MINIATURES MATTER: AGENCY AND AFFECT IN PHOTOGRAPHS BY LORI NIX

Mariah Postlewait

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
May 2014

Committee:
Andrew Hershberger, Advisor
Stephanie Langin-Hooper
Recent anthropological theory suggests that miniatures have a powerful role in affecting human perception and identity formation. Likewise, photographs have long been acknowledged as having captivating power over the people who view them. The artistic value of miniatures, however, has been contested and photographs of miniatures are often thought of as endearing rather than evocative. This thesis argues instead that the photographic process amplifies the transformative power of the miniature.

In this thesis, theories of miniaturization, object agency, and affect are applied in an investigation of Lori Nix’s photography series *The City*. Nix crafts tiny miniature dioramas to form the sets of her photographs, depicting interior scenes of a destroyed city. Works like *Living Room*, *Subway*, and *Library* spark explorations of human-miniature and human-photograph exchange. Utilizing theoretical lenses, this series is approached in a segmented fashion—as objects, as photographs, and as locations for interactions and psychophysical exchanges. Through this analysis, the vast and nuanced potential of such objects (whether miniature, photographic, or both) becomes evident.

With miniature objects, viewers can, through lived corporeal knowledge and experience, imagine what it would be like to hold, examine, and interact with the contents of Nix’s works. Viewers are able to draw comparisons with their own bodies, with their surroundings, and with life-size versions of the same types of objects in order to better explore and understand the works presented. As photographs, Lori Nix’s works remove viewers from the actual objects—able to
see but not touch, interpret the miniatures’ actual size but not know for certain—and their processes of thought and investigation are disrupted by format. The objects within objects and worlds within worlds afforded by the works that comprise The City allow for new investigations of the power of photographs, miniatures, and photographed miniatures that affect the art world and the world at large.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Andrew Hershberger, my advisor, and Dr. Stephanie Langin-Hooper, my committee member, for their extensive time, efforts, insights, and suggestions throughout my thesis research and writing process. I would also like to thank Dr. Douglass Bailey for his insightful counsel, supportive enthusiasm, and for his contributions to miniaturization theory upon which this thesis is largely based. Many thanks to Lori Nix for accommodating me in her busy schedule, as well as her time, encouragement, answers to probing questions, and for the piece of *Chinese Take-Out* (2013) she let me take home. Lastly I would like to thank my numerous friends and family who have lent an ear, a place to stay in New York, a discerning eye, and their love and support; I direct many thanks to Christopher Paul Wagenheim, my constant sounding board, continual editor, and font of encouragement.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. INVESTIGATION I:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objecthood: Miniaturization in <em>The City</em> by Lori Nix</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. INVESTIGATION II:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format: The Intersection of Photography and Diorama</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V. INVESTIGATION III:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement: Interactions between Art, Objects, and Viewers</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Lori Nix, *Church*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2009 ....................... 65
2. Lori Nix, *Control Room*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2010 ............. 66
4. Lori Nix, *Mall*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2010 ........................... 68
7. Lori Nix, *Space Center*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2013 .............. 71
8. Lori Nix, *Natural History*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2005 .......... 71
11. Detail of *Anatomy Classroom*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2012 ...... 73
12. Detail of *Anatomy Classroom*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2012 ...... 74
15. Lori Nix, *Laundromat*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2008 ............... 76
16. Lori Nix, *Subway*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2012 ..................... 77
17. Photo by author, ClampArt Gallery, New York, November 2013 ............................. 78
18. Detail of *Museum of Art*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2005 ............. 78
21  Detail of *Vacuum Showroom*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2006 ........ 80
22  Detail of *Vacuum Showroom*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2006 ........ 81
24  Detail of *Vacuum Showroom*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2006 ........ 82
25  Lori Nix, *Living Room*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2013 .................. 82
26  Lori Nix, *Casino*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2013 ...................... 83
27  Photo by author, casino diorama, apartment/studio of Lori Nix, New York
November 2013.............................................................................................................. 84
28  Photo by author, living room diorama, apartment/studio of Lori Nix, New York
November 2013.............................................................................................................. 85
29  Photo by author, ClampArt Gallery, New York, November, 2013 ......................... 86
30  Lori Nix, *Beauty Shop*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2010............. 87
31  Lori Nix, *Violin Repair Shop*, from *The City* series, Chromogenic print, 2011 ....... 88
32  Installation Process View, Lori Nix, *Beauty Shop*, from *The City* series,
Chromogenic print, 2010.................................................................................................. 89
INTRODUCTION

Miniatures surround us. They permeate our lives, yet rarely are they acknowledged or studied for their importance or effects on people. Recent anthropological theory suggests that miniatures have a powerful role in affecting human perception and identity formation. The presence of miniatures in cultures across the globe is nearly universal; the influence and potential they carry needs to be addressed. In a similar vein, photographs have long been acknowledged as having captivating power over the people who view them.¹ Miniatures, however, are often contested as valued art objects and photographs of miniatures are often thought of as endearing rather than evocative. Building from previous scholars’ work which demonstrates the power of the miniature is a variety of formats, this thesis argues that the photographic process amplifies the transformative power of the miniature.

In her series The City, contemporary artist Lori Nix photographs her own constructed miniature dioramas. Nix mediates viewer interactions with her miniatures through photography, creating a complex set of relationships among the artist, miniatures, photographs, and viewers. Nix’s audience can inspect her miniature objects, but her photographs are objects as well. Nix’s artistic decisions combine to form a potent formula for analysis and particularly for viewer engagement.

Nix currently lives and works in New York City. She was born in Kansas in 1969 and some of her earlier series were inspired by that region and the natural disasters that occurred there. For her most recent series, The City, Nix moves away from the rural subject matter of the Midwest to focus on another form of disaster in a new locale. The City depicts interior spaces of a city (or cities) in destruction. These post-apocalyptic scenes from Nix’s imagined metropolis

include settings ranging from an aquarium, to a casino, to a shopping mall. Human beings are absent from the scenes yet flora and fauna seem to flourish.

Nix constructs the miniature dioramas that comprise her work in collaboration with her partner Kathleen Gerber. With a setting in mind Nix makes sketches, often visiting similar locations in New York City for research and inspiration. Working with Gerber, Nix takes painstaking care to build each set, using everyday materials like paper, foam, wood, and hot glue. This phase of Nix’s process can take anywhere from several months to nearly two years. Nix spends several weeks lighting and photographing the finished scenes with her 8x10-inch large format camera and then prints her final images large—at approximately 50 x 60 inches.

Few books and scholarly articles have addressed Nix’s work to date, but the numerous newspapers, magazines, websites, and blogs that have discussed her work all seem to highlight the same themes—most frequently that her work showcases natural disaster/apocalypse through the portrayal of destroyed, abandoned spaces. Ideas of apocalypse are currently in vogue, based on trends in books, movies, and video games. Popular culture’s apocalyptic saturation may account for the preoccupation with this side of Nix’s work. While the content and subject matter in Nix’s works are certainly important, it is also important to address how they visually and physically function with viewers.

Miniatures are often not seen as full-fledged works in their own right, and they have only recently been acknowledged as having agency. The three-dimensional nature of miniatures contributes to their agency. Miniatures invite people in—one has to get close to see the details clearly and people often want to pick them up to touch them, understand them, and see all sides. Object agency and miniaturization theories account for miniatures’ powers to motivate and

---

2 Lori Nix, interview by author, New York, New York, November 2, 2013.
fascinate their viewers. At first, it may seem as though photographed miniatures would have less agency, would lose their unique qualities to compel touch and capture attention and imagination. It is the aim of this thesis to prove otherwise. Like miniatures, photographs are not always considered artworks, and they frequently function in society simply as documents. Nix’s photographs of miniatures are much more (and, arguably, so are many other photographs). Photography may alter some of the abilities of miniatures, but it does not render them powerless, and in fact it transfers additional possibilities.

In order to talk about these ideas, I will employ the use of several theoretical frameworks including theories of miniaturization, object agency, and affect. These theoretical approaches privilege the objects, rather than the artist, as being producers of their own history. While Nix created her series, it may influence people outside of, or beyond, her original intentions. The photographs will most likely outlive the artist and will have lasting implications for, and impact on, viewers throughout the years that follow. In that sense, these photographs become the mediator of their own messages; objects’ agency influences viewers and viewers feel affective responses in relation to their own historical circumstances.

In the chapters to follow, I will address several issues concerning Nix’s works. The first chapter provides the basis for the thesis through a review of previous scholarship on Nix and her artwork, highlighting the gaps in literature that I seek to fill. The methodology outlined in the second chapter explores the three theories most important to this study, and the ways in which they will be applied. Three investigations will come next, each tackling Nix’s work, miniature agency, and viewer response in a different light. The first investigation addresses objecthood and the object-nature of Nix’s work; it focuses on the enduring three-dimensional qualities of her work. The second investigation centers on format and the interactions of photographed...
miniatures with viewers. The third investigation examines viewer engagement with photographs, with dioramas, and the effects of Nix’s artistic decisions and intentions. Through these three investigations, certain topics come to light. My thesis reveals that Nix’s works cause viewers to reflect on the behavioral codes that accompany social spaces by removing people from these settings altogether and drawing attention to that which is absent. Public space and the intimacy of miniaturization engender considerations of privacy through The City’s disruption of anticipated corporeal experiences with these types of locations. The City also opens up the possibility for discussions of cultural criticism through examination of hierarchies of power—exemplified by relationships between location, viewer, and miniature location (and its destruction).

Inspecting The City with the sole intent of content analysis is both valid and beneficial. Considering it for its aesthetic properties and artistic technique is justified and valuable, as well. But, because of miniatures’ universal presence and photography’s accessible and media-saturated status, exploring The City in regards to its agential and affective capabilities becomes not only warranted but illuminating. To understand more than what The City communicates, but rather why and how it communicates establishes more fundamental and far-reaching knowledge—ideas that apply to more than a single artistic series and can instead be considered in relation to all miniatures and all photographs of miniatures.
CHAPTER I. PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Research on contemporary artists may be difficult for a variety of reasons. It often becomes necessary to look to nontraditional sources instead of more traditional peer-reviewed or scholarly publications. This chapter is dedicated to the review of discourse on the work of Lori Nix, particularly in relation to her series, The City. These sources are located in a variety of texts including: several exhibition catalogues, multiple newspapers, numerous websites, more than a dozen magazines, and a few in blogs, books, and journals. Nix’s new artist's book, The City, with an essay entitled “It’s a Twister!: Constructed Worlds of Lori Nix” by Barbara Pollack, will be important to this section. This source is notable for its medium, its content, its authors, and its recent publication. Nix, herself, is one of the most frequent contributors to discussions of her work based on the number of artistic and personal statements included in books and on websites and because of her willingness to participate in interviews.

The most commonly mentioned theme in relation to Nix’s work is its apocalyptic nature. This becomes clearly evident just from the titles of such magazine and newspaper articles as “Lori Nix’s Apocalypse Dioramas End the World in Stunning Style” from The Huffington Post, “Miniature Dioramas Conjure the Tiniest Apocalypse Ever” in Wired online, “17 Haunting Dioramas of a Post-Apocalyptic World” in the online magazine Fast Company, and “The Apocalyptic Visions of Photographer Lori Nix” from the website The Culture Trip. Nix’s large photographs, approximately 50 x 60 inches, can be seen hanging on the walls of galleries and

---

museums or viewed on computer screens, but either setting seems to communicate to viewers—first and foremost—that these are abandoned spaces, falling into decay. David J. Carol, director of photography at CBS Outdoor and columnist at *Rangefinder*, writes that the first time he saw a photograph from *The City*, “…I did a double-take, then a triple-take, then I just stared in absolute amazement and fascination. What was I looking at? Was it real? Was it an illustration?”

