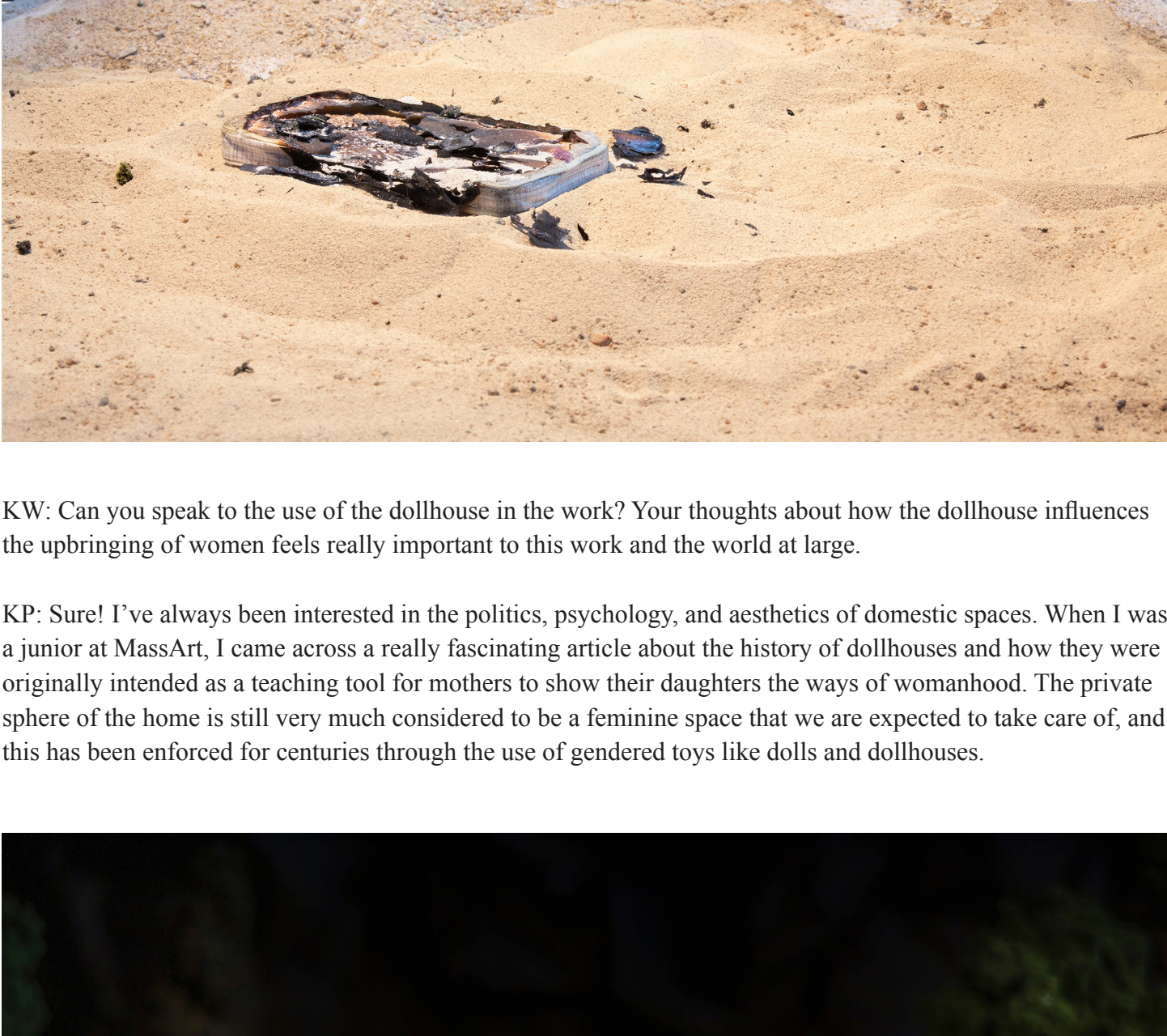


Kendall Pestana (b. 1998) is an interdisciplinary artist based in Brookline, New Hampshire and Boston, Massachusetts. A recipient of Departmental Honors at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, her work spans sculpture, photography, and animation. Inspired by figurative surrealism, her work is an investigation of psychological and bodily space through the lens of gendered violence and illness, as well as the commodification of the female body and labor within the domestic sphere.

