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Dollhouse of Horrors

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Susan Marks's documentary, Of Dolls and Murder, explores people's fascination with death through the eyes of dolls



By: Lauren Peck

At first mention, miniature dollhouses depicting brutal crime scenes, complete with blood and doll corpses, sound like a grotesque prank on an innocent child. But these dioramas, the "Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death," really do exist.

They and their creator are the subjects of local filmmaker and writer Susan Marks's latest documentary, Of Dolls and Murder.

Showing at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival at 7 p.m. Wednesday, the documentary explores the Nutshells and heiress Frances Glessner Lee, who created the dioramas in the 1930s and 40's as a way for police detectives to hone their investigating skills. Narrated by John Waters, the film also explores modern forensics and our collective fascination with murder and

The documentary "Of Dolls and Murder" looks at murder scene dioramas used by police to hone their investigating skills.

Image credit: Susan Marks

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death.

"We're lead to believe that if you're interested in death or murder that you're dark and there's something wrong with you," Marks says. "But we have all this evidence to show otherwise because we have all these TV shows, movies, and books based on murder and death. We all are curious to know what happens at the end and how one person can take another person's life."

Marks became interested in the Nutshells in graduate school while working on her first short documentary The Betty Mystique and accompanying book, Finding Betty Crocker, on the history of the General Mills icon. When she finished those projects, Marks began exploring these eerie dollhouses.

She quickly realized that she "couldn't just walk into the officer of the chief medical examiner in Maryland [where the Nutshells are housed] and make a film." The Nutshells aren't open to the public because detectives still use them as educational tools today. So Marks, who directed, wrote and co-produced the film, had to prove that this was a story worth telling.

There was also the problem of the dollhouses being static pieces in the moving medium of film. When Marks' producing partner John Kurtis Dehn, who also served as editor and composer for the film, saw the Nutshells, he was as impressed with them as Marks.

"He was able to share the vision that there was something we could really do here," Marks says. "We could create a little movement and add a little life into these dollhouses of death."

While Of Dolls and Murder is her first feature-length documentary, Marks says the filmmaking process was incredibly smooth-- "a testament to surrounding yourself with talented people."

Working with prolific filmmaker and true-crime aficionado John Waters as the film's narrator was also a high point. Marks and fellow producer Dehn were convinced he was the perfect fit for the film. "We had our hearts set on it, and we never even considered anyone else," she says.

After he agreed, Marks says Waters was wonderful to work with and has become a big supporter of the film. "He's so sweet, kind and encouraging to me as a filmmaker and a writer," she says. "I couldn't ask for anything more."



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Dessa at the O'Shaughnessy Photos by Derek Lundmark

Marks is in the midst of developing several new narrative and documentary projects, but she and her filmmaking team also want to expand on *Of Dolls and Murder* in the future. Marks hopes to create an additional documentary focused more closely on the dollhouses' creator, Francis Glessner Lee, who couldn't be fully explored in *Of Dolls and Murder* because of budget constraints.

"We have found out quite a bit of information about her and some of it is very subjective," Marks says. "Now that the family [of Glessner Lee] trusts us and likes what we've done with the film, they've opened up to us more. It's been amazing what they've told us, and we'd like to explore some of these stories we've heard about her."



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+ *Of Dolls and Murder* will be shown at the [Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival](#) on Wednesday, April 18 at 7 p.m. at St. Anthony Main Theatre, 115 SE Main St., Mpls. The entire film team will be in attendance. The showing will be followed by a forum at Pracna, 117 Main St. SE, Mpls.

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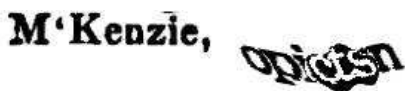
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