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Tammie Knight

The World in Miniature



Words by Ellis LeBlanc

Objects represented in miniature are fairly common—dollhouses, toys, and even art showcase narratives depicted on a small scale. Miniatures are an incredibly tactile art form and beg to be picked up and fiddled with. The miniature scenes created by Tammie Knight ignite that sense of excitement to explore while inviting one to place themselves inside the space. You can see yourself relaxing on the red velvet couch with a good book and sipping tea in “A Peek in the Victorian Parlor” or cooking in the extravagant kitchen in “The Busy Chef’s Kitchen.” However, one of the most tangible and enticing spaces is one you can’t touch. It’s her gallery space titled Black Cherry Mid-Century, in which she’s curated a show, entitled “WE MATTER.” It’s her first installation and a collaboration with Adrian Octavius Walker, featuring his work. Knight and I sat down to converse about miniatures, the art world, and the impact of her work. Her gallery space is not a space for you to touch. Rather, it’s someplace to stop, reflect, and question what’s going on around you. While talking with her, it was impossible not to envision us in her gallery. Let’s take a step inside.

I’m always curious to hear how artists got started making art. How did you get started creating miniatures?
I’m the artist of my family. When I was constantly drawing as a child, my mother realized that I was more than just a passing fancy. She would take us—myself and my two older sisters—to museums. One of my absolute favorites was the Museum of the City of New York. At the time, their third floor was filled with dollhouses and miniatures. I thought that was really cool. When I ended up with a dollhouse of my own, I wasn’t playing with it like a normal kid; I was actually designing it. I made my own wallpaper and used scraps of fabric to make sheets or blankets. It became such a passion.

It stuck with me right up to college—I went to Parsons School of Design. People would ask me why I wasn’t majoring in interior design or architecture. And the truth of the matter is I’m not very disciplined when it comes to math and having to be precise. I do most things by eye—which has always driven my father crazy! While a student at Parsons, I persuaded a Madison Avenue dollhouse shop to hire me and, during the three years that I was there, I not only worked on dollhouses, but also on miniature scenes and studies for some celebrities like Dustin Hoffman, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and Barbra Streisand. Miniatures have been big in my life for a long time.

That’s an amazing journey. I always love hearing about how an artist’s passion is developed. Art has always been a focal point of my life—I grew up in and out of museums and studied art history through college—and when it comes to miniatures, I tend to think of small, clay figurines and not always a space. Your work is very unique but also familiar, like a dollhouse.

That totally makes sense. It’s funny that you mentioned art history. I actually thought that I would be a curator of a museum one day. However, I had a professor at Parsons who talked me out of it, and I’m bummed that he did. He was actually a cool guy, but he told me that there aren’t or weren’t many female curators and, frankly, that there weren’t many Black female curators. So, [he advised that I should] maybe come up with a plan B. I wish I hadn’t listened, because my third cousin is actually the currently seated secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. We were talking recently about the idea of pursuing a lofty, challenging goal and the need to bring others along when you’re attempting to achieve something that is perhaps new to people. Part of the impetus for that idea was the thought that while there’s certainly nothing wrong with having a museum or an institution that is specifically for a particular group of people in a setting that those people will go to, it might be more accessible to people if it wasn’t in a location that made it likely for a specific community (for example, there’s the Harlem Museum, located in Harlem, which is really marvelous, and it’s all about Black experience, Black art, and Black culture).

The premier gallery that I worked on is the “WE MATTER” photography exhibition by Adrian Octavius Walker, who is a good friend of mine. Before COVID, we were talking about the idea of a traveling miniature gallery where we could mail it to different places (like galleries, libraries, museums, etc.). It could be packed up and sent from place to place. But then COVID hit, and that didn’t seem like a great idea. I decided to go ahead and make it anyway. And a few weeks ago, I had this epiphany that I wanted to give it a geographical location. So outside of the gallery windows, you see the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It’s this gorgeous photo of the MET when it was initially shut down because of COVID, and there are these two huge banners that read “Dream” and “Together.” I thought, what an audacious thing to put this gallery—this Black woman-owned gallery that features the work of a very talented Black creative—smack dab in what would be the crosswalk at the beginning of museum mile, in front of the MET. I thought, that’s a pretty big statement to make.

Wow, that’s incredibly powerful. I love that idea of giving the gallery a physical space to exist in—and especially in front of the MET. By placing “WE MATTER” there, we as the audience have to engage in the current conversation surrounding

museums and their handling of their history of colonization before exiting the gallery to go to the MET. It’s going to be fascinating to see what the feedback is.
I’m excited about it, too. If you got the chance to look at my website, you may have noticed that I don’t put figures in my miniature scenes, because the idea is that I want it to be the experience of the person looking at it. I’m trying to tell the story of how I see the world and then play that out in miniature. Miniatures are my medium to tell stories. What’s really fun is when someone notices something they misread, something they didn’t really see when they first looked at it. There’s always more to discover within a miniature scene.