Carol, from his first sentence, addresses his initial reaction to Nix’s work. This is helpful for readers; rarely do critics acknowledge their immediate thoughts without having time to process and analyze the works. Apocalypse probably becomes the pervading theme for critics because of the psychic and somatic weight it carries. The idea of apocalypse is dramatic, all-encompassing, and is currently in vogue in popular culture. Thus, it stands to reason that this concept—reappearing in movies, video games, and the media—is one that resonates with viewers.

Why would Nix create post-apocalyptic art? Reviewers answer these questions through a variety of means. Many look to the artist’s formative years in Kansas as the primary source of inspiration for her works. Robin Starbuck, Department of Film and New Media professor at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, NY, writes in a dual exhibition catalog that Nix’s first series, *Accidentally Kansas*, was created based on childhood experience with natural disasters combined with stories from local newspapers. Karli Petrovic, a writer for *Print* magazine, asks Nix about natural disasters in an interview. Nix’s response details that natural disasters have never been her motivation; and that *Accidentally Kansas* was inspired by “a whole childhood experience.”

---

6 The exhibition catalog (cited below) was written for *Other Places* at Bruce Gallery of Art at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and for *The City* at Jenkins Johnson Gallery in New York City.
and freelance writer for many organizations including *Wired*) and Mark Alice Durant (an artist, writer, curator, and professor at University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and faculty member at Bard College, and the International Center of Photography) in interviews with Nix teased out the same anecdote about playing outside and coming across a ham in an oven having been swept away by a tornado before it could be served. While this story may be entertaining and/or instill visceral responses, it does not adequately explain why Nix creates the artwork that she does. The consistent use of miniatures throughout years of art-making reveal that more is at work than a single moment’s inspiration gained from the discovery of a ham in an oven. A lifetime of natural disaster aftermaths cannot reveal why miniatures—specifically—are the means best suited to communicating Nix’s message.

Other writers turn to a childhood love of disaster films as a rationalization of Nix’s genre. Ellen Von Wiegand, editor at The Culture Trip, and Christian Cotroneo, editor at *The Huffington Post Canada*, each draw connections between Nix’s experiences watching disaster films of the 1970s and her work: from *Towering Inferno* to *Planet of the Apes* to *Airport 75*. Barbara Pollack insists that *The City* is created “by someone who knows disaster intimately” and begins her essay with a movie reference and posits that “in the disaster films of the late 1960’s and 1970’s…the survivors play a secondary role to the special effects that steal our attention. It is these effects, once so believable but now made much more realistic by current events that Nix captures in her post-apocalyptic images…” While miniatures have played significant parts in cinema, John Brownlee, a writer at Fast Company, sees the cinematic quality of the photographs

---


as a way of confronting, exploring, and coping with ideas of apocalypse. From the perspective of *The Guardian* art critics Skye Sherwin and Robert Clark, *The City* reflects an environment affected by nuclear fallout. Pollack’s essay even mentions that many storm cellars in Nix’s region doubled as fallout shelters, and how common it was to happen upon the site of a missile silo. According to Pollack, nuclear disaster may have been just as integral a part of Nix’s past as natural disaster. While it is true that for Nix natural catastrophes and disaster movies were part of growing up (indicated by Nix, herself, on the “About” page of her website), it does not necessarily make sense to continually attribute her inspiration to the same two pieces of her past. Many artists were born in the late 1960s and lived through the same political climate, and geographic conditions, that Nix did—but it does not mean that there are hundreds of artists creating similar work. To view Nix’s artworks exclusively through this lens of disaster is limiting, in meaning and scope, to her work and its potential.

Ideas of decomposition in Nix’s works are noted by critics in a variety of ways. Shawn Hill, art critic, artist, and faculty member at Montserrat College of Art, dismisses the notion in *Art New England* when he writes, “That the illusion breaks down even as the buildings do is beside the point.” But perhaps this is actually quite important; perhaps the illusion breaking down *with* the buildings is essential. Nix’s photographs address the issue of decomposition, theoretically and physically. The fact that *The City* relies on miniatures to exist is significant. More important is the fact that these miniature sets are noticeably miniature—they do not pass for locations found in life. Nix’s method and medium are intentional selections that influence

---

12 Brownlee, “17 Haunting Dioramas of a Post-Apocalyptic World.”
14 Barbara Pollack, “It’s a Twister!”
not only the way her works appear aesthetically, but the way they function and interact with
viewers on conceptual, agential, and affective levels.

Rachel Mansur, Vice President of Curation at WonderHowTo, approaches destruction
and The City in another way. In an interview with Nix, Mansur asked, “Rumor has it you
destroy the sets when you're finished. Isn't this heartbreaking?” Nix responds in the negative—
she has minimal attachment to the dioramas. After all, when Nozlee Samadzadeh, a writer, a
developer at 29th Street Publishing, and an editor at The Morning News, asked Nix in an
interview if she considers herself to be a photographer or a sculptor, Nix replied that while she is
comfortable with fabrication and working three-dimensionally, she is a photographer first.

Brownlee asserts that “it seems a shame that Nix’s dioramas molder away in some landfill
somewhere, but perhaps it’s appropriate. Like the dioramas themselves, Nix’s work concerns
itself with a world that has been thrown away; once cared-for homes and buildings, now
ownerless, that exist only to crumble.” It is not disturbing when an artist cleans their palette
when they finish a painting, so why is it surprising that Nix discards her dioramas when the
finished work is a photograph? Reviewers may comment on this disposal as being “too bad” but
no one expands upon why they need to be saved. Nix’s miniatures connect with viewers through
her photography. Each photograph acts as a window to a miniature world and the power of that
relationship carries such weight, that viewers make connections not just with the object (the
photograph) but with the subject (the diorama), as well. When the subject is then destroyed,
viewers feel their connection is threatened and regret the loss of that subject.

---

17 Rachel Mansur, “Conjuring the Apocalypse on Table Top,” WonderHowTo, http://digital-
photography.wonderhowto.com/inspiration/conjuring-apocalypse-tabletop-lori-nix-talks-dioramas-0127670/
19 Brownlee, “17 Haunting Dioramas of a Post-Apocalyptic World.”
Many reviewers note the existence and destruction of these miniature sets but overlook other motivations for their creation. Nix may be creating her dioramas for a multitude of reasons, including the largely unmentioned purpose of cultural critique. Jessica Dawson, professor at University of California’s Washington Center and “Galleries” columnist for The Washington Post, contends that Nix “keeps her conflicts in full view: Several of her models depict trashed museums of art and natural history—the very cathedrals of her vocation.” While many writers address the practical concerns of Nix’s work, Dawson is one of the few to comment on its more critical implications. Nix takes the tenets of high culture and destroys them, ripping their pedestals out from underneath. This idea can be seen in the destruction of the library, the museum, and the academy, exemplified by the anatomy classroom and the violin shop. In Church, an image from The City, Nix presents a church—with old organ pipes and stained glass windows missing their panes—stripped of its pews and filled instead with old neon signs. A motel, cleaner, diner, bowling alley, and other businesses are represented by the presence of their signage slowing breaking down in a crumbling church. Representations of capitalism turn to dust even as organized religion collapses, brick by brick. Damien James, an artist and writer for Chicago Reader, New City, Saatchi Gallery Online, and Art Voices, interprets Nix’s work as follows: “‘Control Room’ is our suppressed dread of being failed by corporations, governments, ourselves; ‘Library’ is the withering and loss of knowledge; ‘Church’ is the dissolution of religion and the repurposing of its houses; ‘Mall’ is the end of money,” (see figs. 1-4). James regards The City as a series of endings, each of a system deeply entrenched within American culture. Even though James and Dawson investigate Nix’s images

---

deeper than just surface level, they do not move much deeper beyond that. They offer a sentence or two of analysis and move on. By taking these thoughts a step further, I would argue that Nix not only uses the problematic structures that drive our society in order to sustain her livelihood and to showcase artworks (she participates in the gallery and museum relations and practices), but those artworks, in turn, and internally, criticize those systems. Nix’s artwork operates within a system in order to critique it. Tiny protests inside galleries and museums across the world speak to the demolition of humanity, and hegemony, along with it.

Thinking again about common conversations among reviewers, just as most discuss either the length of time the sets take to produce, or their size (from 20x24 inches to as large as 72 inches in diameter), the majority also note Nix’s sense of humor. 22 Starbuck, in the Lori Nix: “Other Places” and “The City” exhibit catalog, writes: “She asserts her distinctiveness through a deliciously twisted, though benign, sense of humor in the face of traumatic events.” 23 Reviewers disagree, however, on the different types of humor in which Nix engages. Von Wiegand identifies two types of comedy: “Humor lies in the viewer’s knowledge that these scenes are false and they have been created in miniature. The use of materials is also light hearted, as the artist constructs figures and landscapes with items such as cardboard, paper towels and clay, and the fabricated quality is often evident.” 24 As pointed out by painter and art writer Sidney Lawrence: “Virtuoso craftsmanship, an incredible brightness and sharp focus, and the humorous, surreal punch of an occasional fake-looking detail add up to highly entertaining narratives of doom and gloom.” 25 Pollack finds humor in The City as well. She references the

---

22 Nix, “About.”
jungle sprung up in “an upscale shopping mall…growing taller than its 2-story escalator.”26 (see fig. 4). Lori Nix makes humanity’s demise into a somewhat laughable scenario.

While reviewers argue for the humor in Nix’s works, Nix and critics alike look to the sublime to explain the emotional quality of her work. Nix’s images showcase the “clash between catastrophe and beauty to depict their codependence,” writes online photography magazine Zone Zero.27 It is the portrayal of this “clash” that allows Nix to align herself with the Hudson River School and the theory of the Sublime, as stated by numerous reviewers like Pollack, and like Nix herself.28 While Pollack discusses Nix’s work in relation to practicing photographers of the 1970s who utilized construction in their work, she, along with other writers, gives more consequence to Nix’s relationship to the Hudson River School and to the idea of the sublime.29

The Hudson River School was a group of painters located in New York City whose artworks centered on grand landscapes in the early to mid-nineteenth century.30 While named for the Hudson River Valley, the landscapes chosen by these artists extended beyond this single region. Thomas Cole has been hailed as the founder of the group.31 His knowledge of the European landscape painting tradition lent credence to depictions of the sprawling wilds of America.32 Cole’s images were comprised of large, sweeping landscapes and vast, dramatic cloudscapes, skies, and lighting schemes.33 The theory of the sublime was adopted and popularized in relation to aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Investigations in the sublime

26 Pollack, “It’s a Twister!”
28 Nix, “About,” Pollack, “It’s a Twister!”
29 Pollack relates Nix to photographers such as John Casebere, David Levinthal, and Laurie Simmons; Pollack, “It’s a Twister!”
32 Kelly, “Hudson River School.”
33 Avery, “The Hudson River School.”
stemmed from British writers experiencing “a simultaneous appreciation for, and overawing fear of, the irregularity and vastness of natural forms.” Edmund Burke, an eighteenth century philosopher, argued for the affective qualities of fear and attraction in art via the opposing qualities of beauty and sublime. “Burke’s Sublime included elements that would later be identified with Romanticism, including feelings of fear, uncertainty, and horror brought on by conditions such as danger, darkness, vastness, solitude, pain, and infinity.” These emotions match those mentioned by reviewers of Nix’s work, as summarized by Sidney Lawrence in his *Art in America* review: “Since the mid-1990s, her model-based pictures of depopulated streets and the aftermath of nature’s aggression have enlivened the photographic setup genre with an edgy mix of terror and childhood wonderment, plus a nod to the 18th-century love of the imaginary ruin.” Certainly, viewers may feel loneliness creeping into *The City* as the abandoned structures are predominately filled with refuse, memories, and emptiness.