In May of 2020, Kendall was interviewed by Kevin Williamson, a classmate of hers at Massachusetts College of art and Design.

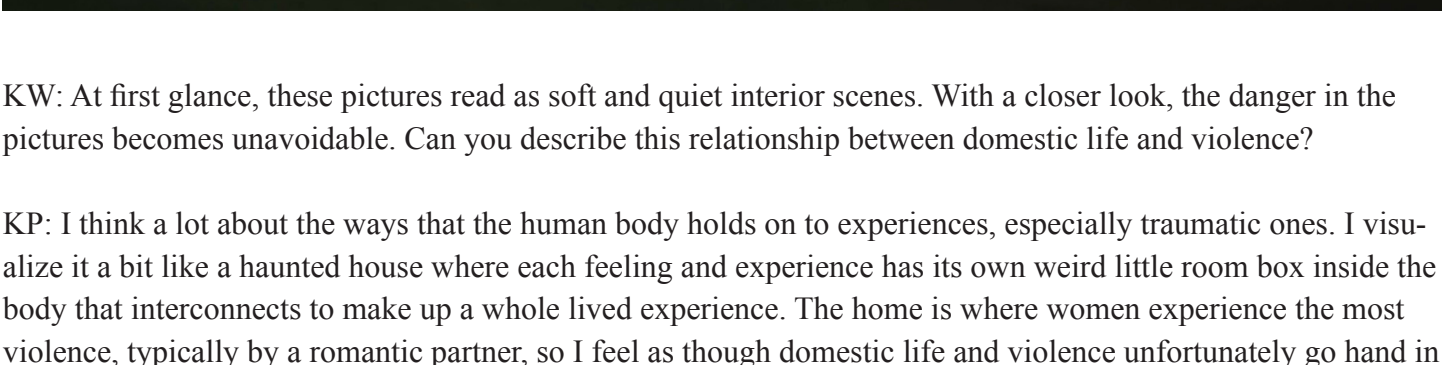
Kevin Williamson: Your thesis work House on Fire utilizes a destroyed, burning dollhouse to speak about feminism and the role of women in the 21st century. Where did the idea for this work start? You have made work about feminism in the past, but this work feels different because it specifically addresses the violence that is enacted upon women.

Kendall Pestana: In general, anger is an emotion that is not considered acceptable for women. For as long as I’ve been making art, I’ve noticed (and felt) a lot of pressure on women artists to make work that is gentle and soft and pretty, while our male peers can create work in any tone they see fit. That weird pressure to be pleasant and lighthearted has always struck me as ironic considering the history of systemic oppression and rates of violence against women in this country and abroad. This project started as a compulsion to go against the grain and create work that expresses a full spectrum of anxiety, anger, and violation that comes as a direct result of gendered violence and the commodification of our bodies and labor.



KW: Can you speak to the use of the dollhouse in the work? Your thoughts about how the dollhouse influences the upbringing of women feels really important to this work and the world at large.

KP: Sure! I’ve always been interested in the politics, psychology, and aesthetics of domestic spaces. When I was a junior at MassArt, I came across a really fascinating article about the history of dollhouses and how they were originally intended as a teaching tool for mothers to show their daughters the ways of womanhood. The private sphere of the home is still very much considered to be a feminine space that we are expected to take care of, and this has been enforced for centuries through the use of gendered toys like dolls and dollhouses.



KW: At first glance, these pictures read as soft and quiet interior scenes. With a closer look, the danger in the pictures becomes unavoidable. Can you describe this relationship between domestic life and violence?

KP: I think a lot about the ways that the human body holds on to experiences, especially traumatic ones. I visualize it a bit like a haunted house where each feeling and experience has its own weird little room box inside the body that interconnects to make up a whole lived experience. The home is where women experience the most violence, typically by a romantic partner, so I feel as though domestic life and violence unfortunately go hand in hand.



KW: Tell us about your studio practice. Why is it important that these are built spaces?

