform to portray compulsive hoarding behaviors on a small scale. Crafting cluttered scenes with abundant tiny objects allows me to effectively capture the overwhelming accumulation and chaos associated with hoarding tendencies. These miniature environments enable me to delve into the emotional and psychological aspects of hoarding.. Additionally, miniatures provide a safe space for examining hoarding themes without judgment, fostering dialogue about mental health and addiction. Miniatures are a powerful tool for raising awareness and promoting compassion towards individuals affected by compulsive hoarding disorder.

CHAPTER 2: BEYOND THE DOLLHOUSE

“[U]nder the enchantment of the miniature, we are invited to become God.”

—Steven Millhauser¹⁴

The dollhouse embodies a blend of transcendence and historical narrative, serving as a “house within a house” while “occupying a space within an enclosed space.”¹⁵ Miniatures and dollhouses have always been significant in human culture and society. Ancient Egyptians used miniature wooden models in burial rituals, while medieval Europe saw the emergence of intricate dollhouses showcasing wealth and status. The first dollhouses were Dutch “baby houses” in the Netherlands during the 17th century. Baby houses were intricate replicas of grand residences that served as status symbols for affluent Dutch families. In the Victorian era, dollhouses gained popularity among the middle class, reflecting architectural trends and domestic lifestyles.¹⁶ The 20th century saw mass production and a resurgence of craftsmanship in miniatures, appealing to collectors and hobbyists alike. Despite the varied historical contexts, the enduring appeal of miniatures raises an intriguing question: Why do we like miniatures?

I’m often asked why I make miniatures. As a child, I didn’t have control of my environment, and that’s reflected in my fascination with tiny things. Jörg Jozwiak writes, “...miniatures take us back to the childhood experience of inhabiting a small (physical and yet imaginary) world and being an oversized outsider controlling it at the same time.”¹⁷ Unlike other artistic mediums, miniatures offer a unique sense of control that resonates deeply with me. As a painter, I felt unsatisfied with my work as I couldn’t express myself fully through painting like I could through miniatures. In miniature, I can control every aspect of a work, from the scale to how it’s viewed. Gaston Bachelard

¹⁴ Millhauser, “The Fascination of the Miniature,” 135

¹⁵ Stewart, “The Miniature,” 61

¹⁶ Lisle, *Life in Miniature: A History of Dolls’ Houses*, 6-8

¹⁷ Jozwiak, “Miniature Appreciation - What’s so Great about Little Models?,” 23

captures this sentiment aptly, stating, "The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the worlds, the better I possess it."¹⁸ I use miniatures to confront and engage with the world around me. In my thesis work, I craft scenes exploring compulsive hoarding disorder, drawing on my experiences and the experiences of others. Rather than striving for exact replicas, many of my works are amalgamations of various ideas and inspirations. Through miniatures, I find artistic expression and a form of therapeutic release as I navigate and process my emotions.

When I make a miniature, I'm creating an illusion of realism. Jozwiak writes, "A miniature is not a copy but an interpretation of reality."¹⁹ While some artists opt for making exact replicas of buildings or homes, I veer towards broader ideas in my work. This decision stemmed from a desire to preserve the privacy of the individuals whose stories I aimed to convey while avoiding the constraints of perfectionism. Miniature spaces can encompass vast conceptual territories and become abstract.²⁰ Embracing abstraction allowed me to delve deeper into conceptual exploration beyond the confines of reality. For instance, in *Hoarder's Porch*, inspired by numerous porches I encountered during my travels, my arrangement of items was guided more by the porch's composition than by specific reference images. This approach allowed me to infuse personal interpretation and creativity into the work rather than adhering strictly to factual representation.

Miniatures as Fine Art

Contemporary artists frequently use miniatures to convey complex narratives. Sarah Anne Johnson's *House on Fire* exemplifies this, as it immerses viewers in a haunting portrayal of her grandmother's trauma resulting from unwittingly participating in CIA mind-control experiments (fig. 5). Within the flame-engulfed dollhouse, Johnson depicts metaphorical scenes with miniatures

¹⁸ Bachelard, "Miniature," 150

¹⁹ Jozwiak, "Miniature Appreciation - What's so Great about Little Models?," 4

²⁰ Stewart, "The Miniature," 68



Figure 5: Sarah Anne Johnson. *House on Fire*, 2009. Mixed media, 32 x 25 x 24 inches.
sarahannejohnson.ca

and dolls.²¹ Like Johnson, I combine miniatures and metaphors to explore nuanced narratives and conceptual themes surrounding compulsive hoarding.

Unprecedented Times

In *Unprecedented Times*, I conceptualize my post-COVID recovery bed by placing it on a carpeted cut-out of the United States (fig. 6). This imagery underscores the nationwide impact of the pandemic against a backdrop of political tension. The aftermath of my bed is a time capsule of isolation and depression. I use subtle details to tell the story of navigating the pandemic. A pair of Doc Martens boots pointed from New York to Virginia signifies my 2020 relocation, while abandoned ice skates represent aspirations sidelined by illness. TikTok on my phone and binge-

²¹ ArtFacts, "Sarah Anne Johnson: House on Fire | Exhibition."

watching *Lord of the Rings* on my laptop hint at long periods spent in bed, seeking distraction from the isolation. On the side table, among tissues and medicine, are reminders of the pandemic's impact: a COVID test and a stimulus check (fig. 7). Piles of neglected laundry behind the bed reflect the neglect that comes with depression and illness. Through this symbolism, I encourage viewers to contemplate their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 6: Amanda Kelly. *Unprecedented Times, 2022*. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, fabric, plastic, paper, resin, 3D prints on wood panel, 17 x 11 x 4 inches.

Pocket Hoarder

In the dollhouse community, there is a preference for Victorian-style dollhouses over the gritty and realistic scenes I create. The allure of these pristine dollhouses lies in their nostalgic



Figure 7: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Unprecedented Times*, 2022. 1:12 scale miniature. wood, fabric, plastic, paper, resin, 3D prints on wood panel, 17 x 11 x 4 inches.

charm and idealized representations of domestic life.²² These perfect dollhouses evoke a sense of elegance and refinement, appealing to those who cherish the romanticized notions of bygone eras. However, this departure from the “traditional” dollhouse can be polarizing. While some may appreciate the honesty and authenticity of my work, others may find it unsettling or discomforting. The preference for perfect dollhouses reflects a desire for escapism and fantasy, where miniature worlds serve as idyllic retreats from the complexities of reality.²³ Yet, miniatures serve as a canvas for storytelling and introspection.

Pocket Hoarder resembles a Polly Pocket (an iconic and nostalgic toy beloved for its pastel hues and portability) with a twist: It portrays a hoarded house (fig. 8). Drawing from personal experiences, I explore themes of childhood escapism and reclaiming control. Children often use house-like toys to process complex situations through imaginative play. Children can temporarily

²² Jozwiak, “Miniature Appreciation - What’s so Great about Little Models?,” 21

²³ Singly, “Dollhouses and Other Bad Objects,” 80

detach from real-life stresses and experience a sense of empowerment by creating their own stories and scenarios.²⁴ This work shows the dichotomy of pretend play and the reality of hoarding through the eyes of a child.



Figure 8: Amanda Kelly. *Pocket Hoarder*, 2024. Polystyrene, polymer clay, found objects, 3D prints, 6 x 5 x 5 inches.

²⁴ Chen, "Playing with Size and Reality: The Fascination of a Dolls' House World," 279

Goat Paths

Inspired by the real-life tale of the Collyer brothers, *Goat Paths* provides a poignant snapshot of compulsive hoarding both in history and through the lens of miniature art (fig. 9). I loosely recreated a part of the interior of their brownstone, complete with towering stacks of newspapers, piles of furniture, and meandering pathways carved through the clutter (fig. 10). Homer and Langley Collyer gained notoriety in the early 20th century for their extreme hoarding and withdrawal from society. Over the years, they amassed a staggering collection of items,



Figure 9: Amanda Kelly. *Goat Paths*, 2023. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, paper, fabric, found objects, 3D prints, wood banister poles, 42.5 x 15 x 9.75 inches.

including antique furniture, hundreds of yards of fabric, musical instruments, human organs pickled in jars, newspapers, a Model T chassis, and more than 25,000 books. Tragically, in 1947, Langley

was crushed to death by a collapsing pile of objects, while Homer, blind and unable to care for himself, passed away shortly afterward. The discovery of their bodies amidst the immense clutter became a public spectacle and left a mark on New York City's history.²⁵ The title, *Goat Paths*, alludes to the pathways carved through towering mounds of possessions akin to the paths taken by goats through mountain ranges.²⁶ The exterior of the work is adorned with curated *New York Times*



Figure 10: Amanda Kelly. Top view of *Goat Paths*, 2023. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, paper, fabric, found objects, 3D prints, wood banister poles, 42.5 x 15 x 9.75 inches.

articles that contextualize the brothers' lives. Small openings in the work serve as windows into the labyrinth and allow viewers to discover the curiosities.

Sam Durant's *Abandoned Houses* series places vacant miniature spaces atop wooden legs, turning them into pieces of furniture (fig. 11). Regarding Durant's work, Paulette Singley writes, "Ultimately, the inhabited, versus empty, architectural model leads to the insertion of messy

²⁵ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 3

²⁶ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 22

interiors that besmirch modernism's abstract purity."²⁷ *Goat Paths* similarly stands on wooden legs and showcases an inhabited yet hoarded interior. By introducing elements of messiness into my miniature scenes, I disrupt the conventional notion of the perfect dollhouse.