By noting these sources as influences, Nix acknowledges her relation to these past traditions. In conversation with the Hudson River School and its Romantic tendencies, Nix’s work falls in line with the emotional connotations for which the sublime is known. Yet, unmentioned by writers and critics is the fact that *The City’s* leanings toward romanticism actually subvert the traditions of the Hudson River School. This sphere of male-dominated artistry is reversed by Nix’s shift from the exterior (epic Hudson River landscapes) to interior spaces—a domain often associated with women. In fact, I would argue that Nix accomplishes the surprising feat of giving the indoors the same sublime qualities as the outdoors. The sublime normally uses the vastness of nature and the mixture of its beauty and destructive power to awe

---

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Lawrence, “Lori Nix at Randall Scott,” 171.
and captivate audiences. Nix employs these tropes in her own work, featuring the interiors, and accomplishes the same feats with her viewers. While a nod to the sublime provides a layer of added meaning to her work, Nix’s intentional removal of signs of living humans may align with a wish not to provide her viewers with too much information.

Investigation of the titles and labels complementing her images reveals that Nix chose very simple names. Majestic, Clock Tower, and Vacuum Showroom are only a few of Nix’s straightforward titles. Each identifier only tells what overarching category the general setting could be cataloged under. “The titles are as direct and blunt as the images are evocative and poetic,” writes Hill in Art New England. This choice in minimally titling works means that viewers are responsible for filling in gaps (created by withheld information) with their own imaginations. Why are people missing? Where have they gone? What is happening in humanity’s absence? This is one of the many ways in which Nix’s works become participatory experiences.

A direct response to the removal of humans from Nix’s The City is the continuous acknowledgement of this aspect of her work. Nix comments that the series presents a time when some process or event has brought about the demise of humanity, stating it could have been “manmade (like global warming) or spectacular (like an asteroid)…” Nix explained in an interview with Carol that she imagines New York without all the people—what it would be like without its “urban caretakers.” While reviewers acknowledge that the images are absent of people, few seem to investigate what that means for the artwork. While the theory of “Post-Humanism” seems an obvious lens through which to view Nix’s work, it has yet to be utilized.

---

40 Carol, “Lori Nix’s City,” 122.
Whether human beings are excluded because of issues of craft, illusion, or context, the fact that they are clearly absent is significant and remains a site for future scholarship to investigate.

The lens through which one views Nix’s work directs the interpretations that result. How people view Nix’s work, whether theoretically or physically, is important. There is a precedent for Nix and for scholars examining the ways people view *The City*. Nix photographs her completed sets with an 8x10-inch large format camera. Once she sets up the camera at the beginning of her process, she never moves it.\(^{41}\) With a single, interior viewpoint in mind, Nix never finishes the “outsides” of her structures. When she displayed her dioramas in the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York City, the public was able to see her constructions from all sides. Nix told Horne of *Wired*, “You could see the pink foam and the hot glue, but that is how we work.”\(^{42}\) Because the dioramas are not normally on display, audiences had the unique opportunity to see beyond the frame of Nix’s photographs. Besides an expanded point of view, what MAD visitors saw in person was exactly what they saw in the photographs. Nix watched people at the MAD show taking pictures of her miniatures with their cell phones in what, she thinks, was an attempt to create images similar to her own.\(^{43}\)

It is the aim of this thesis to address the issues lacking in the current research on Nix’s work. Such issues will be addressed as how miniatures function within *The City*; what, why, and how they communicate to viewers; and why miniatures can and do accomplish certain tasks in Nix’s images that other objects/subjects could not. Viewers typically see Nix’s photographs, not the miniatures depicted, and the photographs mediate these miniatures’ messages. While previous scholarship has examined Nix’s works through a variety of lenses and recognized a number of their qualities—including humor, the sublime, apocalypse, cultural critique, natural

\(^{41}\) Nix, “About.”
\(^{42}\) Horne, “Miniature Dioramas Conjure the Tiniest Apocalypse Ever.”
\(^{43}\) Durant, “Lori Nix.”
disaster and nuclear fallout, etc.—I plan to address the unacknowledged tensions, nuances, and interactions that result from the use of miniatures and photographs with miniature contents. I will discuss these ideas through the conceptual field of Object Agency Theory and its extension, Miniaturization Theory, in addition to Affect Theory in order to prove their applicability, utility, and power.
CHAPTER II. METHODOLOGY

Contemporary art historians frequently emphasize the artist and their intentions when analyzing bodies and works of art. This popular approach is helpful for contextualizing and gaining certain perspectives on works while utilizing the unique primary sources that are living artists. However, in order to engender a more object-oriented analysis of Nix’s works, I will be taking a rather unconventional approach. Instead of relying solely on photographic theory, I will employ theories of object agency, miniaturization, and affect.

More recently embraced within the art world, object agency and affect theories have aided in revealing the potency of objects-as-art and distinguishing them as having specific agential power. These theories are especially attractive to art historians studying the ancient world who may not have access to the specific contexts in which works were created, commissioned, viewed, used, repurposed, destroyed, or discarded. Because authors of ancient works are no longer living, limited information may exist in relation to language, culture, technological advances, political climates, etc. But the usefulness of these theories for older artworks does not negate their utility in regards to more recent art. In fact, few scholars have tapped the potential of object agency and affect in relation to photography. Such an approach is not only valid, but valuable, for many reasons. Not all viewers know the background of an artist or the “why” or “how” an artwork was created, but the work can act on them regardless. Despite artists’ best intentions, despite labels, didactic panels, or carefully crafted gallery guides, viewers may have experiences outside or opposite that which was desired. It is important to investigate the intricacies of viewer-art engagement for these reasons. Rather than study what these images are intended to be, I will examine what they can do for the viewer.
Alfred Gell extensively developed object agency in his seminal text, *Art and Agency*, in 1998. Gell’s anthropological approach towards objects and art assigned them the status of “social agents,” indicating their ability to cause change in and through their viewers. Gell’s action-based technique shifts art from a position of potential to one of activity. While Gell uses some terminology familiar to semiotics, he generally applies it in a new manner. Gell asserts: “In place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation.” Exploring these ideas through an established lexicon, he posits that art owes its existence and its social agency to its creator and is thus a secondary agent. Without a creator, the artwork would not exist and without an audience, the artwork would not be able to evoke change. While artists instill objects with agency during the process of creation, the artist’s specific vision, intention, or agenda is not necessarily that which the work communicates to viewers. In this way, art objects take on lives of their own, independent of their creators. According to Marian Feldman, “Because all human-material interactions involve social activity that can be understood as agency, I see a universality for the agentive capacity of objects, while at the same time acknowledging that the specific configuration of this agency is historically and culturally contingent.” Feldman supports the idea that object-human relations are characterized by agentive processes, but she qualifies this process as being molded by the culture and era in which it is located. My examination considers contemporary works created within the last nine years within the context of the American society for which they were

---

46 Ibid., 6. [emphasis in original].
47 Ibid., 17.
48 Ibid., 23.
produced. By centering my investigation on the artworks, I will be able to question how they act on a viewer, rather than on the messages behind them—a shift from intention to reception. Thus, art objects assume some authorial command over their own history.

Object agency and affect occupy opposing sides of the same theoretical coin. While object agency concerns the messages conveyed by objects, affect refers to the perceived psychophysical reactions experienced and exhibited by spectators. Affect is the exchange of forces and intensities between “bodies” (human or inhuman), and lies in the between-states of action and being acted upon. These resonances of energies can fluctuate, accumulate, or dissipate.

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth state in *An Inventory of Shimmers*, “Sigmund Freud once claimed … that affect does not so much reflect or think; affect acts.” Affect is a product of subconscious cognitive and corporeal actions/reactions. Maruška Svašek emphasizes the active nature of affect: “Artefacts ‘do’ things: they reproduce the agency of their commissioners, makers and users; they evoke emotional reactions within and amongst individuals, and urge people to take certain actions and positions.” The agency of objects act on people and people experience affective responses in return. Humans bring about non-human creations capable of acting on viewers and even the original artist. People and things are capable of mutually creating one another, sharing and trading powerful experiences over time.

Miniaturization theory, a distinct branch of object agency theory, forms a foundational part of this study. Most substantially developed by Douglass Bailey, miniaturization theory deals with the agency of miniature objects. Miniatures are tiny versions of larger objects in the

51 Ibid., 2.
Susan Stewart remarks that “There are no miniatures in nature; the miniature is a cultural product, the product of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to, the physical world.” Stewart, Bailey, and others investigate the power of miniatures through examination of ancient clay figures, bonsai trees, Barbie dolls, and more. Even looking at that simple list reveals the complexity of the objects and their relations with viewers. Art historians have debated the meanings and uses of ancient clay figures from around the world for decades, convincing cases presented from a range of viewpoints. Bonsai trees have a far-reaching history in the Far East and have found their way into the hearts of westerners, these trees garner the attention of their keepers for the many years required to grow, shape, and craft their appearances into mature forms. Barbie is a relative sensation in the United States, having influenced generations of American youth and causing controversy over the social values and body politic the doll engenders. These examples are normally considered everyday paraphernalia—supposedly outside the scope of deep meaning or impact—and yet their impression on culture and society is apparent. Bailey discusses interactions with miniatures relative to conceptions of time, stereotypes, the body, and space in order to prove the increased power one feels when exerting control over miniature objects. A unique property of miniatures is the ability to pick them up, hold them, and manipulate them—but this power of the viewer coincides with the miniatures’ ability to evoke emotional reactions, physical actions, or general...

---

Bailey relates the “perceptually explosive” qualities of miniatures through a series of five paradoxes in order to segment a complex phenomenon into manageable parts.

Bailey lists “the paradox of size” as a first consideration of the contradictory nature of miniatures. Shrinking objects down can cause several things to happen. The creation of miniatures necessarily causes a loss of detail—the miniature cannot fully match the complexity of its larger referent. The process of compressing an object’s size also allows for the concentration of information and ideas. In the 1980s, Alton Delong ran a series of experiments to test the effects of changing scale on subjects’ perceptions by designing an experiment in which test subjects played Pong on either a large or small television screen. Delong’s results (and EEG readings) indicated that people were more aware, more focused, and better able to process information when interacting with the smaller screen. Bailey’s paradox of size is important because it reveals that the scale of interactions between people and objects alter mental and physical behaviors. Small objects can increase the mind’s ability to grasp information, and thus, miniatures have the power to make concepts too difficult to grasp suddenly comprehensible. Reviewers and I have identified a number of concepts and themes that run throughout The City to which the paradox of size can be applied.

Bailey identifies the second paradox as that of “multiple scales.” This concept may be considered through Susan Stewart’s discussion of Charlotte Yonge’s History of Sir Thomas Thumb (1856). Stewart states that scale is perceived in terms of comparison: “…Space is

57 Bailey, Prehistoric Figurines, 42.
58 Bailey, Prehistoric Figurines, 36.
59 Ibid.
managed by simile and by the principles of equivalence existing between the body and nature."  

Thomas Thumb’s stature is described in relation to an acorn cup, and his weight is dictated by the inability to realize his presence on the palm of a human hand.  

People measure the world around them in relation to what they know—often being comparison of objects to their own human body. Thom Thumb would have a very different perception of how things compare to his body. Bailey expounds that miniatures allow us to realize the presence of multiple scales and the validity of a scale beyond our own. 

Viewers examining Nix’s work look at buildings and settings with recognizable objects inside to which they can compare their own bodies, with a knowledge of what it is like to interact with a life-size version.

Bailey’s third paradoxical consideration is the “paradox of multiple worlds,” or the “paradox of multiple interpretations of the world.”  

