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'Nutshell' murder dioramas arrive on film

John Waters narrates 'Of Dolls and Murder,' documentary on miniature, macabre forensic tool

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In the Nutshell study 'Three Room Dwelling,' Mr. and Mrs. Judson's life looked perfect from the outside. From the inside, all the doors were locked. (Susan Marks / June 2, 2012)

By **Michael Sragow**, The Baltimore Sun
2:40 p.m. EDT, June 2, 2012

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A man hangs from a rope connected to the beam of a barn, his feet smashing through a wooden crate so he looks like he's cut off at the knees. His wife explains that when he was angered or annoyed, he would go to that spot, get up on a bucket, put a noose around his neck and threaten suicide. On the fatal day, she placed the bucket elsewhere, so he grabbed the crate.

Is this a picture of accidental death, as she contends? Or is it suicide — or murder?

This scene doesn't belong to a forensic TV series like "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation." It's depicted in one of the 20 meticulously detailed dioramas made over 70 years ago by Chicago heiress Frances Glessner Lee. The toy-size tableaux do more than illustrate natural death, accidental death, homicide, suicide or deaths that are inexplicable. They challenge the viewer to locate clues, whether in the clutter of a chaotic domestic killing or the apparent simplicity of a lone drunk lying facedown on a sidewalk.

Used as teaching tools, "The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death" ultimately ended up in the Maryland medical examiner's office. Studying them has become an important part of training for homicide detectives and other investigators in the Baltimore Police Department — as well as a prime attraction for crime specialists from across North America.



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Now Lee and her Nutshell Studies have come under canny scrutiny in a film, "Of Dolls and Murder," which has its Baltimore premiere Tuesday at the Hollywood Cinema in Arbutus. The director, Susan Marks, is from Minneapolis. But she has filled the film with Baltimoreans, including narrator **John Waters**. At its best, the film unfolds in its own macabre Everyworld. With first-rate filmmaking instincts, Marks set her camera roaming *inside* Lee's criminal microcosms, where a straw hat can get creepy and a cheery-sleazy Hy-Da-Way cabin can become a house of horror.

Just one photo of one Nutshell hooked Marks when she stumbled across Lee's story in a magazine about 10 years ago. As she earned her master's degree in liberal studies at the University of Minnesota, and worked on other projects, she couldn't get the image out of her head.

"It haunted me," she said recently.

"Frances Lee captured the moment when everything is at a crime scene — there's so much evidence available, if you know how to look for it," said Jerry "D" Dziecichowicz, a semiretired medical examiner's office administrator who appears in the film. He has guarded the Nutshells' secrets for over 15 years. He never reveals Lee's explanations for the crimes because that would defeat her purpose.

Born into the family of an International Harvester vice president in 1878, Lee transformed herself into a master of forensic analysis 50 years later. Her dioramas are scaled so that one inch equals one foot, and she created police reports and witness statements to go with them, based on real cases.

Lee conceived of the Nutshells as educational devices, and they became a key ingredient of the prestigious Harvard Associates in Police Science seminar, or HAPS. She named them for a time-honored police aphorism: "Convict the guilty, clear the innocent, and find the truth in a nutshell."

The Nutshells "are not whodunits that you try to solve, though everybody wants to do that," said Dziecichowicz. "They're models for you to learn and exercise your observational technique."

Marks' interest in using the Nutshells in a film was enflamed by essayist-photographer Corinne May Botz's book, "The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death," published in 2004. About four years ago, Marks embarked on "Of Dolls and Murder."

When Marks first saw the Nutshells "in person" — she laughed as she said it — "I knew that no photography could do them justice."

These still lifes with still deaths possessed a dynamism all their own. To echo their kinetic effect, Marks and her producing partner/editor, John Kurtis Dehn, and her cinematographer, Matt

Ehling, planned a series of insinuating camera moves that open up the cases for the audience.

For Dziecichowicz, their dirty-dollhouse function — the way Lee took a form associated with innocence and domesticity, then filled every corner with gritty reality — is part of their allure.

"It's not Disney ... it's not 'It's a Small World After All,'" he said. "But it truly is amazing. People who see them for the first time go ooh and aah."

The Nutshells now occupy a space on the third floor of Maryland's bright new Forensic Medicine Center, where they continue to be used for the weeklong, twice-yearly HAPS seminar. Detective Robert Dohony, who took the HAPS seminar in 1999 and appears in the film, remembered when they were scattered around the old medical examiner's building at Pratt and Penn streets. "There used to be some in the lobby, and I would really look at those. They were fascinating, unique, and even before I knew what they were, I knew they were well-done."

What attracted Dohony most were the details. And they are impressive, in big ways and small. When Lee set a crime scene in a burned cabin, she built the cabin first, then burned it. When she filled a kitchen with food, she made sure each tiny item was labeled properly — you can read the PET logo on a can of evaporated milk. In the movie, Dohony and two other Baltimore police detectives, Robert Ross and Sean Jones, intensely analyze a Nutshell, tracing blood pools and drag marks and splatter patterns in an apparent triple murder.

"It really is like a puzzle. And that's what makes it real," said Ross. "Because in a real investigation it's like that. You walk into a house, and you don't know what's evidence and what's not. So you have to look at everything."

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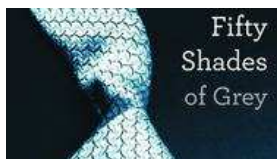
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