Figure 11: Sam Durant. *Abandoned House # 4*, 1994. Foam core, cardboard, plexiglass, tape, spray enamel, wood, and metal, 25.5 × 41 × 4.5 inches. samdurant.net

Smoke Break

Set atop a full-size pipe sits a tiny bathroom portraying the harmful coping mechanisms and self-neglect of an individual battling nicotine addiction (fig. 12). *Smoke Break* captures their struggle between quitting smoking and seeking solace in their bathroom. The exterior of the work is covered with cigarette butts, forming a brick-like siding representing the psychological walls built by addiction. The bathroom's wear and tear are evident, with water damage on the ceiling, peeling

²⁷ Singley, "Dollhouses and Other Bad Objects," 77



Figure 12: Amanda Kelly. *Smoke Break*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, PVC pipe, paper, plastic, found objects, 3D prints, 38.5 x 7.5 x 7.5 inches.

paint, and grimy surfaces. Furthermore, the work subtly conveys depression in details like the cut hair on the sink and the piled-up cigarettes on the windowsill (fig. 13).

Smoke Break marks the culmination of my thesis journey, as it was the last piece I created. The bathroom room box hangs on the wall and is supported by a PVC pipe underneath. This approach serves a dual purpose: concealing the electrical cord and immersing the viewer deeper into the narrative. Initially conceived as only a wall-mounted installation, I incorporated life-size elements to enhance the viewer's engagement. The exterior showcases realistic cigarettes made



Figure 13: Amanda Kelly. Detail of *Smoke Break*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, PVC pipe, paper, plastic, found objects, 3D prints, 38.5 x 7.5 x 7.5 inches.

from scanned cigarette wrappers, straws, tin foil, and charcoal, which are arranged to look like a brick wall. Two light sources are within the room box—the ceiling light and the faint glow from behind the window. Inspired by Charles Matton, I created a faux wall with LEDs installed behind it to give the illusion of daylight (fig. 14). These elements enrich the storytelling and enhance the sculpture's composition.



Figure 14: Charles Matton. *The Untidy Women's Bedroom*, 1991. Mixed Media, 30 x 25 x 20.5 inches. allvisualarts.org

CHAPTER 3: OBJECT NARRATIVES

"We look through objects because they are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful."

-Bill Brown²⁸

In our everyday lives, we're surrounded by objects—things, stuff, items—that we often hold dear. Even amidst the trend of minimalism, our attachment to possessions remains strong. As I navigate through life, these objects accompany me on my journey. But why do objects hold such significance? Why do we assign meaning to them instead of seeing them as just "things"? In *Thing Theory*, Bill Brown explores the distinction between objects and things. He suggests that *objects* hold meaning for us while *things* lack functionality. Brown notes that we're confronted with the "thingness" of objects when they fail to perform: a broken drill, a stalled car, and dirty windows disrupt their seamless integration into our daily routines.²⁹ Objects retain memory and are used as reference points of the past. Since objects are tangible and physical, we can hold them while remembering their histories. Items can be associated with specific individuals, positive and negative emotions, and craftsmanship.³⁰ Through my work, I reflect on how I interact with and perceive the objects that populate my life.

As an artist making miniature scenes about hoarding and accumulation, I constantly think about objects. I ask myself: Do I need this? Which one should I buy, should I give this away, etc.? In her book "The Materiality of Nothing: Exploring Our Everyday Relationships with Objects Past and Present," Helen Holmes delves into these questions. She suggests that acquiring an object involves more than just its physical presence—it's about where it fits in our lives, what we must sacrifice to make room for it, and how we eventually let go of it. Objects seem to linger, haunting us even after

²⁸ Brown, "Thing Theory," 4

²⁹ Brown, "Thing Theory," 4

³⁰ Cherrier and Ponnor, "A Study of Hoarding Behavior and Attachment to Material Possessions," 14



Figure 15: Sarah Sze. *Triple Point (Pendulum)*, 2013. Salt, water, stone, string, projector, video, pendulum, and other materials, Dimensions variable, approximately 150 x 210 x 200 inches. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

they're no longer in our possession.³¹ From the moment we acquire them to their disposal, objects leave a mark on our lives and shape our experiences in profound ways.

In *The Art as Experience*, John Dewey delves into the fundamental idea that art is not merely a static or decorative object but a dynamic process rooted in human experience. Art is not confined to the artist's creation alone; instead, it finds its true meaning in the responsive and aesthetic engagement of the viewer. He discusses the concept of the "expressive object," emphasizing that it gains its significance through the emotions and thoughts it stirs in the observer.³² The aesthetic experience is a continuous interplay of perception, feeling, and expression. This highlights the dynamic nature of art in its ability to evoke responses and emotions by transcending the limits of a lifeless, inanimate object. Art is an evolving process that enriches human existence through its profound connection with lived experience through objects. The objects I represent with miniatures

³¹ Holmes, "Object Loss and Material Hauntings," 18

³² Dewey, "The Expressive Object," 90

hold significance through the artwork's narrative to the viewer. The miniature objects are also expressive through the context they're placed in. My artwork reflects my experiences by the objects I choose to showcase. In *You can't tow a Uhaul to the grave*, the artwork consists of two objects—a U-Haul trailer and a coffin. Though a simplistic idea, the viewer can draw their assumptions and conclusions in the context of its imagery.

Accumulation of Objects

The accumulation of objects in sculpture is a powerful means of exploring memory, identity, and consumption. Through the strategic arrangement of various materials, artists convey the complexities of human experience and societal values. Each object within the composition carries its own history and significance. Sarah Sze's work masterfully explores the intersection between materiality, space, and perception. Sze arranges everyday objects, found materials, and sculptural elements in her installations to create immersive environments that teeter between chaos and order (fig. 15). Of her work, Sze says, "When you take an object out of its context, it loses its meaning and becomes only a list of materials."³³ Like Sze, I'm captivated by the concept of accumulation and our relationships to objects. While piles of objects can initially seem overwhelming, I find them inherently beautiful, akin to a still life. I use objects to construct dynamic compositions and compelling framing in my miniature scenes.

You can't tow a Uhaul to the grave

The relationship between mortality and materiality depicted in *You can't tow a Uhaul to the Grave* is represented by the contrast between a coffin and a U-Haul trailer (fig. 16, 17). This juxtaposition is a powerful metaphor for the inevitable separation between humans and their earthly possessions upon death. However, objects are not merely static but active components of our personal and collective narratives. Objects carry memories and serve as historical conduits for the past. Inspired by a quote from *STUFF: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* by Randy

³³ Sze, interview.



Figure 16: Amanda Kelly. *You can't tow a Uhaul to the grave*, 2023. 1:18 miniature. Resin, wood, styrene sheets, foam core, 3D prints, 13 x 4.5 x 4.5 inches.



Figure 17: Amanda Kelly. *You can't tow a Uhaul to the grave*, 2023. 1:18 miniature. Resin, wood, styrene sheets, foam core, 3D prints, 13 x 4.5 x 4.5 inches.

Frost and Gail Steketee, this work invites viewers to contemplate their attachment to belongings and reconsider the value of our possessions.³⁴

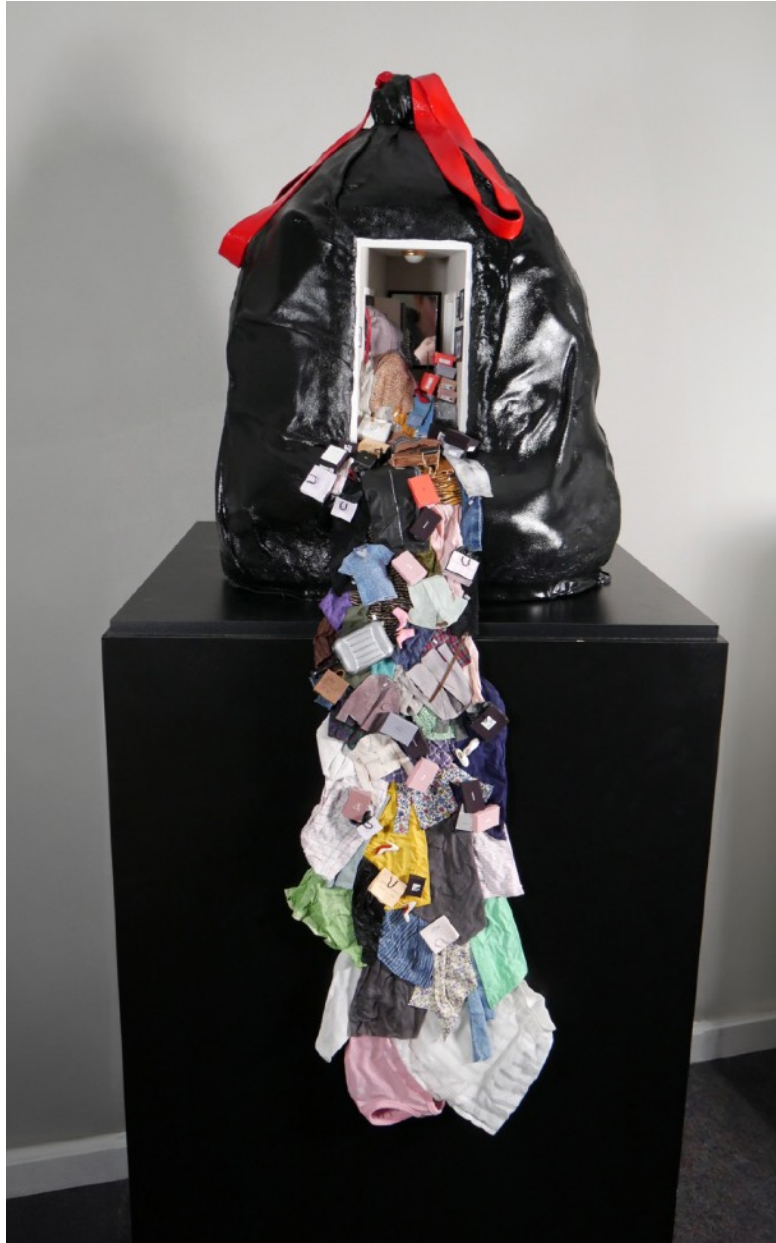


Figure 18: Amanda Kelly. *The Avalanche*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Foam, thermoplastic, wood, fabric, paper, 63 x 17 x 11 inches