KP: My studio practice involves a lot of sifting through objects on eBay, Etsy, and estate sales to find tiny furniture and other details that will become part of my diorama photographs. I often have a faint picture in my mind of what these spaces will become, but I work pretty intuitively and rarely sketch or plan out each minute detail. I’ve recently started building miniature props out of wax and clay which has been fun. I like constructing these spaces because it allows me to create an object out of my lived experience that I can view and photograph almost as a third party. It helps me make sense of things in my own mind.

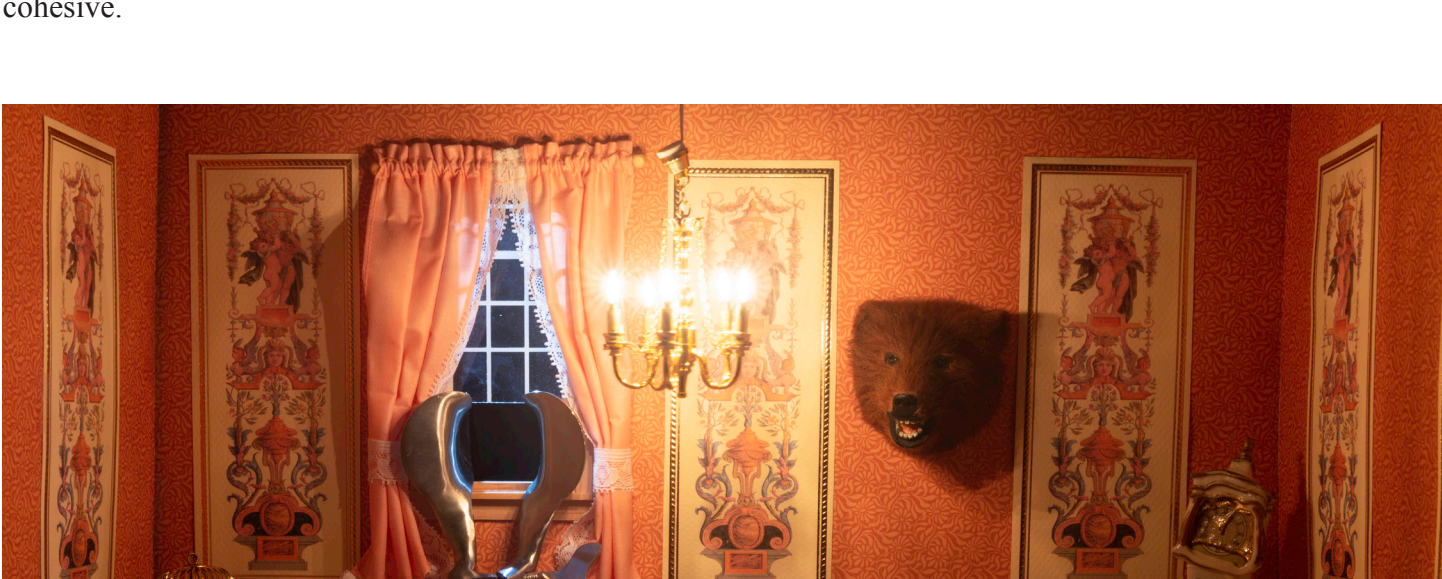
KW: Who do you see your work in conversation with?

KP: I would say my work is inevitably in conversation with a lot of contemporary and second wave feminists who created work with these themes before I did. People who come to mind immediately are artists like Laurie Simmons, Pipilotti Rist, and Ana Mendieta. I also owe a lot to surrealist animators like Suzan Pitt and Allison DeVere as well as dollhouse artisans like Corinne Botz.



KW: Color feels very important in these pictures. How do you pick your colors? Are you using them to communicate something?

KP: I use a lot of pinks, blues, reds, and other fleshy tones that are meant to reference the body. I usually will pick out the color of the sky or wallpaper first, and will then match the floor and surrounding objects to be cohesive.



KW: Your pictures are a visual joy, and I find myself needing to spend time with each picture to fully take in all the details. These details are always related to conceptual ideas. The picture frames with the close up faces come to mind, can you speak a little bit to those?