In this case, miniatures may grant viewers access points to “other” worlds. One may imagine that objects and characters, like Barbie, GI Joe, or Legos, each exist in worlds of their own. Barbie dates Ken, GI Joe battles Cobra—and yet we have knowledge of, and a certain level of participation in, these worlds. Nix’s artworks allow viewers to see, imagine, and become a part of worlds that they cannot otherwise discover. The dioramas may represent place in the future, the past, or a future past—times and spaces people cannot yet travel.

Another of miniaturization’s unique qualities is the “paradox of being/not being there.”  

The creation of, investigation of, and interaction with miniatures allows one to become a part of that world. However, an individual remains physically in the quotidian world during these.

---

64 Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines*, 42.
forays into other worlds. As much as an individual can immerse themselves, they will always remain physically where they are. This yields the paradox: one cannot be in two worlds at once. But, at the same time, miniatures force viewers into new realities. This does and yet cannot exist. Bailey states that the continual insertion into, and removal out of, miniaturized space causes an “irresolvable tension.”\textsuperscript{65} This is particularly relevant when discussing photography because the viewer cannot physically enter the space pictured—it is frozen and separate from the one they inhabit.

Bailey’s final and, allegedly, most important paradox is that of “the uncanny.”\textsuperscript{66} Miniatures formally resemble their larger counterparts and yet have a strange and fantastic aura about them. They are familiar and foreign, natural and unnatural. According to Bailey, “…the thing represented in miniature is not what it purports to be. It presents something recognizable but it does so by invoking incompatible associations.”\textsuperscript{67} Miniatures thus hold strangely energized positions in relationship to viewers; always and never occupying both sides of dichotomous existence(s). The paradox of the uncanny helps to describe the set of qualities that reveal Nix’s works as having miniatures contents.

Miniatures have power. They invite viewers into their world, their scale, and their perspective and reality. Miniatures grant viewers power, the power to dominate and control, or the power to be dominated and controlled. Miniatures also motivate observers to be participants. People pick up miniatures and hold them, wanting to get a closer look or a better feel for what such an object is like and is capable of. The theories of object agency, affect, and miniaturization afford scholars a scaffold upon which they can actually recognize the agency of

\textsuperscript{65} Bailey, \textit{Prehistoric Figurines}, 42.  
\textsuperscript{66} Bailey, \textit{Prehistoric Figurines}, 42.  
\textsuperscript{67} Bailey, \textit{Prehistoric Figurines}, 42.
miniature objects. The aforementioned theories provide a framework through which I will approach the photographic works of Lori Nix. Not only is this application of theories illuminating for the power of photography and miniatures, it is necessary to really understand the impact and effects works can and do have on viewers. The nontraditional approach of analyzing works with theories originally developed for three-dimensional objects is valid because of the photographs’ three-dimensional contents. The objects speak from within the image, and the photograph is still an actual object itself and communicates physically with viewers. Object Agency and Miniaturization theories are largely overlooked in relationship to photography—despite the fact that photographs are physical objects (albeit two-dimensional ones)—and should be considered in the study of photographs and the subjects they portray. The objects in Nix’s images, and the images themselves, hold power over viewers because of their states of existence, scale, and affective potential. These theories allow for the argument that The City actively influences and motivates its viewers—yet at the same time grants power to them as well. This theoretical grouping transfers attention from the artist and creator to the art objects they have produced.
CHAPTER III. INVESTIGATION I

Objecthood: Miniaturization in *The City* by Lori Nix

This thesis presents three investigations of *The City* through the use of three methods of analysis. This chapter is dedicated to the investigation of objecthood as it relates to the miniatures created and used in *The City* by Lori Nix. The nature and character of objects as art is important—particularly the ways in which these physical, material objects engage viewers in bodily interactions. The types of objects I am discussing are apparent, but the ways in which they influence viewers are not necessarily as evident. Bailey’s paradoxes of miniaturization will be utilized in order to structure analysis of the agency and power of the objects comprising this series. My investigation serves to prove the ability of art objects to move, motivate, influence, stimulate, and affect viewers—physically, emotionally, and mentally.

In the photograph *Museum of Art*, Nix creates an art museum of her own imagining (see fig. 5). “Marble” pilasters and engaged, Ionic columns encase each arched doorway, while a second story of Corinthian columns stands above them. The moldings and arches emphasize the height of the space and lead the eye up to the decorated, arched ceiling. The semi-domed end of the museum showcases a classical nude statue and a golden chalice. The gold frames and marble pedestals suggest to viewers that this museum places importance on the value and display of its collection. This museum, however, appears not overly discriminating in its juxtaposition of works. An abundance of landscapes of different styles and eras (including a view of Old Faithful, Yellowstone) hang adjacent to a gold-leaf panel of the Madonna and child, and an apparent photographic portrait of a woman.

The emphasis on landscape, seen through the imbalance of artistic genres, may have been strange in the museum’s heyday, but it is not out of place any longer as the museum interior
slowly turns into its own kind of growing, green paradise. Nature’s reclaiming of this space indicates that the people who were once concerned about its care and display are no longer able to continue their efforts. The disappearance of these caretakers is troubling. Why are they absent?

Another look at Museum of Art, using miniaturization theory as a frame of reference, permits deeper readings of the power of this location. When the paradoxes of miniaturization are applied to works within The City, a variety of issues and considerations come to the foreground. For instance, according to the paradox of multiple worlds, miniatures allow access to any number of “other” worlds or to interpretations of those worlds. In Museum of Art, a multitude of worlds exist simultaneously. Looking at this grand building, one can imagine it filled with people, walking up and down the stairs and passing through the arched doorways. One can also contemplate the museum in its current state—its return to nature. These worlds cannot coexist and yet they do. The scene reveals a glimpse into the insect world; bees thrive in a perpetual flurry of productive activity, their hives clinging to corners and crevices. Honey drips down the walls, proof of insect success, rivaling the artwork and gilt frames for visual consumption.

Myriad artworks cling to the museum’s walls and sculptural pieces surmount free-standing pedestals. Each unique work of art encompasses a world of its own; the artwork acts as a window into the context and scope of its own creative expanse. In this way, multiple worlds occur within multiple worlds. The museum is both a part of and apart from everyday life; thus, the works housed in this institution are further mired in a network of worlds.

Viewers of this diorama might find themselves in a variety of situations that may add to the complexity of their visual and sensory experiences. Depending on where Museum of Art is viewed, its context may become ironic or reflective. Should a viewer examine this work in a
gallery, it would be seen alongside the other works hung on the gallery walls. Art would be alongside art, within worlds of art and without worlds of art; worlds beside worlds, worlds within and without worlds. Should Museum of Art be seen in a museum of art, viewers could draw direct comparisons to the space in which they stood. They might imagine their current location removed of people and filled with the flora and fauna of Nix’s world. This comparison of spaces may bring to mind consideration of what it feels like, or would feel like, to be in either of these spaces. Could a visitor feel the dryness in the air or the humidity on their skin? Would there be a breeze or a musty smell? Would it sound very different or very much the same? Should an individual purchase the work for their home the viewing experience would probably be further separate and distinct. The multiple worlds existing in Museum of Art can engender a limitless variety of correlating experiences.

The concept of multiple worlds does not only apply to Nix’s Museum of Art, but to the entire series. Multifarious worlds can be seen and explored through Circulation Desk, Space Center, Natural History, Great Hall, and others (see figs. 6-9). Within these examples specifically, numerous worlds become easily and immediately identifiable. Circulation Desk highlights a library’s importance across decades through its art deco moldings, 1970s wood veneer circulation desk, newer mostly-plastic office chairs, and the presence of the card catalog (see fig. 6). This library may have functioned decades ago; perhaps it did not have funds to update to computer cataloguing systems; or perhaps it is in a world where our current technology had not arrived or did not matter. Every abandoned book holds a world within its moldering pages, any of which could have foretold of the disarray and catastrophe depicted. Space Center references the possibilities and the existence of other planetary and celestial worlds (see fig. 7). Outer space has been brought into this interior space for a look at issues of technology and travel
through time and space. And yet, perhaps the space center no longer exists in a world where exploration of other worlds is even an option—the separation and convergence of worlds.

Another of the miniature paradoxes evidenced in Nix’s dioramic works is the paradox of multiple scales. Typically, people see and experience a world built to their own scale. When expected scale shifts to something unusual, human beings can react in surprising ways.

Sometimes “real-life” locations intentionally utilize miniaturization in order affect visitors. One such case—that receives a great deal of foot traffic—is Disneyland. Every visitor who enters and exits Disneyland must pass through Main Street, an area representative of iconic “small town America.”

The buildings lining the street were built at 5/8ths the size of normal buildings, not really noticeable to park visitors. Taller buildings continue to hide the illusion of being life-size by being scaled further down with each consecutive story. The forced perspective makes the buildings seem larger and the act of shrinking one’s surroundings in turn makes visitors feel larger. Suddenly, in Disneyland, one may feel consequently at ease, in control, and more optimistic.

“The result is that people walking along the street and entering its shops are provided with a subtle, unperceivable boost to their sense of well-being; they are empowered, comforted, made secure.”

With miniaturization comes a certain measure of power, but also the conception of having that power. As a result, viewers engaging with Nix’s works may cope with views of a post-apocalyptic world because it is presented in a way that seems manageable and controllable.

Confronting a miniature world upsets one’s conception of reality. For dioramas, the diorama itself is far smaller than a scale catering to adult humans. The size disparity is

---

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
unsettling. One must look closer, perhaps lean down, crane one’s neck, and peer about to investigate the contents. *Natural History* depicts a variety of simulated geographic regions around the world and animals that live there (see fig. 8). These scenes detail entire geographic regions “shrunk” to fit within the framed cases of the Natural History Museum. The scale of these cases is not indicative of what one would assume the rest of the represented miniature world to be. They are a snapshot of a larger ecosystem—or systems of ecosystems.

Furthermore, the implied atmospheric perspective of the “outside world” allows for unusual juxtapositions. We know the city skyline that forms the horizon was not actually built to the same scale and placed numerous feet away, it was built much smaller to *appear* as if it were in the distance. The strange comparison of a penguin, moose, or ostrich rivaling the height of an apartment or office building is perceptually disruptive. In this case, objecthood and agency are perceptual processes\(^{\text{72}}\) led by interactions of human and inhuman objects. This diorama has incited considerations of other realities—and therefore reevaluations of our own reality or realities.

In Nix’s *Anatomy Classroom*, a variety of scales compete for the viewers’ attention. “Real” human skulls and organs in jars line shelves of the classroom (see fig. 10). Educational models include simplified, “life-size” models (see fig. 11) cut away to show ribs, intestines, etc., along with enlarged versions of dissected organs (see fig. 12). The pull-down diagrams hang mounted above the chalkboard; an unfurled chart displays the components of the human eye. These are *enlarged* miniatures—miniatures too large for the “normal” scale of the diorama. In this classroom, miniature people would have been faced with a conundrum similar to that of

current viewers—the objects students would be interacting with would be of a scale different from their own.

*Anatomy Classroom*’s layers of scaled meanings build upon and intersect with additional layers of corporeal meaning. The contents of this diorama prompt considerations of one’s own bodily experiences. The relative center point of the space is the eye diagram, leading to contemplation of sight and other sensory discernments. Chairs lead viewers visually into the space. Because chairs have the intended purpose of providing seating, they help to draw attention to more bodily experiences—the act of sitting. The corporeal consciousness that *Anatomy Classroom* raises is tied to agency, affect, and one’s own understanding of what it is like to live and move as a human in the world.

