

## VISUAL ARTS

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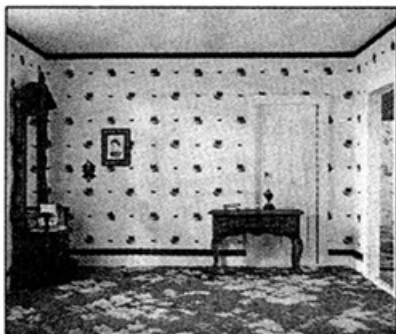
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# The curious art of a crime scene

In *Stable Vice*, at Johnston Gallery in Mosman Park, Samantha Small has delved into the mythology that surrounds a crime scene. In this case, Small has reconstructed, in miniature, rooms from the house in which Lizzie Borden was charged with murdering her parents.

This grisly event has entered into public folklore and as such Small's remaking of the Borden household comments on obsessive behaviour on a number of levels, both private and public. The artwork itself shows an almost unhealthy level of infatuation. The amount of research and hours spent poring over crime scene details is incredible.

This is evident not only in the attention to detail but also in the atmosphere that Small has been able to translate in her photographs of the models. It would have been nice to see the models in the flesh but their translation into photography is necessary on two counts. First, it utilises the allegory of crime scene



**Guest Room: Samantha Small's artwork is the recreation of rooms from a crime scene.**

photography and our reliance on photography to recollect and recollate information.

Second, in her use of photography Small allows the photograph to do what it does best, that is to evoke an atmosphere. In this case the images are imbued with a Victorian stuffiness. The photos present a covering up or hiding away of all overtly emotional feelings and

improperly erratic behaviour, until of course it all pops.

This quiet simmering is brought to the boil in Small's work by simply remaking what was already there but it is interesting to question whether this emotion in her photos is fuelled by our knowledge of events or whether the images make us want to know more?

I know I found myself looking closely at the images, looking for little clues that would help me get inside the mind of Lizzie Borden, or at least the emotions that filled this household all those years ago.

And in looking closely, other little signifiers are found which have been surreptitiously placed in the model sets by Small.

In *Guest Room*, there is a print of Borden's step-mum next to a table which has been placed across an entrance door. The wallpaper, though Victorian in feel, is actually a print of the women's skull, taken from autopsy. The other motif on the

wallpaper looks like the supposed murder weapon. The furniture, walls and doors are so well made that on initial inspection you might think them life-size. There is also a series of close-up photographs showing the lamps and table tops taken as forensic snaps. They double as close studies for Small's model-making skills, showing the tiny lamps complete with black stains on the glass from the smouldering wick.

*Stable Vice* is an entertaining journey into the contemporary art of model making and its association with photography.

This is a crime scene but it's not CSI; Small's work is not pseudo science confounded by gadgets and

processes that don't exist. She seems more interested in the reality of confinement and conservative social expectations and more so the obsessive interest we as a society have when something snaps.

I should add Lizzie Borden got off and Small leaves some clues in her work about who she thinks did it.