It took me a while to realize that there aren’t figures in your work. It wasn’t until after I had looked them all over and then read the descriptions that I caught on to it. I think I was subconsciously placing figures in all the scenes. Each scene is caught in the middle of an action, and I wanted there to be someone completing the action.

You just made my heart sing! That’s the whole point, right? It’s supposed to be a moment, just after or just before a human was there. I love the idea of you picturing figures in the spaces. That’s exactly what I want my work to represent. I want people to play out the scenes while thinking of themselves or other people in the scene. I created. I think that’s magical.

How we as individuals bring our own experiences into the artwork is very important to acknowledge. It definitely adds a layer and perspective to any work. Can you tell me more about the “WE MATTER” gallery show project and what that entails?

It’s now complete, even though it took quite a bit to get here. I started it back in April. The original gallery was a lot smaller, and it included some of Adrian’s portraits—which I love. They are very powerful photos. I showed it to Adrian, and he flipped out. He loved it. The “WE MATTER” show is a part of that story. I told him I wanted to make a full gallery of some of his work. We went back and forth on what to show in the space because he has other bodies of work that just aren’t as well-known. For him, “WE MATTER” is some of the most important work that he’s most proud of, so we decided I would tackle that incredible series of photos as my first full micro-gallery.

Within “WE MATTER” is the idea of softening Black masculinity. Within our society, there’s the stereotype of Black men as dangerous... as thugs or bullies. Adrian putting a Black man in a dung, (especially a good looking Black man at that), created a kind of fun, softer experience than what is usually seen, right? Instead of the portrayal of Black men as a danger, you get to see them differently. I just love “The Black Virgin Mary”—the one that ended up at the Smithsonian. I go back to it all the time. I love the juxtaposition of this sort of velvety dung that’s emerald green and beautiful, and this very dark Black man who has very African features—full lips and a full nose. He’s so striking. I feel very honored that I get to represent it.

His work is so emotional. Every time I look at his pictures I’m just knocked over. There’s so much history and contemporary affairs being added. The photos you’ve sent over of the gallery so far are stunning. I love seeing the process of the space coming together. What’s the physical layout of the space? Are there multiple rooms? It’s one big space. The gallery is called Black Cherry Mid-Century for many reasons. I did design it so that some of the walls can actually move—to make it a modular space. The idea behind this gallery is much like that of a full-sized gallery. There isn’t a permanent show.

Oh wow I hadn’t realized that. What are your hopes for the future of the gallery?
The goal is to have lots of different artists and different shows coming in and out, just like a real gallery. I think it’s a fun idea, because I haven’t seen anyone do anything quite like this. As much as I love the idea of a miniature gallery that could be anywhere, that’s not nearly as appealing to me as a miniature gallery that could be “somewhere.” The miniature “WE MATTER” gallery, for example, gives people that moment of, “Is that

really the MET? Location recognition is something that I love to play with. My vision is that some of my galleries will be in places where you might typically see them and some of them are where you would never have a gallery. I love the idea of having a real location outside of this fictitious gallery.

I love the idea of your miniature gallery being able to travel and be wherever it needs to be. Whatever the exterior space is that you're incorporating into the interior will be a powerful change to audience experience. In the current show, I think we see that beautifully. It forces the viewer to address the current conversation of how museums are addressing artworks by people of color by how the viewer is shown the miniature space.

It will be shown on Instagram, as well as in two-minute YouTube videos. I think it's just a fun idea to walk through a gallery in miniature, because there are moments where you forget that it's a miniature. I do love what you're talking about in the context of how Black artists are treated, and it goes back to if you have a Black-owned gallery for Black patrons in a Black neighborhood, to some degree, you've limited yourself. I say put the ethnic galleries where all the people go. I don't know if you've had the chance to go to the African American Museum of History and Culture...

I have not yet, but hopefully I can soon.

It's a jewel in the Smithsonian crown. I was thinking about it, and how it takes the importance of Black culture and Black history to America. There are the realities of slavery and how Blacks have been treated. But if you can peel back the layers of what we think we know, you can get to the history amongst Blacks beyond the origins of slavery in America, i.e. picking cotton, whether it's quilting, baking, or even farming. It's such a complex and beautiful tapestry to be unfolded and told. For me, it feels like an opportunity and almost an obligation to tell that story with my miniatures. It wasn't something I had thought about until, frankly, Adrian planned the seed to create his gallery in miniature. Then I thought, I want to create lots of galleries and tell the story of people of color, and of women, and of minorities—just a richer story about art in this country that needs to be told.

