

But the documentary film “[Of Dolls and Murder](#),” which will make its Baltimore-area debut next month, takes an intimate look at one of the strangest of them all.

The movie is director Susan Marks’ take on the *Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Deaths*, the state Medical Examiner’s collection of dollhouse-sized exhibits crafted in the 1930s and 40s, that depict 18 scenes of mayhem as first encountered by detectives.

Baltimore’s kitsch king John Waters narrates the film, which is dedicated to the creator of the “studies,” Frances Glessner Lee, an heiress to the International Harvester fortune who combined her love of dolls and dollhouses with a born sleuth’s ability to read a crime scene.

Her aim was to improve the training of investigators, to insure they didn’t overlook or misinterpret crucial clues. She’s been called the patron saint of crime scene investigators everywhere.

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Another victim. But of what?

The Nutshells host some dysfunctional inhabitants: prostitutes, adulterers and alcoholics. All the scenes contain at least one corpse, and are cunningly arranged so the detectives can easily jump to the wrong conclusions.

Lee died in 1962 at the age of 83. She left the collection to Harvard in her will, but it found a permanent home at the [Maryland Medical Examiner’s office](#) in Baltimore, where the studies are not on public display because they are still used for training.

The collection has inspired writers, filmmakers and, apparently, photographers like [Mariel Clayton](#), with the deliciously sinister implications of Lee’s work.

The film gets its first theatrical screening in the Baltimore area at the Hollywood Cinema in Arbutus June 5, at 7 p.m. The premiere is being coordinated in collaboration with the [Welcome to Baltimore, Hon!](#) website, maintained by Arbutus Patch editor Bruce Goldfarb.

<http://www.baltimorebrew.com/2012/05/03/coming-at-you-murder-most-small-festive-films-runaway-art/>