³⁴ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 237

The Avalanche

As consumers, we are constantly bombarded with messages encouraging us to acquire more, often equating possessions with success or happiness. This relentless pursuit of goods leads to over-accumulating items, many of which are ultimately discarded or forgotten. I explore the relationship between object journeys and consumerism in my work, *The Avalanche* (fig. 18). The



Figure 19: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *The Avalanche*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Foam, thermoplastic, wood, fabric, paper, 63 x 17 x 11 inches



Figure 20: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *The Avalanche*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Foam, thermoplastic, wood, fabric, paper, 63 x 17 x 11 inches

sculpted trash bag exterior serves as a pointed commentary on the absurdity and excessiveness of luxury fashion, particularly exemplified by Balenciaga's \$1,950 handbag of the same shape.³⁵ By replicating an ordinary trash bag, I highlight the irony of the high fashion industry's tendency to elevate mundane objects to symbols of luxury. The sculpture's centerpiece is a cascading avalanche

³⁵ "Trash Bag Large Pouch."

of high-end clothing, shoes, and bags spilling out of an upscale New York City apartment, visually representing the chaos of materialism and shopping addiction (fig. 19, 20). Despite their wealth, affluent individuals can also struggle with compulsive hoarding disorder due to emotional attachments to possessions, compulsive buying, and pressure to maintain a particular lifestyle.³⁶

Trash Series

Fascinated by maximalism and the accumulation of objects, I use trash to examine object journeys. *Trash Series* comprises six works: *Spring Cleaning*, *Lost Innocence*, *Move-in Day*, *Moving Out*, *Pop Era*, and *Trash Day 2* (fig. 21). Initially a series of thirty, each panel conveys a narrative through miniature trash bags and boxes. The abandoned items offer a nuanced look into the individuals who discarded them, communicating both the end of something and a new beginning. While "trash" often carries negative connotations, I see the beauty in thrown-away things.

³⁶ Frost, Randy O., and Gail Steketee. 2010. *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. <http://books.google.com/books?isbn=9780151014231>.

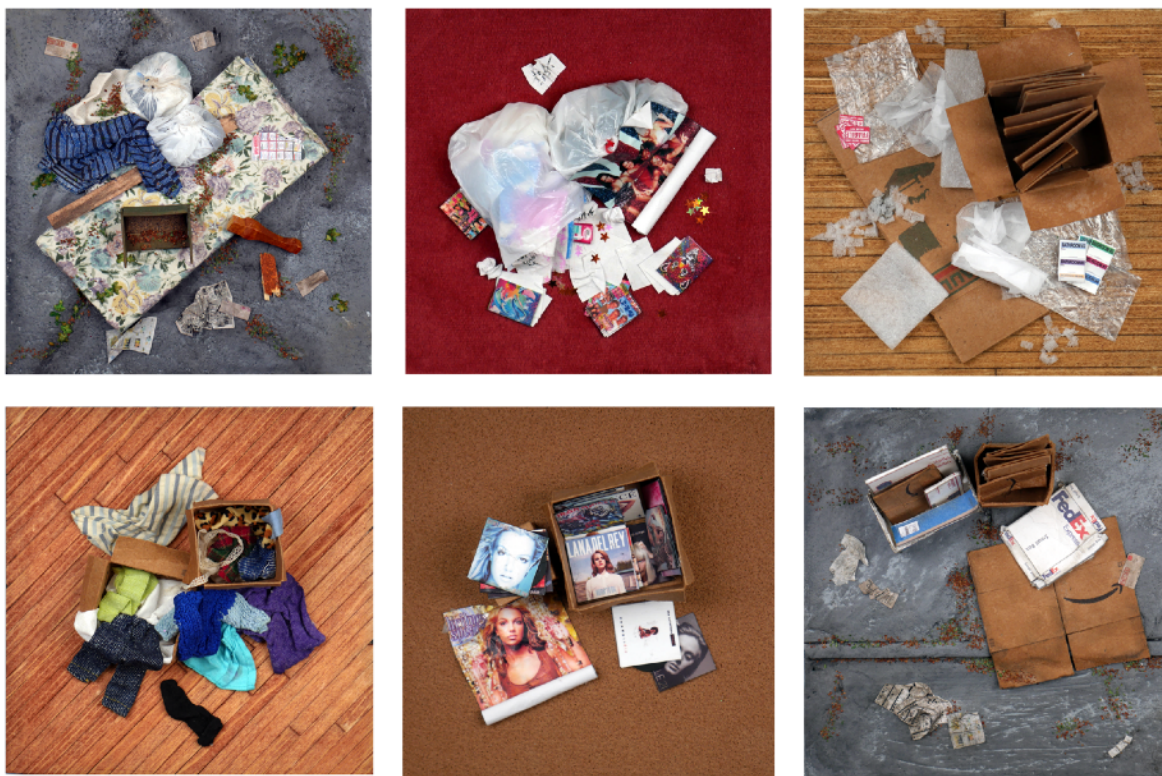


Figure 21: Amanda Kelly. *Trash Series*, 2023. Top row left to right: *Spring Cleaning*, *Lost Innocence*, *Move-in Day*, Bottom row left to right: *Moving Out*, *Pop Era*, *Trash Day 2*. 1:12 scale miniatures. Paper, found objects, plastic on board, 6 x 6 x 1 inches.

CHAPTER 4: THE NEED TO KEEP

“What does it mean to own something?”

-Randy O. Frost and Gail Sketekee³⁷

Is it a must-have or a nice-to-have? This question permeates my mind as I look down at the object in my hand. I’m standing in a booth of a musty-smelling antique mall, frozen in thought. *Do I NEED it or WANT it?* The object is a 1998 Radio Flyer Little Red Wagon toy with a panda. It’s vintage, it’s a miniature, and it has a panda—all criteria for a potential item in my collection of nostalgic toy memorabilia. I sigh and examine the toy. It’s in good condition, but it’s twenty-five dollars. I pull out my phone and research it online. It’s not worth much more, and it’s not very rare. I place the toy back on the shelf. *Well, I can reconsider if it’s still there next time I’m here. Then, it’s meant to be!*

What drives our urge to possess objects? What happens when we keep too much? At its core, accumulating objects satisfies our innate desire for security, identity, and status. Objects often carry sentimental value, reminding us of cherished memories. In a consumer-driven society, personal property is frequently associated with social status and success, leading us to acquire it in pursuit of validation and belonging. However, excessive belongings can clutter our physical spaces and overwhelm our mental well-being. Compulsive hoarding disorder is a mental health condition characterized by persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions.³⁸ It’s a captivating yet daunting condition where individuals are caught in an endless loop, unable to let go of even the most trivial items. For those grappling with this disorder, the thought of parting with their stuff can lead to anxiety and depression. The overwhelming amount of objects becomes both a fortress and a prison, shielding sufferers from the outside world while suffocating their living spaces and relationships. It’s a thin line between the “need” and the “want.”

³⁷ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 46

³⁸ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 11-15

Compulsive Hoarding Disorder

“I’m such a hoarder. I have too much stuff. Haha!” “I’m not a hoarder; I just need a bigger craft room!” Jokes about hoarding are frequently seen on social media across memes and merchandise. The word “hoarder” is often used loosely and incorrectly. When showing my work, I’ve had two separate reactions from people—those who can relate and tell me about a family member or friend who hoards and those who laugh while telling me how they’re supposedly hoarders. While many people think they have compulsive hoarding disorder, they are, in fact, just being human. As humans, we love to collect things and attach meaning to them. Animals, like the Junk bug (green lacewing larvae) and the Packrat, also accumulate and store items but for survival purposes. The term “hoarder” originates from Old English and Middle English, and it refers to storing or laying up goods or provisions in abundance. Over time, its usage evolved to describe individuals who compulsively accumulate possessions, often to the point of danger.³⁹

Compulsive hoarding is a complex psychological disorder characterized by the excessive accumulation of possessions, often resulting in cluttered living spaces that impede daily functioning. Those affected by compulsive hoarding experience intense distress at the thought of discarding items, leading to an overwhelming urge to acquire and retain objects, regardless of their practical value or relevance. This behavior can result in severe social, emotional, and physical consequences, including isolation, strained relationships, financial difficulties, and even health hazards such as fire hazards or infestations. Compulsive hoarding is often accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety, yet individuals may struggle to seek help due to fear of judgment or embarrassment. Treatment typically involves a combination of therapy, medication, and support groups to address underlying psychological factors and develop healthier coping mechanisms for managing possessions and reducing clutter.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cherrier and Ponnor, “A Study of Hoarding Behavior and Attachment to Material Possessions,” 9

⁴⁰ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 271-279

Collecting

Collecting and hoarding are often considered the same; however, they are different. Hoarding is the accumulation of items, which leads to clutter and unsafe living conditions. This behavior is driven by underlying psychological factors such as anxiety or OCD, and it can have negative consequences on an individual's well-being and relationships. On the other hand, collecting is an intentional and systematic acquisition of specific items based on personal interest, passion, or value. Collectors derive pleasure from curating their collections and may even find community and connection with others with similar interests. Collectors meticulously organize and display their treasures. Unlike hoarding, collecting is not associated with distress or impairment and may bring the collector a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.⁴¹ For example, collecting miniature food and 1:144 scale dollhouses from other artists is an enjoyable hobby of mine. The key distinction lies in the balance between enjoyment and functionality—collectors may cross into hoarding territory when accumulation disrupts daily life.