I'm very excited to see what comes next and what narratives will be told. When looking at the capitalist nature of the US art market, I especially see its tendency to favor art created by white men for profit. It's crucial to share stories from a different perspective of a different side of America.

When we think of a museum or gallery as a space for learning to be able to engage with another narrative—whether life sized or in miniature—a diverse rendering is critical in moving the art world forward. I love that it's going to have a strong online presence. That platform really opens it up in terms of accessibility.

I think so, too, but I think it's almost coincidental that there's a pandemic, because someone asked me if I saw this having legs and a life after the pandemic, and I said, 'OMG, yes!' The whole idea is it gives access in a way that people may not have experienced before, because you might not go to a gallery where you don't know anything about the works. And I'm telling you, here are all these incredible people creating art and it's being shown in a small gallery setting.

I love the idea of lingering in museums and galleries. They always have benches for folks to stop for a moment and look. I want to find a way to creatively tell the story of the person whose work I'm showing that causes people to stop and linger. With Adrian, it's easy because I actually know him, his family, and his history. But I want to cover the work of artists that I don't know. I think there's endless opportunity.

The lifespan of the gallery is going to be outstanding and just to see what you're able to do with it. Art is fun. I think the art world forgets that. It goes back to what—in my opinion—is the root of art and how art is meant to be shared; it is serious and tells a story, but it's also just fun and enjoyable. I think there's a natural

instinct to touch and play with a miniature. There's something about them that really pulls you into the space. How was working with Adrian on this project?

I'm biased, because I really do love Adrian. He's very serious, but there's a playful side to him. He feels like he has a responsibility and a role to help tell the story of the Black community. It's a cliché to hear that photographers use their camera lens to tell a story, but Adrian really does, and he's been doing that for a long time. He's a young man, but he's been doing this for a long time! What I love about him is his honesty. He isn't afraid to share what he thinks about something. That's a very important part of being a creative and an important part of being human. It's vital as a creative that you're willing to examine, juxtapose, question, call things out, and apply your experience to what you see. It's been a blast to work with Adrian.

That's wonderful! Collaboration is incredible. It's delightful to have that trust and respect to critique and compliment what you guys are working on. That level of communication is phenomenal.

Absolutely. It's going to be interesting when I start working with creatives that I don't know. Adrian was comfortable enough with me to tell me that he wasn't feeling the portraits in the first miniature gallery space. It's his work and my interpretation. I consider myself to be the miniature curator of these galleries. I want the artist's voice, point of view, and their work to shine.

From what I can tell from your website, most of your work has been private, interior spaces—a living room, a kitchen, etc—but the gallery is a public space. How has that transition been?

I had only recently started to think about that myself. A lot of my work is in small, familiar spaces, but all of a sudden it's this big, public space. The journey for me has been looking beyond what I think the experience should be and, instead, thinking about what I want other people's experiences to be. The gallery has to be bigger than my miniature—which sounds silly, because the miniature is what this whole work is. But it also has to do with the work being shown, right? It has to be about art. It's a hoisted experience where the person can appreciate the art and not be looking at the details of the gallery. It's about the art on the walls and not the walls themselves.

I hadn't thought of it in that way before. From where I was viewing it, everything was the artwork, right? The walls were just as important as the pieces. It'll be really interesting to go back to it and see it through that lens. My last question for you is there one of your works that you see yourself in often?

I love that question. There are two: one is an unfinished, nearly seven-foot brownstone dollhouse. The other is one I created for my husband for his birthday early in our relationship. He used to say that if he could have a business, he wanted to own a bar. So for his 25th birthday, I built him a bar. Whenever I see it, I can actually see us in that space. I really couldn't do what I'm doing without the support of my family. I have projects everywhere in the house. Yes, I do work on my own, but it's because of the cooperation of my husband and children that I'm able to do this. That's not lost on me at all.

That's wonderful to have that strong of a support system in place. It really reinforces your own confidence in your work as well as the desire to keep creating when it's being supported.

Exactly and the exciting part about the galleries is that I used to tell my husband that if I ever make it big with my miniatures it's going to be about more than just my work. The rooms and scenes I make are fun and interesting. But these galleries are the perfect marriage between fun, interesting, and making an impact.

It's a pivotal moment for me, and the story isn't just about my work; it's about the creatives that I want to show the work of. There's something really beautiful about that. It feels like I'm fulfilling my purpose by creating miniatures that tell a story, which gets exponentially bigger because it's slowing the work of other people.