The architecture that surrounds us has been designed and constructed with a specific aesthetic experience and practical purpose in mind. Even Nix’s diminutive spaces are created not for the enjoyment of Lilliputian peoples, but for homo sapiens. While Nix’s works are not locations humans can physically enter, the inability to enter bodily does not prevent affective responses as if one had entered them. People know what it is like to walk into a classroom, and one can imagine what it would be like to traverse a classroom in disrepair. Thus without a physical presence, one can still project themselves into the space. The realization of paradoxically being and not being in a space results in a discomforting cognizance that one is wavering between two levels of being. I would argue that miniatures encourage—through disruptions caused by paradoxes of size, scales, worlds, etc.—dissonances in corporeal functionings, and therefore encourage critical consciousness.

Briefly mentioned in the Introduction, Nix’s works seem to have a component of cultural criticism that few critics remark upon and fewer actually explore. While miniatures can
engender psycho-physical experiences of a critical nature, they can also facilitate understandings of complicated concepts. The act of condensing a place, space, or object not only shrinks it physically but conceptually, as well. Just as Alton Delong substantiated in his 1983 study of *Pong*, more information can be processed more quickly when it is presented at a smaller scale. Nix’s representations of tenets of high culture—i.e. *Museum of Art, Natural History, Great Hall, Circulation Desk*, etc.—depict well-respected and highly valued institutions as defunct, abandoned, and without import. The fact that Nix’s artworks are displayed in some of the very spaces she “tears down” gives the work additional force; the art becomes self-reflexive institutional analysis or critique. Rather than place herself in these environments and take control that way, she destroys them altogether. This destruction of hegemony segues into a criticism of the “religions” of consumerism and capitalism—direct ties seen in *Mall, Shoe Store, Vacuum Showroom, and Church*. Nix enacts the destruction of commercial spaces and twists the church into a storage facility for the neon signage of business storefronts. These images collectively point to the larger issue: that of general corruption of current society. Returning to focus on the intentions of the artist is acceptable at this juncture because Nix’s intentions intersect with the affect her images engender.

Another notion that has been largely absent in critical discussion is the issue of public versus private space within *The City*. According to Susan Stewart:

…The miniature world may always be seen as being overcoded as the cultural. [Many examples] tend to present domesticated space as a model of order, proportion, and balance. Yet, of course, the major function of the enclosed space is always to create a
tension or dialectic between inside and outside, between private and public property, between the space of the subject and the space of social.  

Many of Nix’s works are comprised of locations meant for public use—probably because life lived in a city is shared with so many people in close proximity. Her dioramas carry cultural significance in their divisions of personal and public. *Natural History, Space Center, Museum of Art,* and *Mall* all represent large spaces used by many, many people (see figs. 4-5, 7, 9). Even smaller spaces, like *Chinese Take-Out,* still represent high foot traffic areas where the public comes and goes—even if the business is private, the space is not (see fig. 13).

The fabrication of such large public locations in a miniature format transforms the space into a private one. In small scale, these large places become intimate. There is room for few people to interact with the objects and within the space. The desire to lean in and peer closely at things becomes restricted to one, two, or three individuals depending on the size of the diorama; it disallows for the participation of a crowd. The smallest dioramas force one-on-one participation. Their small scale requires viewers to get near to view them clearly. This reversal of public to private upsets viewers’ usual perceptions of particular types of places. Nix’s images stand in for locations that operate with specific social and behavioral codes and expectations attached.

Examples of culturally-coded spaces include the rooms depicted in *Museum of Art* and *Circulation Desk*; they represent places where, if they were functioning normally, people would most likely use quiet tones or whisper to speak (see figs. 5-6). Calm, composed movements and bearing are anticipated along with polite interest and proper dress. Spaces like *Fountain* (see fig. 14) would expectedly witness crowds of people moving quickly in a variety of directions rarely

---

talking or having social exchanges. Affect of the original space influences experiences of, and affect of, the miniaturized space. Viewers understand what interacting in large public spaces is like and bring that knowledge with them to their interpretations and perceptions of Nix’s miniature counterparts.

The dioramas which comprise Laundromat (see fig. 15) and Subway (see fig. 16) depict locations with culturally, rather than authoritatively, enforced codes of conduct. These two sites bridge the gap between public and private. Laundromats operate on the basis that numerous people bring personal possessions into public in order to clean them with specialized equipment. People rarely speak to one another when in laundromats; they most likely feel openly or subconsciously vulnerable at having their intimate apparel (not an acceptable part of daily public life) exposed to strangers. Individuals engage in the intimate act of sorting, folding, and caring for their clothing, linens, etc., alongside individuals whom they may have never seen or met. Human beings sit side-by-side in plastic chairs waiting in silence, reading or listening to music, seldom exchanging a touch, glance, or sentence. A similar situation occurs in the subway. Travelers enter and exit subway cars to sit and stand beside each other in strained silence. During high traffic hours as many people as possible crowd into each car, each pretending not to notice their sudden lack of personal space. Often strangers squeeze next to each other in normally unacceptable or inappropriate ways. The lack of space and the general rush of city-dwellers seems to excuse these common codes of behavior. On the subway, humans of all ages and backgrounds sit shoulder-to-shoulder and stand breast-to-back-to-elbow. In these situations, people refuse to acknowledge one another’s presences, as if disregarding others could cause them to not exist, or cause personal boundaries not to be crossed. The use of headphones, paperback books, cellphones, etc., helps to create a further barrier between an individual and
those around them: a world within a world and social expectations within larger social expectations. In these ways, Nix’s spaces occupy liminal spaces on the edges of public and private.

Nix’s works generally engage popular locations characterized by associated social rules, expected modes of behavior, and often routinized acts. By miniaturizing these common locations viewers may be able to view them in a different context, and reexamine the way they would normally behave. Thus a dialogue is created in relation to the observer and this new place, a place outside the normal world, where any behavior is possible. A part of the paradox of size states that miniatures inspire considerations of larger worlds.74 This concept means that perceptions of life-size and miniature objects influence each other. And the fact that life-size environments can cause affective reactions in viewers, as well, means that everyday experiences in the world will most likely influence viewers’ experiences with the miniature versions. By inserting one’s self into a new, miniature environment, one may leave behind socially-constructed strictures on behavior/performance, and enter a world where participants possess infinite possibilities. Viewers may be simultaneously aware of “proper” behavior in such a place and of their newfound freedom beyond its boundaries.

Many artists working with miniatures utilize humans, whereas Nix’s works do not. This allows viewers even more options. Observers can contemplate where the people have gone, why they left, and insert themselves into the scene (without the social stigma normally tied to these locations). This removal of people, of typical location operations, and of culturally enforced conduct, endows the viewer-participant with unfettered freedom. While objects have power, the

absence of objects does as well. Absence creates informational gaps that the brain is compelled to fill in. Its inability to “persuade, convince, or fulfill,” encourages viewers to search for, generate, and test any variety of meanings of their own choosing. According to Bailey, Cochrane, and Zambelli, the “absence of expected elements in representational art is a liberating process.” Lack thus becomes uplifting, enlivening, and limitless. The idea of presence versus absence is reflected within the paradox of being/not being there. Viewers cannot simultaneously be present and absent, yet they are. While viewers can be mentally present in the space, they necessarily must be physically absent.

Through this analysis it is evident that Nix's *The City* evinces Bailey’s paradoxes of miniaturization through the use of comparisons of size, scale, and multiple worlds. The well-known types of locations Nix chooses to portray are relatable to viewers and often fit within the realm of related life experiences. Nix breaks and decomposes the worlds she creates, drawing attention to conceptions of place and time and allows viewers to form altered relationships within these conceptions. Viewers may call into question who they are as individuals and how they relate to the world around them, in addition to their relationship to the miniature world in front of them. Social cues and graces are eliminated in miniature scale by the implementation of an alternate reality and by the removal of humans.

The spaces represented in *The City* tend to be specifically, behaviorally coded locations. Individuals feel pressured to conduct themselves in certain ways in different social settings—taking this idea one step further reveals that some people may not in fact even notice their behavioral changes in relation to these different settings. Strictures on proper conduct are not so

---

75 Bailey, Chochrane, and Zambelli, *Unearthed*, 140.
76 Ibid., 140.
77 Ibid., 140.
78 Bailey, Cochrane, Zambelli, *Unearthed*, 16. “Acts of breaking and decomposition were performances which stimulated senses of personhood and understandings within the Neolithic world.”
pronounced everywhere as they are in Nix’s selected spaces. This chosen assortment leads to many alternate realities—particularly through the attention drawn to disrupted social order. Viewers in these spaces can be, act, imagine whoever and whatever they like. The assumption of new possibilities and the insertion of oneself into the works is unique and personal, but nearly universal in its accessibility. The viewer becomes the utmost authority on what is “normal” behavior and can create a social order of his or her own choosing.

*The City* grants power by providing options, unique experiences, and empowerment to its viewers. The series holds power in its ability to engage viewers but grants power in the viewers’ ability to decide on what information “completes” each scene in whatever manner they choose. Observers loom over small, manipulable scenes. The works pose questions to their viewers and draw comparisons to their surroundings and within themselves. They are active works—the lack of detail, lack of human beings, and lack of enforced social boundaries activate possibilities for viewer input and response. *The City* subverts the expectations of a world with established rules and opens up multiple, new worlds for exploration, possibility, and creative transformation.
CHAPTER IV. INVESTIGATION II

Format: The Intersection of Photography and Diorama

Chapter III incorporated a variety of artworks, theories, ideas, and places as evidence of the agency and affective potential of objects and objects-as-art. In order to further investigate *The City* and its components this case study will examine the specific format through which these dioramas are presented: photography. The fact that Nix’s works *are* photographs and not the physical, three-dimensional dioramas themselves does not hinder the potential agency and affective potency of her work, but it does change them in numerous ways. I argue that the miniature objects depicted in these works not only retain the many properties unique to miniaturization, but that these properties become more pronounced and far-reaching through their photographic transformation.

Photography is still often disputed as being “art.” 79 Photography’s numerous, diverse uses prevent its blanket acceptance as art. The age-old debate of art versus craft (which may become increasingly poignant when discussed in relation to Nix’s *Museum of Art*) partially lies in discourse on the practical nature, or usefulness, of an object. In many countries around the globe photography serves countless, varied purposes, many of which are of little or no artistic value or consequence. A photograph can be evidence, a document, a memorial, an illustration, a souvenir, and so on.

Photography’s pluralistic nature lends itself to recording and sharing news, often in relation to natural disasters or large-scale catastrophes. People generally assign to photography inherent truth; they choose to understand photographs as being windows to the world. When

---

photographs hold such persuasive power with viewers, the “truth” associated with photography
has ramifications for artworks by artists like Nix. Viewers confronting her images are presented
with a very immediate decision to make; whether or not what they are seeing is real. Because
the miniature-ness of a Nix scene is relatively clear, a whole host of other issues surface. Does
the place pictured exist? Does it refer to an event or a location in life? Why did someone make
this? How did they do it? Nix’s decisions to photograph miniature sets beget images in dialogue
with those of actual natural disasters all over the world. The obvious “untruth” her photographs
tell collides with the photographs that viewers are shown in the news. The City is strange in its
miniature scale, but it is somewhat familiar in its scenes and settings. These unique properties
fulfill Bailey’s paradox of the uncanny and the odd combination makes the series compelling.

The common experience and knowledge of life-size spaces like the ones depicted in The City encourage personal responses because they are relatable to viewers. While viewers are used
to directing themselves in the perception of their environments, Nix intercedes in this process
with the additional determination of point of view via a fixed photograph. The artworks may
continue to move viewers, but the stimuli are channeled through a specific plane—a directed
plane of observation—and a very specific, selected perspective.