Hoarder's Porch

Amidst overgrown foliage, beer cans, and old holiday decor lies the reality of hoarding and its impact on individuals' lives and surroundings. *Hoarder's Porch* is the foundation work of my thesis, *The Need to Keep* (fig. 22). At first glance, the scene appears innocuous—just a messy porch. However, upon closer inspection, the actual narrative unfolds. The porch's entrance is barricaded, the door obscured by a haphazard pile of miscellaneous items (fig. 23). Signs of human activity linger with a discarded newspaper and a broken plastic chair, perhaps evidence of failed attempts to reclaim the space (fig. 24, 25). Children's toys juxtaposed with eviction notices symbolize the

⁴¹ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 51-57



Figure 22: Amanda Kelly. *Hoarder's Porch*, 2022. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, fabric, paper, plastic, found objects, resin, 3D prints, 14.5 x 12.5 x 10 inches.

hardship many individuals with compulsive hoarding disorder face. Yet, despite the signs of life, an overwhelming sense of shame and secrecy lurks behind the door. The viewer is left to contemplate the emotional weight of compulsive hoarding, its debilitating impact on individuals and families, and the hidden turmoil concealed within the confines of the hoarder's home.



Figure 23: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Hoarder's Porch*, 2022. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, fabric, paper, plastic, found objects, resin, 3D prints, 14.5 x 12.5 x 10 inches.



Figure 24: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Hoarder's Porch*, 2022. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, fabric, paper, plastic, found objects, resin, 3D prints, 14.5 x 12.5 x 10 inches.



Figure 25: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Hoarder's Porch*, 2022. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, fabric, paper, plastic, found objects, resin, 3D prints, 14.5 x 12.5 x 10 inches.

Time's Up, Betty

Time's Up, Betty depicts the fictional tale of an elderly woman grappling with compulsive hoarding disorder (fig. 26, 27, 28). Every inch of the car is brimming with clutter, reflecting Betty's inner turmoil and desperate attempts to fill an emotional void. The title suggests both a looming ultimatum and the inevitability of mortality. Betty isolates herself by creating a cocoon of junk within her car, a physical manifestation of her hoarding. There is a delicate balance between empathy and accountability within families navigating the complexities of compulsive hoarding disorder.



Figure 28: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Time's Up Betty*, 2022. 1:18 scale miniature. Paper, card stock, plastic, metal car model, 10.5 x 4 x 2.5 inches.



Figure 26: Amanda Kelly. *Time's Up Betty*, 2022. 1:18 scale miniature. Paper, card stock, plastic, metal car model, 10.5 x 4 x 2.5 inches.



Figure 27: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Time's Up Betty*, 2022. 1:18 scale miniature. Paper, card stock, plastic, metal car model, 10.5 x 4 x 2.5 inches.

Glass Note

Children of hoarders often grow up in chaotic and cluttered environments, profoundly impacted by their parent's compulsive hoarding behaviors. Living in homes filled with excessive possessions can have significant emotional, social, and developmental effects on these children. They may experience shame, embarrassment, and isolation as their living conditions differ drastically from their peers. Growing up in such environments can also lead to a lack of personal space, difficulty inviting friends, and challenges maintaining friendships and social connections. Additionally, children of hoarders may struggle with anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, as well as a heightened sense of responsibility for their parent's well-being.⁴² As they become adults,

⁴² Frost and Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*, 227-231



Figure 29: Amanda Kelly. *Glass Note*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, 3D prints, found objects, paper, extruded polystyrene foam, 18 x 12 x 11 inches.

these individuals may carry the emotional scars of their upbringing, impacting their relationships, decision-making abilities, and overall quality of life.⁴³

Set within the nostalgic backdrop of the 1990s, *Glass Note* captures the reality of childhood neglect (fig. 29). Inspired by Amelia B.'s short story, *Glass*, the broken glass in this work is swept into an abandoned pile and not discarded (fig. 30). Despite the apparent hazard it poses, there are no signs of cleanup from the parents, hinting at their neglectful and indifferent attitude toward the safety and well-being of their children. Yet amidst the clutter, bittersweet glimpses of normalcy emerge—a half-eaten birthday cake and party plates on the crowded table (fig. 31). Parents with compulsive hoarding disorder can have difficulty maintaining a clutter-free and sanitary

⁴³ Kurutz, "Children of Hoarders on Leaving the Cluttered Nest - The New York Times."



Figure 31: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Glass Note*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, 3D prints, found objects, paper, extruded polystyrene foam, 18 x 12 x 11 inches.

environment. Compulsive hoarding can cause harmful and lasting effects on family relationships and dynamics.

Living the way we did required many specific stretches and maneuvers to move safely throughout the house. There was no such thing as simply walking a straight line between Point A and Point B- even in the short distance between the couch and the piano, a barely navigable maze of stuff teetered ominously.

The "turn and squeeze" move got you through the piles of junk between the living room and the dining room (although we never ate in there, the dining table also being covered in junk). "Jump, climb, and crawl" got you over piles of old computers, boxes of clothes, and papers in the family room, allowing you to reach the tall bookshelves by the never-lit fireplace.

I was not allowed to move anything or throw anything away without permission and that permission was rarely granted. Mom collected things compulsively and never got rid of anything. She was what is known as a "hoarder," although that wasn't a word I would learn for many years.

A piece of paper covered most of the pile of broken glass, roughly torn and, like the floor, dirty.

"BROKEN GLASS-DO NOT STEP ON!!!" was scrawled on it in green crayon, a smiley face drawn underneath. Mom's handwriting was as familiar to me as her face.

—Excerpt from *Glass* by Amelia B.⁴⁴



Figure 30: Amanda Kelly. Detail from *Glass Note*, 2024. 1:12 scale miniature. Wood, 3D prints, found objects, paper, extruded polystyrene foam, 18 x 12 x 11 inches.

⁴⁴ B., "Glass."

CHAPTER 5: CREATIVE PROCESS

*“The dollhouse is a materialized secret; what we look for is the dollhouse within the dollhouse
and its promise of infinitely profound interiority”*

-Susan Stewart⁴⁵

The process of creating my work begins with extensive research and rough sketches. My commitment to realism makes research indispensable, mainly when crafting miniature scenes with specific historical contexts. Take, for instance, *Goat Paths*, a piece inspired by the tale of the Collyer Brothers, unfolding between 1942 and 1947. While depicting the brother’s compulsive hoarding disorder, I encountered the challenge of authenticity. Garbage bags, a staple element in such scenes, posed a dilemma as they weren’t introduced until 1950. Other objects to consider were book covers, pin-up images, and brand-name items, which, when included, had to be time-accurate. I also utilized online tools such as the Times Archive, cataloging New York Times articles from 1785 to 1985 (fig. 32). Immersing myself in the brother’s narrative through archived articles offered insights into public perceptions at the time. I also found digital archives of catalogs and magazines for *Glass Note*, set in the late 1990s. Researching object dimensions is also crucial to crafting realistic miniatures. Accurate scale and proportions help capture the essence of real-life pieces, whether historic or contemporary. I can replicate specific styles and design elements with precise measurements to enhance realism.

Research continues throughout the process, but I sketch a composition’s key elements and components once I have context. Drawing inspiration from a short story for *Glass Note*, the initial sketch depicted the story’s main elements: a kitchen with a pile of glass. Searching through my extensive miniature furniture and accessories collection, I put aside items aligned with the envisioned scene. While not every piece makes the final cut, having a surplus ensures flexibility and creative freedom. Ironically, my process of accumulating a vast array of miniature objects and

⁴⁵ Stewart, “The Miniature,” 61



Figure 32: Articles from the *New York Times* 1942-1958. 2024. Times Archive, New York Times.

materials mirrors the subject I explore in my work—compulsive hoarding. Yet, unlike the chaotic accumulation often associated with hoarding, my collection is purposefully curated and selected for its potential contribution to a miniature scene. Once I have chosen items from my collection, I plan to create the remaining necessary miniatures. This involves three approaches: "scratch-building," where items are crafted entirely from raw materials like wood, paper, or plastic; 3D printing, which may entail sourcing or designing 3D models; and purchasing pre-made kits customized to fit my needs. While most of my works are rooted in scratch-building, I often incorporate 3D printing and laser cutting for specific objects to blend handmade craftsmanship with digital processes.