KP: Thank you, Kevin! In that picture, I was thinking about my Catholic upbringing and their long held tradition of ladies of sorrow. There is a history of representing women in art as crying or grieving, which I think is very interesting. Those pictures in the frames are actually screenshots of a Spanish woodcarving of the Sorrowful Mary. The Seven Sorrows of Mary are a common Catholic devotion where she is often pictured in a sorrowful or lacrimating way, often crying and bleeding after being stabbed in the heart with seven long swords. I sometimes think about how those artworks celebrate female pain as something sacred. At the time that I made this, I was struggling a lot with chronic, unexplainable pelvic pain that often reminded me of the biblical curse that subjected Eve and her descendants to excruciating reproductive cycles and childbirth. That gave me the idea to put bloody underwear on the floor.

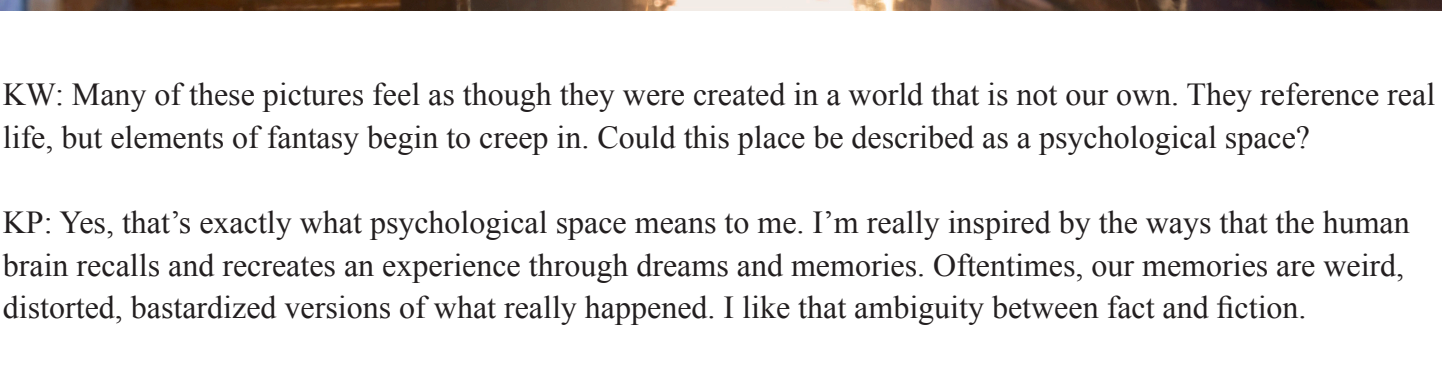
KW: You have been making some animations that go along with this work. It’s really interesting to see this place you are creating come to life. It is certainly a different way to experience the work. What purpose do the animations serve in relation to the still images?

KP: The relationship between my still and moving images is something that I’m still kind of figuring out. I’m new to animation, but I like stop motion because it combines everything I love: photography, sculpture, music, and movies. Photography is interesting because all you have is a single frame which gives you very limited context, so it’s up to the artist and viewer to infer their own meaning. With animation, you have the option to create a really immersive experience using motion and sound. For now, I consider my animations to be a supplement to my photographs that add more information.



KW: Many of these pictures feel as though they were created in a world that is not our own. They reference real life, but elements of fantasy begin to creep in. Could this place be described as a psychological space?

KP: Yes, that’s exactly what psychological space means to me. I’m really inspired by the ways that the human brain recalls and recreates an experience through dreams and memories. Oftentimes, our memories are weird, distorted, bastardized versions of what really happened. I like that ambiguity between fact and fiction.



KW: How do you see these pictures in their final form? What’s your dream exhibition of this work?

KP: My dream exhibition of this work would take the form of life-sized sculptural and video installations and very large prints. I would want the space to feel like a recreation of one of my photographs. I’d ideally like to find a way to take each different element of my work and make it come together in a cohesive way, which is a lot easier said than done.

KW: Thank you so much for your insight, I really enjoyed digging into your physical process as well as your thought process behind this work!