Because Nix controls part of viewers’ perceptions, her camera decisions play a part in
influencing viewers’ affective responses. But very likely, the objects she creates affect Nix as
well as viewers. Nix builds her miniatures by hand, over the course of weeks, months, and years.
The objects she creates stem from experiences and knowledge of living in the world. Intimate
interactions with these miniatures make it exceedingly likely their individual and collective
agency acts on Nix—even as she brings them into being. These objects and Nix mutually affect
(and create/recreate) each other. Nix’s final works are photographs, which carry performative
potential as prints also. Nix spends months or years adjusting the scene until it matches her desired arrangement. Then she spends weeks lighting and photographing the miniature space. Not only does Nix construct each miniature to her own personal specifications, but she also agonizes over the perfect atmosphere with which to imbue the scene. In that sense, Nix’s photographs provide much more than just miniatures; there is an air and character to them that is other than any that could be easily experienced with just the diorama on display (and/or photographed quickly). I would argue that Nix does not simply try to depict her miniatures in a pleasing fashion; instead, she works to capture her own affective responses on film. Nix isolates the responses at work within herself and then works to visually simulate them for the camera. Nix gives her miniatures greater agency in their creation and combination, and the miniatures thereby affect her in return. Nix uses her emotions, feelings, and understandings of these objects in order to bring certain qualities to her photographs, qualities that the miniatures cannot—the affect she derived from them. Thus, The City, as a series of images, represents one person’s conceptions of their own affective emotions in relation to various combinations of miniatures. These photographs and the miniatures they depict gain new agency, received and processed by viewers who respond affectively too. Agency and affect are a process in which the interactions of artist, artwork, and interpreter are undoubtedly linked.

Nix’s images, as discussed in Chapter III affect the viewers who interact with them (as evidenced by the various tenets of object agency, affect, and significantly, miniaturization theory). The City is unique in that each work is mutually constructed by the incorporation of dioramas and photographs. Finished pieces cannot exist without both photographic and dioramic elements. Like these works, which are mutually constituted by two mediums, Nix, the artworks,
and viewers are also mutually constitutive. Each of these components shares a role in the
development of the others through the transmission of agency and affect.

Photographed dioramas provide different experiences from dioramas or photographs alone. The dual nature of *The City* presents certain unique qualities that neither single medium could accomplish on its own. Bailey’s paradoxes of miniaturization are not negated by the photographic format of Nix’s works and, in fact, they can be enhanced by it. Bailey even cites the work of photo-historians as evidence in his own writings:

Tagg argues that the power of images such as photographs rests in their ability to leave us feeling inadequate and incomplete yet with an appetite for more. They exert influence precisely because they are not real or complete. As repetitions, they are effective in deceiving in ways that the world of real actions and effects cannot match (Tagg 1988: 207).  

The concept of presence and absence becomes relevant again through the consideration of the miniatures presented in their photographic form. According to John Tagg, photographs already cause viewers to feel incomplete. But, as indicated by Bailey, Cochrane, and Zambelli in Chapter III, the absence of objects has the potential to do the same. Thus, the issue of presence versus absence is doubled by the photographed diorama. Because dioramas are both complete and incomplete, (they can never encompass every exact detail of the original), viewers feel both complete and incomplete in reaction. Viewers encounter voids of information by observing spaces in which products of humanity are visible, but there is no evidence of humans themselves in Nix’s photographs. The “appetite for more” stems from the natural desire to solve that which

---

is incomplete. Viewers are present in the world of the diorama, present in the photographed world, and also absent from both. They are within and without a world-within-worlds—a further ramification of the photographic format on the paradox of multiple worlds.

These photographed spaces also have the unique potential to be printed at any variety of sizes. Nix chooses to print them at a large scale; *Subway* (see fig. 16), for example, is 48 x 63 inches. Even Nix’s recently published artist book, *Lori Nix: The City*, is printed at 11 x 13.6 inches, larger than the average book. It becomes clear that it is important, at least to Nix, that these works are seen in large format.

Considerations of the effects of large views of miniature worlds lead to interesting discussions between scale and perception. Several things happen when *The City* is printed at such proportions. Face to face with the physical diorama, one would be able to move left or right, closer or farther away, in order to see inside the space and really examine all of the objects and details therein. However, Nix considers her artwork to be photography, not sculpture, so this is not possible—especially after the destruction of the old dioramas. Viewers are denied the ability to look around and about these objects. The visual perspective is chosen and then forced upon the viewer. If the photographs were printed so that the miniatures matched their real size, viewers would become discouraged very quickly at the inability to see everything. The images would be too frustratingly small to allow for the inspection of details and for the comfortable ability to distinguish all the various objects that inhabit the space. So many details and items are contained within Nix’s imagery; these aspects of the works would be lost on viewers if they were printed at a smaller size. The intimacy of viewer and work would quickly turn to dismissal or disinterest. The increased size of the prints makes them larger than their own miniature life-size, but not even close to a human’s life-size. The inherent qualities of miniaturization make it
eventually obvious to viewers that they are looking at miniature objects, but the increased size of their printed representations makes it more obviously so.

The large scale of the prints emphasizes the true tiny nature of the dioramic subjects and is most likely disconcerting to viewers. Strange fluctuations in scale or proportion that may have occurred during the process of recreating an object very small become glaring, rather than subtle, when blown up large. Details that where too minute to include are magnified in their notable absence. Confronting an image leads to the realization that the photograph is large, but it contains tiny objects—with no way to measure or understand how small they are. Nothing exists within the image to reveal the actual size of the miniatures, and so upsets the power paradigm of miniature and human observer. The paradox of multiple scales instead becomes a strange spectrum of potentials. With no identifiers of size, there is no way to really determine the stature of the miniatures in actuality. Viewers cannot know how much larger they are than the miniatures. Thus, they cannot feel comfortable in their power over miniatures without knowing how much power they are justified in feeling.

These images continue to alter normal miniature paradoxes in various ways. Conceptions of intimate and public space are also skewed. The tiny detail and inviting properties of miniatures bring viewers in closer to the photographs, closer than a normal viewing distance for images of this size (see fig. 17). The photographed miniatures make public space intimate and private, and then public again, through the back-and-forth interactions they engender and the spaces in which they are displayed.

Viewer-participants must be unsettled through their further removal from positions of control because of the artwork being photographic and not simply dioramic. Nix gives power to viewers of her work; she presents them with miniatures—with objects that are recognizably
smaller than they—which they could dominate, control, and manipulate as they wish. However, these objects are captured on film, separated by realities and a two-dimensional picture plane, removed from the possibility of touch. People have control over miniatures but not when they exist only in photographs. *The City*, therefore, creates its own kind of paradox in the dynamics of power and control.

Continued layering of worlds within worlds (and scales within scales) occurs through the photographic character of *The City* and its incorporation of art historical elements. *Library* (see fig. 3) includes old photographs on the walls. Miniature photographs within a larger photograph, old photographs within a new photograph, black and white photographs within a color photograph, and portraiture within a (albeit unusual) genre scene. Nix forces dialogical comparisons in and through her works because of the breadth and depth of options which photography affords. Strange relationships may develop from the layering of formats: print media is seen in a three-dimensional environment, seen in a photograph which is experienced in three dimensions (without the additional consideration of time).

Allusions to art, just like references to general objects in life (like chairs and books), are important and act upon the viewer, but very precise references can increase visual impact, meaning, and levels of paradox. For example, the representation of the painted Madonna and child in *Museum of Art* looks specifically like Duccio di Buoninsegna’s *Virgin and Child*, c. 1300 (see figs. 18-19).\(^{81}\) This contextualizes the multiple worlds and multiple scales involved.

In *Vacuum Showroom* (see fig. 20), three prints still cling to the wall in the dilapidated store. Each print references a different major artist/movement in art history. The first proclaims “It’s classic” in large letters over an altered backdrop of *The Creation of Adam*, painted by

\(^{81}\) Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1300, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel c. 1511 (see fig. 21). Adam’s figure is replaced by that of a vacuum, its handle reaching out to meet the finger of God. Next in the line is a poster proclaiming “It’s Modern” (see fig. 22). The repeated vacuum design plays on Steve Schapiro’s 1965 photograph, *Rene Magritte, MOMA, New York, 1965* (see fig. 23). The last ad in the series states, “It’s Powerfull [sic],” and harkens back to Vincent Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* painting from 1889 (see fig. 24). *Vacuum Showroom* thereby taps into a well-known, highly-recognizable, visual library that has become part of Western society’s general knowledge and popular culture. Nix’s incorporation of such elements acts as bonuses for informed viewers. The conversation created between these wall posters and *Vacuum Showroom* as a whole situates the work and works within an art historical frame of reference. The ties to famous artworks lend credibility to *Vacuum Showroom* simply by association. Additionally, these works form part of the paradoxical discussions of multiple scales, multiple worlds, and multiples sizes. Viewers are potentially familiar with the original works, which draws direct comparisons and attention to their re-representation here.

As mentioned, the photographs which constitute *The City* occupy spaces of both photographs and dioramas. As photographs, one manner in which these images could be anticipated to affect the public has not occurred. One must consider the subject matter inherent to *The City*: interiors laying in chaos and destruction. These spaces are familiar, loved, and near and dear to city dwellers. Artworks depicting so many culturally and socially recognized and important locations in ruin might expectedly elicit anger, frustration, and confusion from viewers. In the case of Nix and *The City*, however, the opposite is true. Observers tend to react favorably, as evidenced by numerous reviewers, online comment postings, and by gallery-
goers. Artworks that involve the virtual destruction of culture and life as it is known certainly occupy a vein of expression that could be construed as distasteful, irreverent, or aggressive. Art has had a long history of causing protest. If works like Oscar Gustave Rejlander’s *The Two Ways of Life* (1857) caused controversy over its “explicit” content, and Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans* (1981) incited debate over its appropriation and subversion of authorship, certainly a photograph depicting the destruction of an art museum—with the artwork moldering away and no one to look at it—might bring about negative reactions. As this is not the case, it is important to analyze why a series that could have incited rejection has instead been embraced.

Jonah Samson, an artist who photographs miniature people engaged in explicit violent or sexual acts in his *Pleasantville* series, presents viewers with subject matter heavily protested in exhibitions of the past. Artists have met great adversity in the exploration of sexual encounters, like Robert Mapplethorpe’s *The Perfect Moment* exhibit (1989), or any one of Joel-Peter Witkin’s photographs, like *The Kiss* (1982). For Samson, viewers tend to read his images as light, comical, mischievous. Because the subjects are miniature people, somehow their actions are seen as laughable, rather than obscene, to the general public. Nix’s utilization of miniature sets may also play into their perception as enjoyable and fascinating, rather than impudent and goading. As mentioned in Chapter I, Nix and her critics have noted the various types of humor they find in *The City*. While they interpret the series as having a humorous air, no writer outright

---


attributes this quality to the use of miniaturization. Somehow, Nix has largely been able to avoid negative views of her work—and conversely been praised for her images and technique. I suggest that miniatures played more than a small part in the ability to deliver a shocking message to an often disinclined audience. The combination of miniature and photograph accomplish what neither one could do alone.