With every project, I relish the opportunity to make miniatures from scratch. *Scratch-building* involves using plain materials such as wood, plastic, paper, and chipboard. I design, measure, and fabricate each component based on reference materials. This process often involves cutting, shaping, gluing, and assembling individual parts to create the desired structure or object. *Kit-bashing* involves modifying or assembling miniature kits to create custom models, often combining parts from different kits to achieve a unique result. Both of these techniques are about finding beauty and potential in discarded materials. Incorporating found objects and recycled

materials into my work adds depth and uniqueness that can't be achieved with store-bought supplies alone. Using my collection of "bits and bobs" (small bits of plastic, wood, paper, and resin; jewelry parts; broken miniatures, etc.), I'm challenged to adapt and reimagine existing materials to fit my vision. A hot glue stick can become a miniature candle, a spray cap can become a tiny trash can, and the bristles of an old paintbrush can become a broom. In "You can't tow a Uhaul to the grave," I constructed the trailer from foam core, styrene sheets, found objects, wood, chipboard, and vinyl paper (fig. 33). While the coffin was entirely 3D printed, I also customized it with cut styrene rods and paper. Additionally, the tow hitch was scratch-built using wood and plastic parts. This fusion of traditional craftsmanship with digital methods creates a dynamic composition.

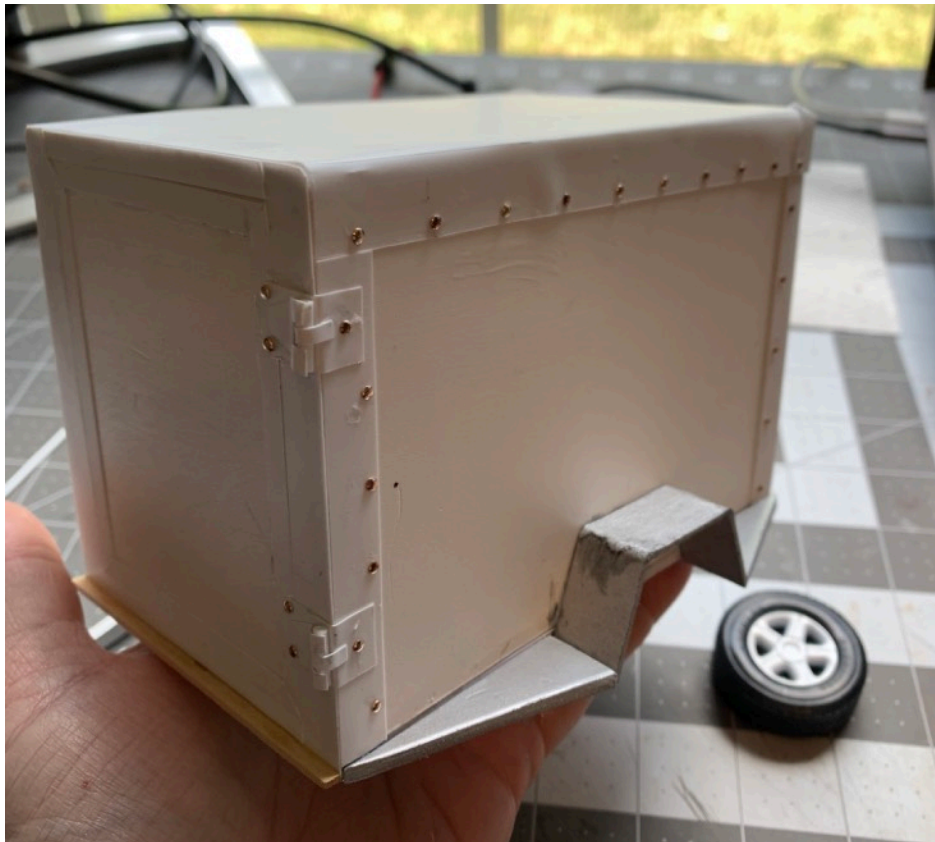


Figure 33: Scratch-built trailer for *You can't tow a Uhaul to the grave*, 2024.

Blending Analog with Digital

3D printing, also known as additive manufacturing, is the process of creating three-dimensional objects from a digital file. Unlike traditional manufacturing methods that involve subtractive processes (like cutting or drilling) from a solid block of material, 3D printing builds objects layer by layer. The process typically begins with a digital model of the object, created using computer-aided design (CAD) software or obtained from a 3D scanner. This digital model is then sliced into thin horizontal layers using specialized software. The 3D printer interprets these layers and deposits material, such as plastic or resin, layer by layer according to the digital model. Laser cutting, on the other hand, is a subtractive manufacturing process that uses a high-powered laser beam to cut or engrave materials precisely. The material to be cut or engraved is typically held on a flat surface, and the laser beam is controlled by a CAD program or software to follow the desired cutting or engraving path. This allows for intricate designs, fine details, and precise cuts with minimal material waste.

I employed digital fabrication techniques for *Smoke Break* to achieve intricate details and realism. I designed the elaborate tile floor pattern using Illustrator, which was then laser cut onto wood. After removing the masking tape surface, the remaining glue acted as a “resist” during spray painting, preserving the laser-cut lines as “grout” between tiles. While the radiator and toilet 3D models were sourced, I created the sink model from scratch using Blender’s CAD software (fig. 34). After recreating the 1950s sink, I 3D printed it in resin. I can harness the best of both worlds by combining scratch-building with digital processes. (fig. 35) Building with traditional methods and assembling materials by hand allow me to infuse each piece with a sense of character and authenticity that machines can’t replicate. Once the groundwork is laid, I turn to digital processes to add layers of detail and complexity. The 3D printing process enables me to create to-scale miniature objects with precision and consistency, while laser cutting allows me to cut walls, doors, windows, and floors easily. Incorporating digital processes into my workflow also offers practical advantages, such as making duplicates efficiently and refining designs quickly. It also opens up new avenues for experimentation, allowing me to push the boundaries of what’s possible in miniatures.

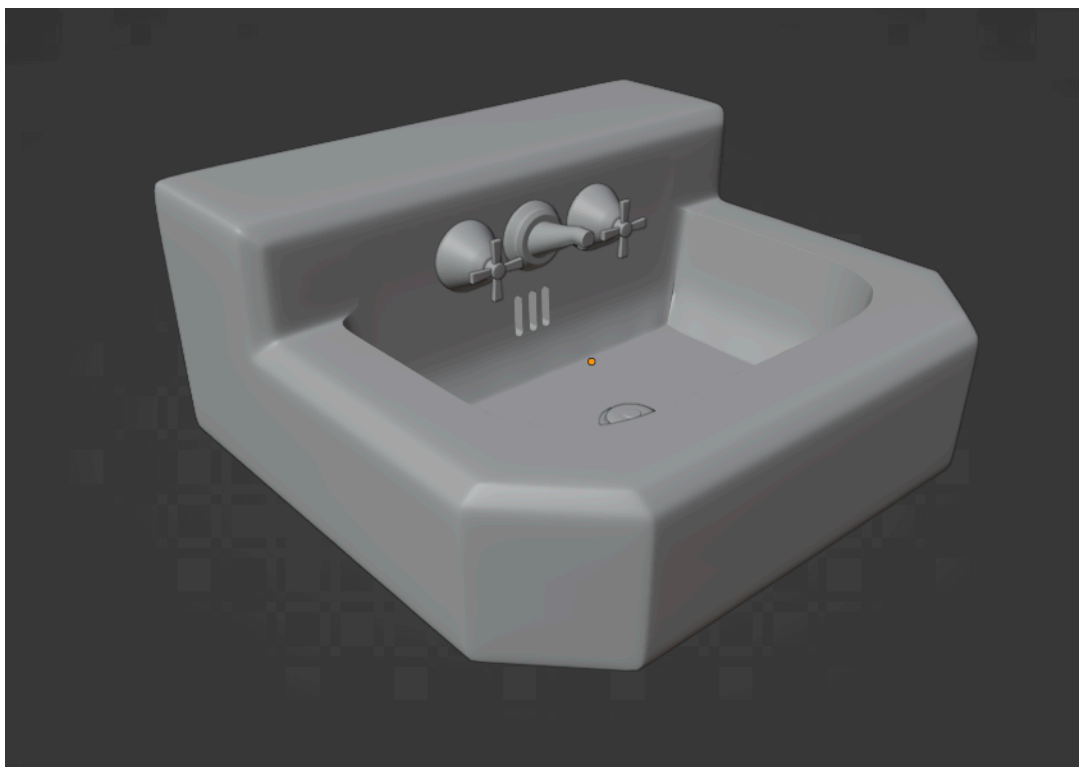


Figure 34: 3D model of the sink from *Smoke Break*, 2024. Blender.

Materiality

The materials I use play a pivotal role in crafting miniatures, dictating the appearance and the feasibility of replicating real-life objects in miniature form. Each material presents challenges and opportunities, influencing the techniques and approaches in miniature-making. Consider fabric, for example. While it adds texture and realism to miniature scenes, fabric doesn't naturally conform to miniature proportions as in real life. I often use adhesives to secure the fabric to overcome this challenge, carefully manipulating it to achieve the desired drape and form. Despite its limitations, fabric, when done correctly, can look very realistic in a miniature scene.

On the other hand, materials like wood offer more versatility and flexibility in replication. With the right tools and techniques, wood can be carved, shaped, and stained to resemble its full-scale counterpart closely. What's fascinating about working in miniature is the scale itself. Since miniatures are much smaller than their real-life counterparts, I can get away with employing a wide range of techniques and materials that might not be feasible on a larger scale. For example, materials like paper or plastic can be transformed to mimic various textures and surfaces. The

choice of materials played a crucial role in shaping the narrative of *Pocket Hoarder*. The handmade quality of the polymer clay furniture and items echoes the theme of nostalgia and sentimentality (fig. 36). I deliberately hand sculpted most of the details rather than opting for solely 3D printing.

