

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Plum Cloutman

Kennel Cough

I have a theory that children play with doll's houses in one of two ways. Some are fastidious. To them, the world in miniature offers an intoxicating opportunity for control. Furniture is painstakingly arranged: beds made, baths and sofas in the correct places, little pots of jam laid on the table and fried eggs balanced on the stove. Everything has its place in this crisply organised scene. Dolls sit, or sleep, or huddle together in the kitchen, talking about the baby whose pram has been abandoned in the hallway.

Another kind of child likes action, though that may be too generous a word. 'Havoc' might be more fitting. To such a child, these dolls in small rooms are not bloodless statues but living, impulsive beings. Often, they mimic the still-mysterious logic of the adult world. Mummy and daddy fight. The dolls hold parties. They have sex, plastic torsos bashing. The house exists less as a still life than a stage, with the child as both director and puppeteer, the motions and frictions of these private dramas played out with eager fingers.

Growing up, Plum Cloutman owned a doll's house made by her father. It was a replica of their family home. When it came to toys, she was a doer rather than an arranger, preferring unruly activity to tableaux. Still, there was something in the rigidity of these figures that interested her, with their awkwardly fitting clothes and lack of agency. Left where they are, a doll cannot escape their assigned deed, always washing the dishes or bending down to pet the dog. Like all playthings, they are subject to the will of whoever holds them: picked up, thrown around, ventriloquised, placed in situations both mundane and bizarre. With a doll's house, no matter how carefully they are posed, often their environment is slightly *off*. Different sets of furniture disrupt the scale, the Goldilocks conundrum of too big and too small played out in real time when well-meaning gifts lead to tiny sofas dwarfed by vast side tables, or dolls perched on armchairs that would better serve as footstools.

In *Kennel Cough*, Cloutman distils this idea of off-kilter domesticity to a sharp point. Her images are small, some no bigger than 13 by 8.5cm. At first glance, they are filled with quotidian activities. Women take baths and couples complete crosswords. But look for longer and a strong sense of disquiet creeps in. These are not contented or uncomplicated moments of repose but glimpses into fraught terrain, riven with tensions and power asymmetries. Figures remain locked into intense, mutual looks, or else gaze out with heavy-lidded eyes beyond the edges of the image. Some were modelled on photos from a series of books about 1970s doll's houses. Others exist in an imagined instance of absurdity: a man running away from his trousers, a pair of houses observed through a window morphing into stocky human faces.

Many take atmospheric inspiration from Iris Murdoch's novels, with their pressurised environments and theatrical set pieces (showdowns with ex-lovers, girls swinging from

the chandeliers). Murdoch's works are full of unwanted affections, morbid obsessions, and moments of dark farce, characters pursuing one another or finding themselves tethered together in strange fashion. The line between normality and monstrosity trembles. The push and pull of human connection ends in chaos and occasional tragedy.

Cloutman's works are both tense and tactile. They are created using crushed pastels, mounds of colour repeatedly applied, glazed, and carved into, yielding a textured surface that is built up layer by layer. It is a process that requires equal amounts of delicacy and force, fragile swirls of powder solidified into a substance hard enough to etch grooves in with an embroidery needle. There is an almost sculptural quality to her defined lines, the grain of a wooden floorboard or raised bobble of a bouclé skirt-suit lifting away from the board. Skin, too, is not smooth but pitted and fleshy, the body's proportions distorted – too-long arms and rounded knees cramped within a tight frame.

The diminutive size of these pieces enhances their aura of claustrophobia. Having previously worked on meters-long oil paintings, Cloutman has found clarity in the act of paring down. An imposed limitation – especially one of scale - demands a concentration of ideas and forms. Like a poem, it is weighted differently. A conflict can be illuminated with brevity, a scenario amplified in a confined setting. In a room like this, where everything is always closing in, there's nowhere to hide.

Although it's Iris Murdoch that Cloutman cites, another text that seems resonant when thinking about these works is Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. These images are not haunted per se, but there is something in their arrangement that recalls the doctor's description of a watchful house in which "every angle is slightly wrong... the doorways... all a very little bit off center." Like Hill House, these skewed environments infect their residents with unease. Characters absorb one another's ill humours. The tiles and chintzy furnishings steadily encroach on those they enclose. Nothing here is comforting, and the surreal feeling of a dream, or even a nightmare, grows with each new scene, each gesture and action stilled forever in soft, scratched pastel.

Our own sense of perspective is equally uncertain. Occasionally we might be beckoned forward to spy through the keyhole, but often we hover above the action, or skulk in the corner. A doll's house is unusual because the front comes off. We get to see the house in cross-section, from the living room up to the attic. Life exists like this, in layer upon layer, from floor to floor and home to home, mostly hidden from view. Rarely do we get to see it all at once. Walk down the street and one can only speculate at all the anxieties and lusts and laundry loads occurring behind shut front doors. Here though, each image feels like a different room in the same, vast house full of thick carpets and unspoken feelings, the walls pulled away and ceilings dismantled so that we may lean in and scrutinise these trapped inhabitants.