While miniatures have helped to make Nix’s content more palatable, the photographic side of the equation has helped to make these images increasingly accessible, attainable, reproducible, and transportable. Photography has the power to be art, documentation, evidence, example, etc. Perhaps in *The City*, these images bridge many of the possible categories in order to become part of a miniature world, one able to connect and speak to viewers. The format of *The City* both gives power to viewers and takes it away. It provides information and-withholds it. It doubles and triples the emphases and tiers of significance within the paradoxes of size, multiple scales, multiple worlds, and being/not being there. Moreover, photographed miniatures transcend new arenas of understanding and acceptance within viewers. I have shown how miniatures and dioramas act on the observers who experience them, but the altered format of photographed miniatures does not hinder the agential potential of these artistic works—seemingly the opposite is true. Nix’s *The City* accomplishes more because of its unique composition of artistic elements.
CHAPTER V. INVESTIGATION III

Engagement: Interactions between Art, Objects, and Viewers

Chapters III and IV were dedicated to critical examinations of the characteristics and abilities of miniature objects, and the ways in which they are altered by being photographed. This chapter will take an agential and affective approach in order to inspect the ways in which viewers engage with miniatures, in both physical and photographic forms. Discussions with Nix have helped to formulate an understanding of her motivations and interests in creating her dioramic scenes. Nix’s perspectives on her own creations can be completely different from those of her viewers. If viewers would not choose the same angle from which to view the miniature diorama that Nix chose for them in photograph, her decisions become imperative to consider because they have a direct impact on viewers’ perceptions of and experiences with her work. Relationships forged between the artwork and its creator and the art and its viewers are divergent, but both are important. By studying the creator, the object, and the viewer, a more holistic understanding of the intermediary nature of objects can be gained. The art objects themselves are responsible for shaping viewers’ perceptions and interactions with these objects—in several venues—will be explored.

The insights and supportive communications that Nix has provided have allowed my research to reach further. Nix described how she has always felt more comfortable working with things than with people.\textsuperscript{84} The preference to work with objects is represented in her art. The sets she wishes to photograph need to be created as they do not exist anywhere in life. It is not feasible for a working artist living in an apartment building in New York City to construct full-size rooms or buildings as sets for photographs. Nix states that not only is it logistically impractical, but expensive and wasteful to think of building such structures for a fleeting

\textsuperscript{84} Lori Nix, interview by author, New York, New York, November 2, 2013.
Instead, Nix builds the miniatures within her apartment/studio and begins by making paper models to plan out the elaborate dioramas. Nix attributes part of the surreal quality of her dioramas to abstaining from mathematically determining the appropriate scale of every object within a designed space. Nix and Gerber’s general perception of appropriate size guides the formation of miniature objects, and the lack of mathematical precision causes the occasional element to seem a little “off.” Limited by her means, location, and lifestyle, Nix has carved an interesting niche for herself within genres of photography (and diorama).

While Nix’s reasons for utilizing miniatures to accomplish her photography goals seem sensible, it is possible that there are some motivations at work influencing her actions that even she may not fully realize. Just as Disney world subconsciously affects park visitors, the objects around us—even those we create ourselves—have the power to influence our perceptions, actions, thoughts, and feelings. Nix states that she enjoys fabricating the objects she photographs and the easiest way to do that is to make them all “in the smallest scale possible.” And while she states that she is not particularly enamored of miniatures—that miniature is just her mode of working—that does not mean that miniatures have not affected her. After all, creating things in such a small scale is enormously time-consuming—potentially more so than creating objects at their normal scale. Nix has been working on The City since 2005 and without a specific order or arc in mind for the progression of her images, the series could have ended any year since then. As noted above, miniatures have essentially universal qualities of being engaging, cute, or thought-provoking. Nix’s extended engagements with her own miniature creations have convinced her of their power—of their own need for her to continue the series.

85 Ibid.
86 Lori Nix, lecture, School of Visual Arts, New York, New York, November 1, 2013.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Nix, interview.
The miniatures in Nix’s series, in addition to the others, seem to fall within Bailey’s final paradox, the paradox of the uncanny. The paradox of the uncanny alludes to miniatures’ unique ability to reference a “familiar, knowable form” with which viewers can identify. However, miniatures are simultaneously “different, eerie, and uncanny.” Miniatures imitate their life-size inspirations, but they appear inexplicably strange. Thus the paradox of the uncanny indicates that which we know and recognize, but that which is also oddly different. Nix’s imprecise process of measuring contributes to the uncanny quality of her dioramas.

Beyond our email correspondence, I also listened to Nix as a visiting lecturer at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, interviewed her at her studio and home in Brooklyn, and viewed her works installed at the ClampArt Gallery in Manhattan. Because I visited Nix in her studio, I was able to view two of her dioramas in person, and in the location where they were created. At the ClampArt Gallery, I also saw Nix’s photographs in a gallery setting.

After interviewing Nix in her apartment, I spent time examining her last two completed (and still assembled) dioramas: Living Room and Casino (see fig. 25-26). Casino is large, measuring forty-five inches wide, thirty-one inches deep, and twenty-one inches high. Moving about the diorama, I determined positions that felt natural from which to stand to view and photograph them. The diorama, built far lower than eye level, necessitated my stooping in order to identify an appropriate height. I felt most comfortable facing the slot machines and back wall head on (see fig. 27). I lined up with the second pharaoh statue and stood with my eye level at his waist height. The casino is large, so viewers could stand five feet away and still be able to see it well. Because the slot machines are individualized with unique titles and graphics, one would want to stand about two feet away in order to really study each one. Moving too far to

---

91 Ibid.
either side of the diorama reveals its incompleteness. The wall on the far left in unfinished and there are fewer details closer to the diorama’s missing “fourth” wall.

A comparison of my preferred point of view and the one chosen by Nix for viewers in Casino reveals two different perspectives. According to Nix, one of her greatest challenges when working with her miniature scenes is in achieving the appearance of depth. By choosing to shoot the scene from an angle, Nix makes the space appear larger. The camera is angled to emphasize the ceiling, a view that I did not naturally select on my own. Not only Nix’s angle of view on a horizontal axis, but the vertical one, too, emphasizes the depth and height of the space. The crack splitting apart the ceiling, wall, and floor and the bright light slicing into the darkened interior help to make the image dynamic. While examining a space, the details seen whilst looking and moving are what capture viewers’ attention. Through photography only one angle of view is available to viewers, Nix chose to make it a dynamic one. Nix is, in one way, limited by her medium; without a dynamic angle of view, observers are less likely to keep looking and more likely to move on. The colors, composition, and details are all important in terms of not only drawing viewers in, but keeping them there.

When in ClampArt Gallery, I felt compelled to stand closer to these photographs than I would to other photographs of the same size but with different content. I stood about two feet away, to pick out details—about the same distance that I felt comfortable standing from the actual dioramas in her apartment. While I had to stoop to look at the diorama, the images in the gallery were hung so that average eye level is approximately the same height at which the camera was located. Thus, viewers see what the camera saw, without stooping or standing on tiptoe. The implied point of view is the one provided.

92 Nix, lecture.
Casino is interesting in its content for several reasons. It presents a strange amalgamation of cultures and time periods. One might assume the casino is situated in Las Vegas based upon the prevalence of casinos in that location and the desert landscape that can be seen through the cracked wall. However, the pharaoh statues predate the popularization of casinos in Las Vegas by a few thousand years. Egypt, Las Vegas, desert, and a variety of time periods intersect in this image. Viewers might interest themselves in the colors and designs pulled and twisted from Egyptian art. Occasionally viewers comment on or criticize the presence of glowing lights in the dioramas. They remark how nonsensical it is, how it is a point of departure for suspension of disbelief, or simply point it out. During my interview with her, Nix informed me that she had done this on purpose. She explained that should something happen to our nation as a whole, the areas surrounding Hoover Dam would continue to receive power until the turbines cease to work. Hoover Dam’s hydroelectric abilities would keep Las Vegas well-lit—people or no people. Not only does Casino intermix time periods from the past and present, it references a time in the future that has yet to pass; Las Vegas has yet to stand desolate with flickering fluorescents the only functioning technology left.

For the purposes of the paradox of the uncanny, Casino seems exemplary in a variety of ways. The Egyptian pharaohs and hieroglyphs resemble others existing in life. The ugly carpet and gaudy décor reference the decorated interiors currently in casinos in Las Vegas—even the

---


94 Nix, interview.

95 Nix, interview.
Luxor has an Egyptian theme. The landscape spotted through the crack matches that of Nevada. The abandoned walker next to the center bank of slot machines—with its single tennis ball—mimics those seen across the United States utilized by the elderly. It is all familiar but also strange, and therefore perfectly uncanny.

During my studio/apartment visit, Nix had one more diorama still assembled, Living Room. Living Room is a miniature version of Nix’s own living room. It measures forty-five inches wide, thirty-one inches deep, and twenty-one inches high. The diorama recreates Nix’s living room down to accurate representations of her taste in music. The diorama had approximately ten inches of extra “floor” leading into the space that is not really shown to viewers in the photographs. After those ten inches, I stood back only one or two more inches in order to comfortably see the room. I positioned myself centered to, and eye level with, the scissors hanging on the far wall.

A comparison of my preferred view of the diorama to Nix’s chosen view reveals—again—significant differences. Nix positions her camera higher and farther to the left. This angle of view activates the space once again through the creation of “active” diagonal lines, or orthogonals, in the composition. The higher perspective allows viewers to look over and down on more contents of the room. This reveals more objects on the table and a better look at the subway diorama. Once more, Nix slightly altered the view one might choose for themselves and made it more interesting than a “static” image. While the view I chose felt natural to me, the corresponding photograph I took to match it falls flat (see fig. 28). Although I did not light the space as Nix does, the composition created by my preferred life-view of this diorama did not engagingly translate to photograph. The position I perspective which was most comfortable
from which to examine the diorama did not share the activating, visual, compositional elements that make Nix’s images not just interesting but aesthetically beautiful.

*Living Room* is one of *The City*’s best examples of the paradoxes of miniaturization. *Living Room*, through the paradox of size, can encourage more ideas about everything discussed in previous chapters by shrinking the place where dioramas are made and by shrinking an actual diorama. The paradoxes of multiple scales, multiple worlds, being/not being there, and the uncanny are all obviously present. This room is a smaller version of Nix’s real living room and within it is a smaller version of *Subway*, which is a smaller version of an actual subway. The strangest part of viewing *Living Room* was simultaneously seeing it and the original it was modeled after. I was, and was not, a part of each. *Living Room* is a masterful representation of Nix’s full-size living room. Paint cans, scissors, and books, and various paraphernalia all accurately reflect their progenitors.

While Nix reports that her choice to work with miniatures is a matter of practicality and practicability, there may be unrealized motivations at work, as well. Nix admits that living in a small apartment, forced to serve a multiplicity of purposes, with such a collection of tools, artwork, and personal possessions, can be embarrassingly messy.\(^6\) The untidiness resulting from a flood of “necessaries” being kept in a limited space is both understandable and relatable. But for Nix, this might seem unmanageable. She states that some days it seems as though she lives in a disaster zone.\(^7\) Based on my previous arguments, what better way to take control of an uncontrollable force in one’s life than to miniaturize it? By fabricating a tiny living room, Nix commands the space, dominating each piece of furniture, every potted plant, etc. Maybe, along with its logistic purposes, *Living Room* was a bid for freedom. With *Living Room*, the living

\(^6\) Nix, interview.
\(^7\) Ibid.
room that has caused stress or anxiety is suddenly available for public consumption—but on Nix’s terms. Private meets public once more.

At ClampArt, viewers stood what seemed to be abnormally close to *Living Room* (and other works, as well) (see fig. 29). This tendency to view the work nearer than is necessary or normal supports my claims that miniatures still invite observers in, even in cooperation with a photograph. Their close proximity reflects the artworks’ newfound intimacy of public spaces and, more so, the unstable and fluctuating relationship of private to public space in these works.

From June 7 to September 18, 2011, two works from *The City* were part of an exhibition called *Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities* at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. A unique aspect of this particular show meant that the dioramas would be displayed along with the final photographs. Because of this, viewers would have the singular experience of engaging with both the photograph and diorama forms of the scenes. While I do not have installation views of the dioramas, Nix did provide me an image to help put the relative scale of one of her smaller dioramas into context (see fig. 32). In *Beauty Shop*, one of Nix’s smaller works, her hand eclipses the size of a salon chair. Viewers would have been acutely aware of their size in comparison to that of the objects within.