From subtle cracks in wood, faded paint on metal surfaces, or worn edges on furniture, I imply the passing of time and human interaction—lived-in yet neglected. Distressing and weathering techniques create the illusion of wear and tear while evoking a sense of history and storytelling. I create the look of dirt and grime by applying inks, pigments, and oil washes. I layer dry and wet methods, blotting away the excess and then reapplying to add depth. Oil washes, in particular, are excellent for bringing out texture. I paint over liquid latex or glue for peeling paint and then use a heat gun to crack and peel the paint. I use unconventional materials like ground coffee for dirt, real dried moss for miniature overgrowth, and cinnamon for rusted metal. For finer dirt, I use grout or pigments. I make or use pre-made miniature leaves in different shapes and sizes.

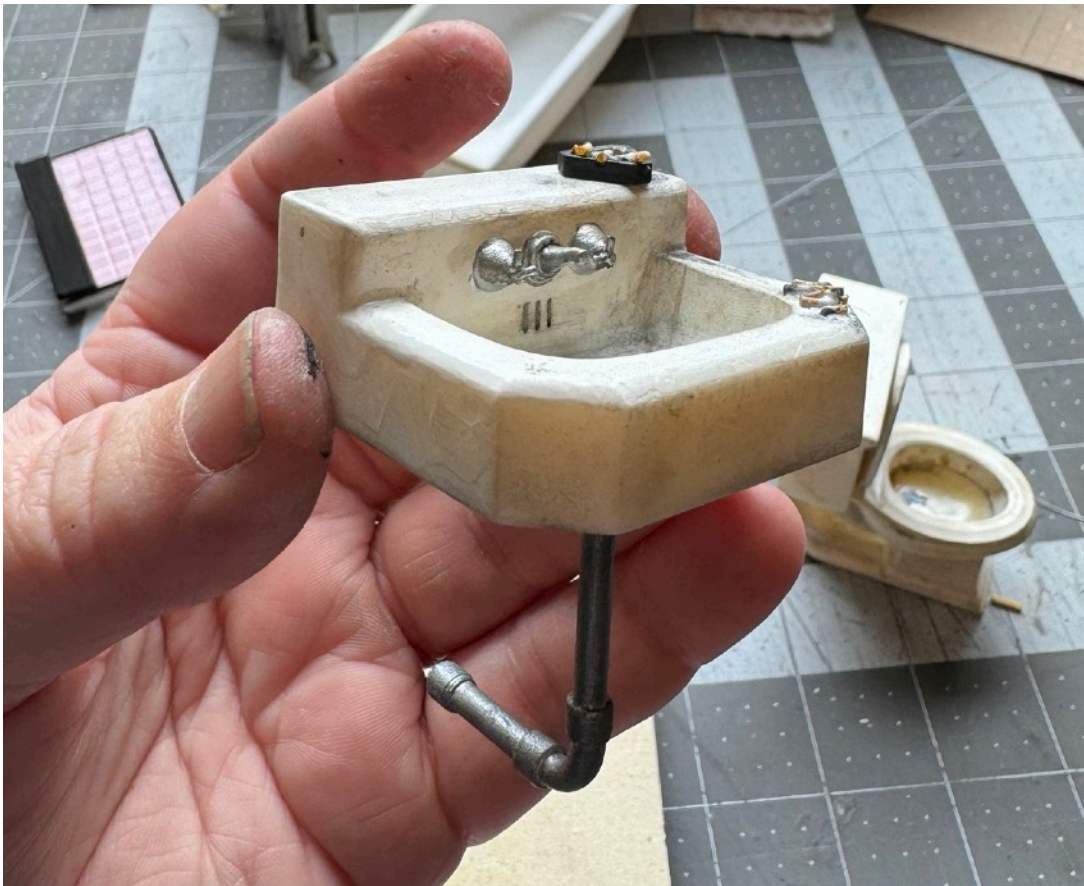


Figure 35: 3D printed model of the sink from *Smoke Break*, 2024. Resin, paper, styrene tube.

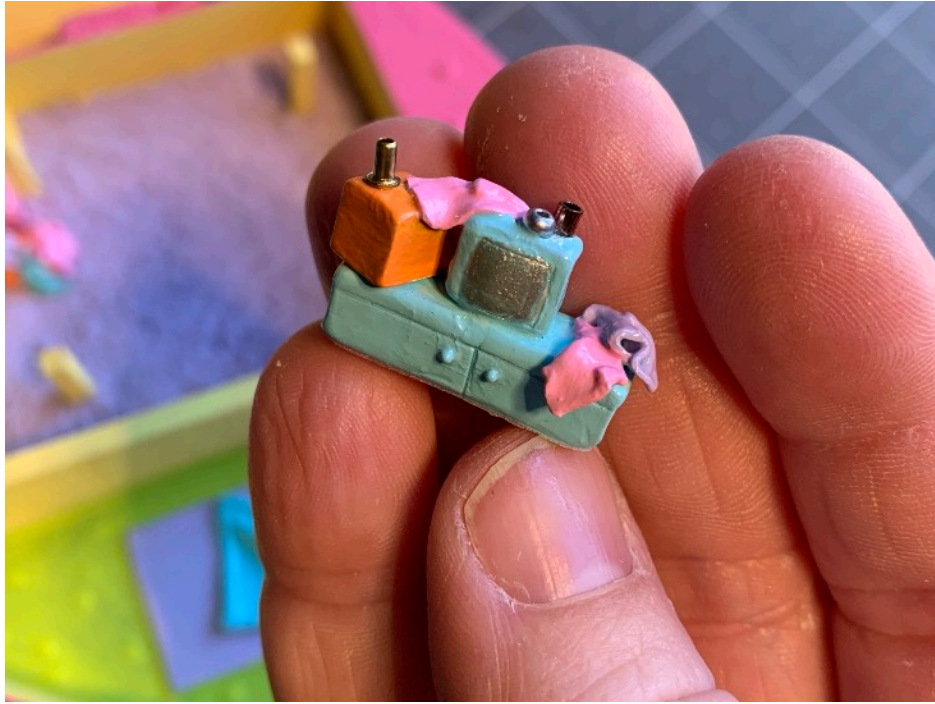


Figure 36: TV on a tv stand for *Pocket Hoarder*, 2024. Polymer clay.

The key to realism in miniature is to use variety—size, shape, color, etc. I use my X-acto knife and other sharp tools to gouge and carve into wood, fabric, and other surfaces. Each imperfection hints at the passage of years and the memories within the scene.

Finishing and Details

Assembling the miniature pieces is akin to solving a complex puzzle, where each component must fit seamlessly to create a cohesive whole. It requires patience, precision, and a keen eye for detail to bring my sketches and plans to life. Just as a curator carefully selects and arranges artworks in a gallery to evoke a specific mood or theme, I approach the placement of objects in my miniature scenes with intention and purpose. Each object is chosen for its visual appeal and ability to contribute to the story I'm trying to tell. As I arrange the objects within the miniature space, I pay close attention to composition and balance (fig. 37). Every object, from a small coffee cup to a piece of furniture, shapes the scene's atmosphere, narrative, and aesthetic.

Problem-solving is also an inevitable part of the process, as unexpected challenges and obstacles may arise. Whether it's a structural issue, a design flaw, or a material limitation, I approach each problem with an open mind. *The Avalanche's* main hallway scene was the easiest part



Figure 37: The beginning stages of the layout for *Glass Note*, 2024.

for me to assemble, while the exterior was more of a challenge. I wanted the outside to resemble a trash bag reminiscence of Balenciaga's "trash bag large tote." Initially, I made the main structure from insulation and spray foam, carving it into shape. Then, I used plaster wrap to make a hard shell. I planned to sand it smooth and paint it white to resemble marble. However, the plastic was too chalky and bumpy. I shifted my plan to use Worbla, a thermoplastic that can be molded and sculpted with heat. It worked perfectly to give the effect of fabric and was easy to manipulate (fig. 38). I also failed to account for the electrical cord, which I had to cut and splice back together. Luckily, I can problem-solve on the go and, in the end, produce finished and unique work.

The exterior presentation of each miniature piece is a deliberate choice that adds another layer of depth and meaning to the artwork. *Goat Paths* is housed within a box with viewports that resemble a piece of furniture, complete with four legs made from old banister spindles. *Glass Note* is wrapped up like a birthday gift, with paper and ribbon encasing the scene that mirrors the hoarded birthday scene within. *Smoke Break's* exterior is bricked with cigarettes, showing the theme of

addiction and accumulation. *The Avalanche* is housed within a sculpted trash bag, symbolizing the overwhelming burden of clutter and the overconsumption of high-end fashion. *Unprecedented Times* is presented on a map of the United States, reflecting the widespread impact of COVID-19. In each case, the exterior vessel serves as a visual metaphor, enhancing the narrative and inviting viewers to engage with the piece on multiple levels.



Figure 38: The process of making the exterior shell of *The Avalanche*. Foam, thermoplastic.

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTION

*“Under the sway of the miniature I contemplate my isolation, and my contemplation is clean,
uncorrupted by the impurity of terror.”*

-Steven Millhauser⁴⁶

As I put the final touches on my MFA thesis, "The Need to Keep," I was flooded with mixed emotions. Completing this work felt like an immense accomplishment, but it also carried its weight. This project delved into deeply personal and emotional territory, demanding every ounce of my creativity, patience, and resilience. I felt a profound release when I finished the last artwork, *Smoke Break*. It was as if a heavy burden had been lifted from my shoulders. Creating this body of work also pushed me to expand my skills beyond miniature work. I explored new techniques and pushed the limits of what I thought was possible in such a small scale. I also ventured into full-size sculpture, exploring new materials and methods. In many ways, *The Need to Keep* marked the beginning of a new chapter in my artistic practice.

