

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

‘Amy Bennett: Shelter’ Review: Marvelous, Mysterious Scenes

The artist’s paintings, now on view at Miles McEnery Gallery,
are small in size but big in narrative.

By Brian P. Kelly | 21 June 2024

Amy Bennett is a master of the miniature. Not only are her luminous oil paintings, currently on view at Miles McEnery Gallery, small in scale—almost all the works here are less than 12 by 12 inches, with the tiniest coming in at just over 3 by 3 (a welcome departure from the wall-spanning canvases ubiquitous in the contemporary-art world)—her subject matter is as well. Not the scenes she paints, interiors and exteriors whose people reveal mysterious stories, but the way they are assembled. Ms. Bennett works from undersize models of the rooms and vistas she depicts.

These intricate models, which she builds herself and often photographs to aid in her composition, can be seen in a slim publication produced for the exhibition, and they are fully realized works of art in their own right.

This unique process puts her at an interesting nexus in the art world, where comparisons to miniaturists (Willard Wigan, Curtis Talwst Santiago, Frances Glessner Lee), photographers of models (Mark Hogancamp), and genre painters stretching back to the Dutch Golden Age are apt.

If the last of these seems like a stretch, Ms. Bennett’s handling of light will quickly dispel any doubts. Sun pours in through a doorway in “Snacks” (2023), a child packing a bag of treats casting a lengthy shadow as his mother looks on. In “Sink or Swim” (2023), dappled rays kiss the bottom of a pool as a man floats on the surface while another uncannily hovers underwater. And in “Time Out” (2024) a beam spotlights a group on the bank of a stream deep in the woods. While a couple tans on a blanket, another pair of figures on the water’s edge give the image a hint of the ominous: Is that person dragging his limp companion into the water or simply helping them stand up? The dark forest that surrounds the scene underscores the tension and acts as a metaphor for our search for answers.

This sense of mystery is a constant throughout Ms. Bennett’s work, and shapes moods that range from the humorous to the eerie to the relatable. As a host greets “Dinner Guests” (2024) at the door of a comfortable-looking home, another character in an adjacent room hits a bong (one way to work up an appetite, I suppose). A woman in a nightgown seems stricken as she stares through the window at the moon in “Flashes” (2023), the vignette and her stiffness conjuring up visions out of an old Hammer horror flick. And in “Year Long Day” (2023), a mother and child sit in a beautiful country house, the tot absorbed in his breakfast while mom, appearing tired,



Sink or Swim, 2023, Oil on panel, 4 x 5 inches

seems fixed on a blank TV, both ignoring the sumptuous natural wonder outside the picture windows by which they rest.

Each of Ms. Bennett's paintings tells a story, but many are in no rush to give up their secrets, often leaving us with more questions than answers. "Booking" (2024) sees a professionally dressed woman having her mug shot taken, the relatively bare police station offering few clues as to what crime she could have committed and leading us to speculate—Marion Crane and "Fatal Attraction" both spring to mind. And why a family of four has wound up in a "Bunker" (2023) is left even more to our imagination—the room is spartan and small, but the group seems rather calm, whatever the reason for their new digs.



Breaking News, 2023, Oil on panel, 7 x 9 inches

Most moving is "Breaking News" (2023). A restaurant has come to a standstill as patrons and staff alike all turn to a trio of TVs on the wall, anchors reporting on some unknown, yet clearly cataclysmic? event. Viewers will all have their own harrowing version of this scene in their heads, drawn from any number of tragedies that prompt the question "Where were you when it happened?" By leaving the specifics unsaid, Ms. Bennett and her captivating paintings create an emotional, universal connection.