*Otherworldly* provided museum-goers an opportunity—not only to see the photograph but to view it an entirely new context. The diorama’s presence changes one’s perspective of the photograph. Depending on the order in which one views them, or if they are viewed simultaneously, the paradoxes of miniaturization will shift to suit the format—layers of meaning

---

combining and overlapping in unprecedented ways. The photographs alone restrict viewers’
power. They have limited information—viewers do not know where these miniatures are, how
large they are, or have the power to physically interact with them. While visitors to museums
would not be allowed to touch the dioramas, they can still move around them to engage with the
objects. Additionally, nothing is hidden; viewers can see the “unfinished” dioramas with their
exposed pink foam and unrefined edges. Viewer-participants are given supreme power when
they know that not only a subject is smaller than they are, manipulable by them, but also
incomplete. Viewers gain more power through this interaction also by knowing how the
miniatures were made, and in part, seeing the process that made them. With raw, “unfinished”
edges displayed for visual consumption, it is evident that the spaces are crafted from foam,
paper, etc., and one can understand how they were created.

Viewers generally have experience with, and knowledge of, using scissors, utility knives,
spray paint, and more, and can directly relate them to the fabrication of the diorama. Bodily
knowledge of what it is like to cut with scissors, or to use rubber cement, leads to corporeal
recognition of the space, not just what it looks like, but what it would be like to slice the foam or
position a tiny tile. While the dioramas were fashioned in Nix’s apartment, viewers can still
comprehend what that must have been like to create them.

Looking at the photographs and the dioramas most likely takes viewers through a series
of emotions and reactions and all the affective currents between. These photographed miniatures
have the power to cause a variety of affective responses in viewers—the interminglings of
pleasure, frustration, intrigue, and superiority in relation to urges to pick up, nudge, pull apart, or
physically investigate the tiny objects. Affect can accumulate and dissipate; viewers may feel
incrementally different as they interact with various facets of each artwork. Nigel Thrift argues
that aesthetics are the “hallmark of allure … namely through the institutions of public intimacy—both of which influence viewers’ moods, thoughts, and liminal formations.”\textsuperscript{99} Miniature objects, through agency, almost seem to have personalities or personifying characteristics. They appear cute, funny, impertinent, etc. According to Thrift, objects “…are able to fascinate, that is to stimulate explorations of their nature and character because they are able to arouse repeated interest or stimulate curiosity.”\textsuperscript{100} These tendencies towards moving viewers (emotionally or physically) only increase the affective potential of Nix’s photographs. Objects make us do and feel, react and resist.

Lori Nix creates objects which possess an agency of their own. These objects then have the potential to act on her and on her viewers—building affect in their wake. The agency of her artwork accounts for part of what makes it interesting, provocative, and noteworthy. Observers engage with Nix’s objects and with her art-as-objects in a variety of ways, especially when the dioramas are saved from deconstruction and disposal and are brought into the gallery as well. The reasons Nix gives for making her creative choices are not necessarily the only motivations at work. Both artist and viewer are influenced by the artworks in their ideas, reactions, and decisions. The artworks play a part in their own sequence, display, and perception. Object agency, affect, and miniaturization theory can help us to account for this phenomenon.


\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION

In a variety of different media, which include websites, newspapers, magazines, and blogs, critics have reviewed and discussed *The City* by Lori Nix. Their insights and analyses encourage dialogue over subject matter (via discussions of dystopia, natural disaster, humanity’s suggested demise), craft (via commentary on craftsmanship and visibility of materials), and visual and aesthetic qualities. While *The City* may be thought-provoking, technically impressive, or visually stunning to viewers, the manner in which Nix’s work communicates these messages has not been acknowledged. Reviewers have yet to look critically at what is one of *The City*’s most noticeable and defining features: it is comprised of photographed miniatures. This simple observation had to be established before the works could be seen for their ability to connect with audiences. These images elicit viewer responses specific to miniatures, and to photographed miniatures, and I have shown that they do so in a variety of ways. Miniaturization theory, object agency theory, and affect theory offer a new, more nuanced understanding of what *The City* means and what it can do.

In the first investigation I approached *The City* as a collection of objects. Photographs are two-dimensional objects and the photographs in this series portray scenes entirely made up of three-dimensional objects. While miniaturization theory and Bailey’s paradoxes of miniaturization were mainly developed for consideration of three-dimensional objects, I demonstrated that these theoretical approaches apply to both Nix’s two-dimensional works and the three-dimensional objects within them. The paradoxes of multiple worlds, being/not being there, multiple scales, and size all fairly seamlessly apply to *The City*. Discussions of these paradoxes, of the absence of humans, stratifications of public versus private space, and interactions within the series all contributed to establishing the agency of Nix’s works and their affective potential for viewers.
Investigation II centered on the format of *The City*—a combination of photographs and miniature dioramas. Neither photography nor miniature sculpture could communicate alone what Nix’s works communicate in tandem. Paradoxes of miniaturization were evidenced or augmented by *The City*’s photographic qualities. The two-dimensional picture plane that separates viewers from subjects in photography aids in upsetting the normal power dynamic present in the relations between humans and miniatures. The large size of the photographic prints emphasizes the miniature nature of the diorama components. It also upsets the viewers’ power perceptions by preventing them from touching/manipulating/controlling the objects and by denying them the knowledge of the objects’ actual size. Additionally, I discussed the ability for miniatures to provide levity and make dark subject matter more palatable in the photographs. Photograph and miniature inextricably collide in this series to affect viewers on greater levels of complexity. I also delved into the idea of the photographs comprising *The City* acting as visual representations of Nix’s affect. Intimate interactions with the miniatures and lengthy efforts to capture something in a photograph that is transitory or ethereal in life could translate into photographic affect. This relationship creates a spiral of agency/affect exchanges: the object act on Nix and her affect is captured as a photograph and has inherent agency of its own. The agency of Nix’s photographs transitions once more to affect through viewer response.

Investigation III examined viewers’ engagement with *The City*. Depending on whether viewers are interacting with the photographs, or with the dioramas, or with both, the power dynamics, affect, and agency can, and do, shift and change. With photographs, the viewers’ perspective is fixed and chosen by the artist. With dioramas, viewers are free to examine the objects from whichever angle of view they desire. When both photographs and dioramas are displayed in the same space, viewers are granted ultimate power—observation of the actual size
of the miniature objects, evidence of materials used, and privilege in knowing that the dioramas are not only miniature, but incomplete (the outside of the rooms remain unfinished, anything previously superfluous and outside of the camera’s frame of view becomes visible). The viewer-participants are not only drawn in by miniature objects, but this investigation also revealed they are drawn in to photographed miniatures, as well—viewers stood very close to scrutinize the large printed images. The artist transfers her own affect into agency in the creation of a photograph and the photograph’s agency, in turn, affects viewers. The relationship between agency and affect and artist, object, and viewer can change depending on which pieces viewers interact with (photograph, diorama, or both). Thus, the format has a great impact on viewer engagement and the mediation of intention and reception.

Through the course of this thesis, I have employed miniaturization theory and Bailey’s paradoxes of miniaturization to explain the participatory nature of miniature objects. I adapted this theory to argue its pertinence for objects presented in two-dimensional form as well as those experienced in three dimensions. *The City* inspires considerations of a variety of issues: the lack of human subjects leads to themes of apocalypse, human folly, corporeal knowledge and consciousness, and imagined realities; tiny sets engender discussions of their larger referents, the societal codes that rule them, and public versus private spaces. Object agency and affect theories also inspired discourse and provided a framework within which artistic intention and viewer reception could be analyzed. Oftentimes viewer responses to artwork differ from those desired by the artist-creator. The discontinuity that characterizes the transition from intention to reception grants art-objects increased importance as authors of their own agency. This thesis has shown that the artworks and dioramas making up *The City* meaningfully act on viewers. Miniatures not only affect the people who view them, but photographs of miniatures affect
viewers in increasingly augmented ways. Photography can do more than supplement miniatures’
great abilities, it can amplify them, and to a certain extent cause relationships, affective
responses, and interactions that are otherwise impossible or inapplicable.

The results of this thesis offer significant ramifications for the discipline of art history. It
has been frequently debated if photographs are art objects at all. Providing evidence as to their
ability to affect viewers on multiple levels gives them further credibility regardless of their label.
The idea of miniatures as art objects is also contested and this research has similar consequences
for them. The debate over whether or not photographs (or miniatures) are actually “art” is
misguided, because their visual affect (not their label) is what is important. This thesis has
demonstrated that both photographs and miniatures have a wealth of visual affect. And one of
the most consequential deductions that stems from this research may be that *The City* is not
important because it is art, but it is significant because of the way it moves its viewers. The fact
that it exists in an artistic context means that people interacting with it are more readily prepared
for critical engagement—their minds are primed for examination, analyses, and judgment.
Nevertheless, I have come to believe that it does not matter whether photography is regarded by
all as art or not; what matters is its ability to do things—to augment the agency/affect of its
subjects, and to engender new arenas for discussion and debate.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Figure 1 - Lori Nix, *Church*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2009. 40 x 48 in.

Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 2 - Lori Nix, *Control Room*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2010. 40 x 53 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 3 – Lori Nix, *Library*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2007. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 4 – Lori Nix, *Mall*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2010. 40 x 57 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 5 - Lori Nix, *Museum of Art*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2005. 40 x 55 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 6 - Lori Nix, *Circulation Desk*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2012. 40 x 53 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 7 - Lori Nix, *Space Center*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2013. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix

Figure 8 - Lori Nix, *Natural History*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2005. 19 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 9 - Lori Nix, *Great Hall*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2006. 40 x 65 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 10 - Lori Nix, *Anatomy Classroom*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2012. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix

Figure 11 – Detail. Lori Nix, *Anatomy Classroom*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2012. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 12 – Detail. Lori Nix, *Anatomy Classroom*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2012. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix

Figure 13 – Lori Nix, *Chinese Take-Out*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2013. 40 x 54 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 14 – Lori Nix, *Fountain*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2008. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 15 – Lori Nix, *Laundromat*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2008. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 16 – Lori Nix, *Subway*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2012. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 17 – Photo by author, ClampArt Gallery, New York, November 2013.

Figure 18 – Detail. Lori Nix, Museum of Art, from The City series. Chromogenic print, 2005. 40 x 55 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 19 – Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Madonna and Child*. Tempera and gold on wood, c. 1290-1300. Overall, with engaged frame, 11 x 8 1/4 in.
Figure 20 – Lori Nix, *Vacuum Showroom*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2006. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix

Figure 21 – Detail. Lori Nix, *Vacuum Showroom*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2006. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 22 – Detail. Lori Nix, *Vacuum Showroom*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2006. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix

Figure 23 – Steve Schapiro’s 1965 photograph, *Rene Magritte, MOMA, New York, 1965*
**Figure 24** – Detail. Lori Nix, *Vacuum Showroom*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2006. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix

**Figure 25** – Lori Nix, *Living Room*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2013. 40 x 67 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
**Figure 26** – Lori Nix, *Casino*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2013. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 27 – Photo by author, casino diorama, apartment/studio of Lori Nix, New York, November, 2013.
**Figure 28** – Photo by author, living room diorama, apartment/studio of Lori Nix, New York, November, 2013.
Figure 29 – Photo by author, ClampArt Gallery, New York, November, 2013.
Figure 30 – Lori Nix, *Beauty Shop*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2010. 30 x 39 in.
Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 31 – Lori Nix, *Violin Repair Shop*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2011. 40 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix
Figure 32 – Installation Process View, Lori Nix, *Beauty Shop*, from *The City* series. Chromogenic print, 2010. 30 x 39 in. Courtesy of the artist © Lori Nix