Installation

When I approached the completion of my thesis, my focus shifted towards the installation process. Considering the unique nature of miniatures, I pondered the various display methods, realizing that more than traditional podium placements might be needed. Many of my pieces were intentionally designed to challenge conventional display methods, particularly by incorporating wall-mounted works to disrupt expectations. For work requiring a podium, I sought to enhance interaction by integrating elements beyond the pedestal's confines. Miniatures displayed behind glass or on podiums create a barrier with the viewer that leads to a voyeuristic experience.⁴⁷ Take, for instance, *The Avalanche*, in which I envisioned miniature clothing cascading down the front of

⁴⁶ Millhauser, "The Fascination of the Miniature," 135

⁴⁷ Jozwiak, Jörg. 2021. "Miniature Appreciation - What's so Great about Little Models?" *World Art* 11 (2): 149–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2020.1797865>.

the podium, gradually transitioning into life-size garments that form a puddle at its base (fig. 39). This juxtaposition of scales adds visual intrigue and invites viewers to engage more intimately with the installation. I strategically positioned *Goat Paths*, a freestanding piece, in a corner, allowing viewers to explore it from all angles (fig. 40). To further delineate its space and encourage



Figure 39: *The Avalanche*, 2024. Installation, Radford University Art Museum, Tyler Gallery, Radford, VA.

interaction, I covered the area with a large rug and placed stools around the piece, signaling its accessibility. I used rugs in other areas to hide unwanted electrical cords and make the space feel more intimate and home-like.

In addition to the main exhibits, I curated still-life groupings of objects sourced from thrift stores and the Goodwill outlet center (fig. 41). Among these treasures were old phones, slide organizers, rugs, and various knick-knacks, each contributing to the immersive experience of the exhibit. One such grouping, positioned discreetly in the corner behind *Goat Paths*, frames the

artwork and immerses the viewer in the themes of hoarding and accumulation explored throughout the exhibition. I created an environment that showcased my work and invited viewers to actively engage with and contemplate the narratives embedded within each piece. To enhance the interactive experience of my exhibition, I added magnifying glasses for visitors. These magnifiers allowed viewers to look closer at the details of each piece that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

My artist statement, show catalog, and artist biography are on display at the beginning of my exhibit (fig. 42). Viewers are encouraged to look through the show catalog for high-res detail shots of each work. I curated a comprehensive display of my artistic process on the same wall. Alongside sketches and a scale model of the gallery exhibition, I showcased some miniature-making tools: tweezers, toothpicks, a millimeter ruler, and miter shears. Some of my paintings are also on display to showcase my skills as a painter. My oil painting, *Self Portrait of a Miniaturist*, depicts me holding a dollhouse and representing my artistic identity (fig. 42). My series *My Favorite Tweezers* comprises five oil paintings of my five favorite tweezers I use daily (fig. 44). Lastly, my gouache paintings *Childhood Dreams* nostalgically depict the dollhouses of my childhood and provide a glimpse into the inspiration behind my love of miniatures.

For each work in the exhibition, I took a creative approach to crafting the wall labels. I weathered cut pieces of wood to have an aged and dirty appearance. Then, I printed the information for each work onto clear sticker paper and carefully affixed them to the wood surface. This technique provided an abandoned aesthetic and added a unique element to the show's overall presentation.

The Future

After being immersed in the topic of compulsive hoarding for the past three years, what's next? I sketched many ideas and concepts for my thesis that were never used, and I believe *The Need to Keep* is complete as a body of work. However, there is more I can express about compulsive hoarding. My next plan is to create a short film about hoarding using stop-motion animation.

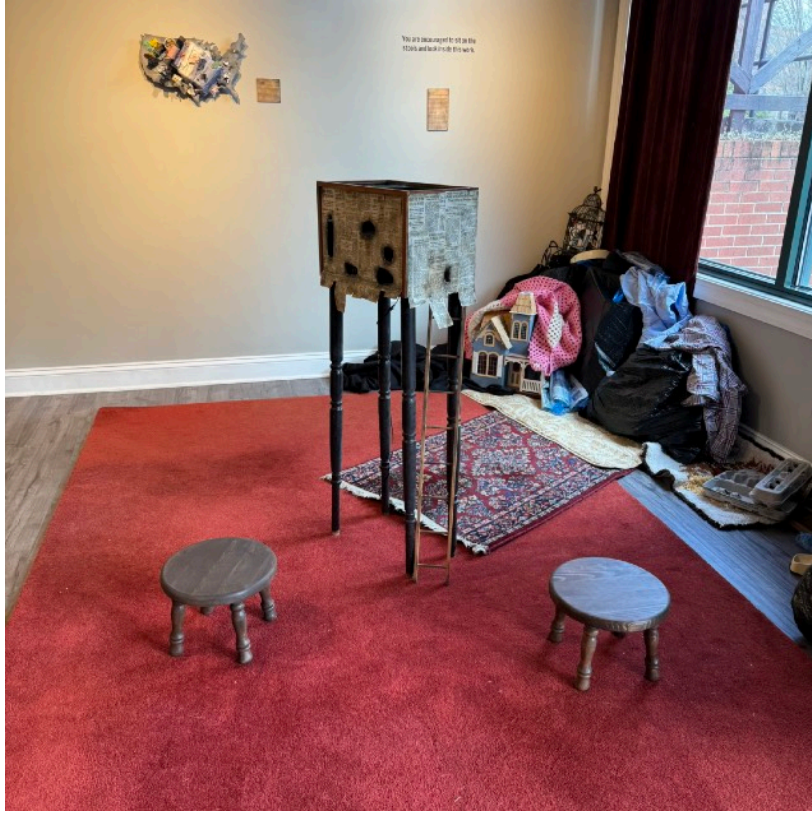


Figure 40: *Goat Paths 2023*. Installation, Radford University Art Museum, Tyler Gallery. Radford, VA.



Figure 41: *Object piles*. Installation, Radford University Art Museum, Tyler Gallery. Radford, VA.

Through the lens of a child growing up in a hoarding environment, I'd like to explore the phenomenon of "the call of the void," which describes the inexplicable urge or impulse to engage in self-destructive behavior. I also have a few series of works that I'd like to create. For example, I'd like to continue the idea of *Unprecedented Times* by making a series of different wall-mounted miniature beds because much can be expressed through the intimate space of one's bed. Additionally, I'm drawn to exploring conceptual and interdisciplinary approaches through installation, interactive media, and painting. As an artist and miniaturist, my creativity knows no bounds. I refuse to confine myself solely to one medium. Instead, I embrace the freedom to explore and experiment across various artistic disciplines.



Figure 42: Artist statement, artist bio, and creative process. Installation, Radford University Art Museum, Tyler Gallery. Radford, VA.



Figure 43: Amanda Kelly. *Self-portrait of a Miniaturist*, 2021. Oil painting on wood board



Figure 44: Amanda Kelly. *My favorite Tweezers*, 2022. Series of five oil paintings on canvas

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APPENDIX A



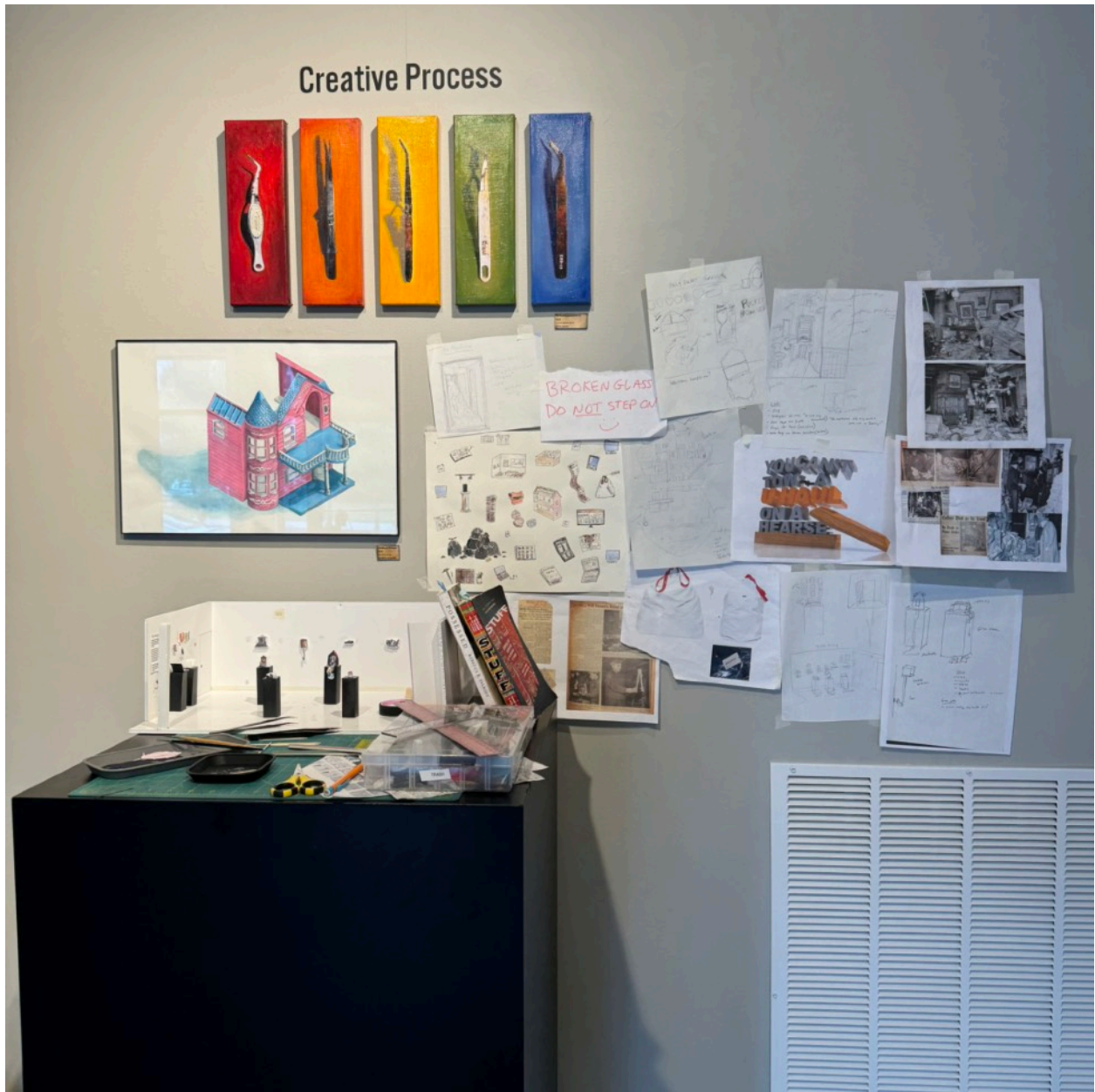
Sketch of Smoke Break



Sketch of Glass Note



1:18 scale model of exhibition installation



Additional details of *The Need to Keep* installation



Additional details of *Hoarder's Porch*



Additional details of *Glass Note*



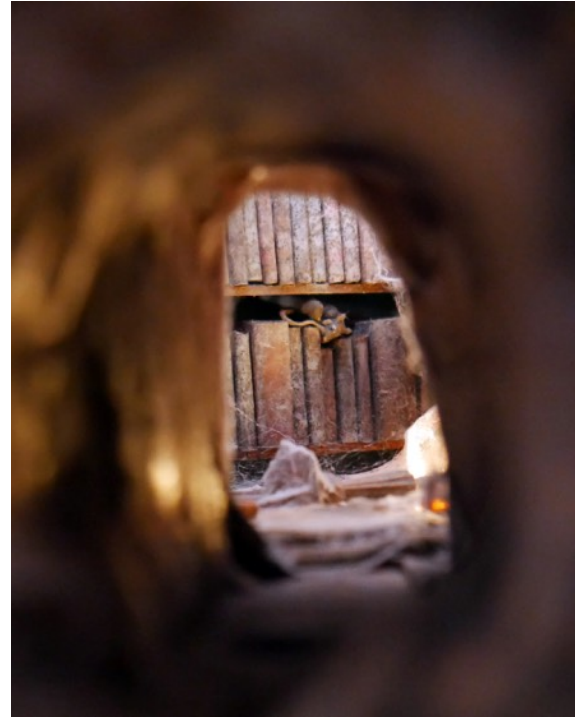
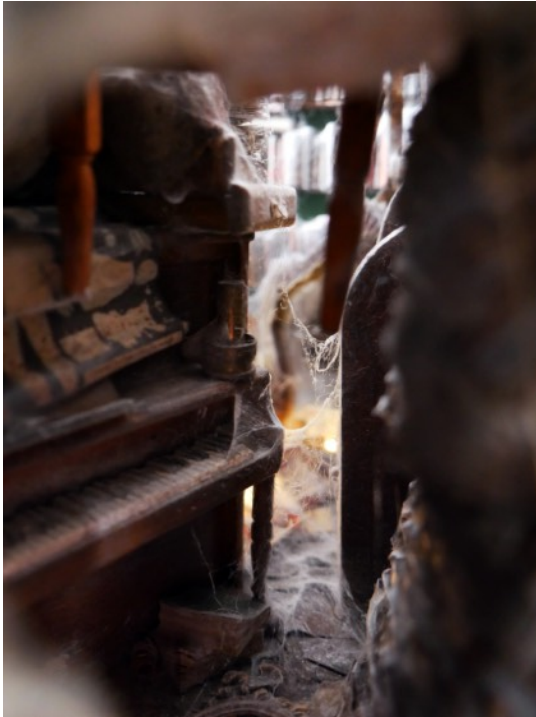
Additional details of *You can't tow a Uhaul to the grave*



Additional details of *Time's up, Betty*



Additional details of *Smoke Break*



Additional details of *Goat Paths*



Additional details of *Unprecedented Times*



Additional details of *The Avalanche*



Additional details of *Pocket Hoarder*



Additional details of *The Need to Keep* installation



Additional details of *The Need to Keep* installation



Additional details of *The Need to Keep* installation



Additional details of *The Need to Keep* installation

APPENDIX B

Glass

by Amelia B.

Broken glass lay scattered on the dirty kitchen floor, untouched.

I circled it on tiptoe every day as I tried to reach the toaster on the counter, making myself something to eat before I left to trudge through the snow to the bus stop. My breakfast was usually two slices of bread, toasted, buttered, then sprinkled with a mixture of cinnamon and sugar. Stretching over the counter, I reached for the cinnamon shaker, keeping my feet safely away from the sprinkling of glass. I perfected this stretching move over the weeks that the broken glass stayed there. Living the way we did required many specific stretches and maneuvers to move safely throughout the house. There was no such thing as simply walking a straight line between Point A and Point B in our house- even in the short distance between the couch and the piano, a barely-navigable maze of stuff teetered ominously. The "turn and squeeze" move got you through the piles of junk between the living room and the dining room (although we never ate in there, the dining table also being covered in junk). "Jump, climb, and crawl" got you over piles of old computers, boxes of clothes, and papers in the family room, allowing you to reach the tall bookshelves by the never-lit fireplace.

I was not allowed to move anything or throw anything away without permission- and that permission was rarely granted. Mom collected things compulsively, and never got rid of anything. She was what is known as a "hoarder," although that wasn't a word I would learn for many years.

A piece of paper covered most of the pile of broken glass, roughly torn, and, like the floor, dirty.

BROKEN GLASS-

DO NOT STEP ON!!!

was scrawled on it in green crayon, a smiley face drawn underneath. Mom's handwriting was as familiar to me as her face.

I don't remember what had broken (probably a water glass) or who had dropped it, only that Mom hadn't been able to find a broom or dustpan in any of the piles of clutter crowding the house, so she did what she apparently saw as the second-most responsible solution: she swept the glass into a slightly smaller surface area using a scrap of cardboard, then left a note on top so Dad and I wouldn't accidentally step on a shard and slice one of our feet open. My little sister was usually confined to her play pen or Mom and Dad's bedroom, so she wasn't a concern for foot-slicing. A few days after whatever-it-was originally shattered, Mom finally found a broom. I had never seen it before, or indeed, ever seen her sweep the kitchen floor in this house. Actually, I hadn't seen her clean at all since we moved here a year ago.

"Now I just have to find the dustpan, and we'll be good to go!" Mom chirped cheerfully, almost alarmingly so. I'd just gotten back home from school. She made me a piece of toast and asked if I had homework. I answered, as I always did, that I was going to do my homework in my bedroom. (There was no other space in the house with a clean area for my notebooks in the same vicinity as a clean, comfortable place to sit. Sometimes Mom or Dad came into my bedroom to sit at my desk and write a grocery list or a note, since it was the only place in the house where it was comfortable to do so.)

"I'm going to lie down for a while, but I'll be up to make dinner later, okay?" Mom said. "Okay," I answered. In most of my memories of my mom, she's in bed. I used to beg her to get up sometimes, to please come upstairs and be with us. I feel bad about that now, knowing how she must have been suffering, but children are notoriously selfish.

One week later, Mom still hadn't acquired a dustpan, or thought of any other solution. The broom leaning against the counter kept its sideways guard over the glass and warning note. Finally, right after Dad came home from work one day, she begged him to help her find a way to clean up the broken glass. He didn't seem either thrilled or bothered by its presence, but then, I surmised, he was much taller than me so it was easier to ignore. He could lean over and reach the counter, toaster, and cupboards with no trouble, glass or no glass.

"I'm worried about our daughter cutting her feet!" Mom moaned at him, not hysterical like she sometimes got, but definitely crying, angry. She seemed as helpless as my baby sister to me in that moment, and that made a knot of pity, fear, and revulsion twist around my heart.

Dad groaned, moaned, and muttered, but he eventually hauled the vacuum out from beneath a pile of clothes, church newsletters, knick knacks, books, and newspaper ads in the living room. I almost never saw our vacuum cleaner. Since the carpet in any given room was rarely visible, there was no way to vacuum it, even if this type of home maintenance was something my mom was at all interested in. Which, clearly, she was not.

When Dad was done cleaning up the glass, he left the vacuum in the middle of the kitchen floor. There was no closet with space to fit it in, anyway. I chose to believe he left it there as a favor to Mom, so that if something else broke in the kitchen, she would be aware of where the vacuum was and maybe be able to clean it up herself.

Mom's smiley-face-adorned, green-crayoned note warning us not to step on broken glass lay forgotten on the kitchen floor the next morning as I happily made my cinnamon toast in the glass-free kitchen. Dad was already at work, choosing to go in early and stay late rather than spend much time at home. Mom was in bed. (She woke up to see me off to school on picture day and my birthday, but today was neither.) Since I wasn't allowed to throw anything away without Mom's permission, I left the note where it was. Eventually, a mixture of food spills and grime over the long months of my second-grade year glued it to the floor. It stayed there, only disappearing when the sink flooded part of the floor one day two years later, and the note finally washed away or disintegrated.