

DISASTERS IN MINIATURE FROM KATRINA TO A LEAVE-TAKING

The world in the wake of the flood



KEVIN YATES

Susan Hobbs Gallery

Until Dec. 12

BY GARY MICHAEL DAULT

"There are no miniatures in nature," observed critic Susan Stewart in her book, *On Longing*. Which is to say that all miniatures and models are inevitably unnatural - fascinatingly so.

But what is actually so compelling about the miniature? Is it the fact that we are larger than it is, and, big as giants, we can now hold sway over a bit of the world in a way we never could before?

Perhaps that's partly true, but it's doubtful that, in the end, miniatures and models are enjoyable because they lend us power. Rather, they offer us wonder. A model, since we know it no longer partakes of "reality," becomes instead a site of reverie. Models and miniatures, which are not useful in the practical world, are, as a result, highly theatrical, and, as such, encourage us to project onto them our own stories and dreams.

At the hands of artist Kevin Yates, who is a model-maker of prodigious skill, miniatures burgeon into something that is not smaller but, curiously, considerably larger than life. For this exhibition of new work, now at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery, Yates has crafted a series of tiny, wall-mounted, wooden miniatures of rather nondescript buildings. These clapboard houses, small warehouses and industrial buildings, sheds and garages, look a bit like the buildings model railroaders build beside their tracks: typical specimens of vernacular architecture, artificially roughed up, deliberately weathered - Yates says he paints his buildings and then both airbrushes them and sandblasts them - and generally abused into a haunting verisimilitude.

Not the least peculiar aspect of Yates's structures is that the artist builds them as mirror images of themselves, each one reversed along a horizontal axis. This makes them appear to be submerged halfway in water - as reflections of themselves. It's as if each building has been overtaken by a flood.

And indeed flooding lies at the very heart of their being. Yates says the idea for his "flooded" buildings came from his seeing Spike Lee's 2006 film *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, about Hurricane Katrina. The flood-idea gained another dimension, Yates adds, when it grew time for him to leave his three-year teaching job at the University of Oregon (where some of his students were relocated Katrina survivors), whereupon he and his wife had to leave behind the "great little house" they had there. For Yates, the Oregon house became an "empty shell" that was increasingly infused, in his mind, with recollections of his life during those years. "Quitting a place that we love," writes James Cowan in his book, *A Mapmaker's Dream*, "means that we are condemned to inhabit our loss forever."

The subsequent model houses Yates would build began to embody both the idea of an actual flood and an opening of the floodgates of memory - as he would attempt to fold into his miniature buildings his recollections of houses he had once lived in and neighbourhoods where he had once resided.

Thinking about the resemblance his abject model buildings bear to those found in model railroad layouts has validity. For while Yates made his first "reflected" buildings himself, he eventually came to work with a company in Connecticut called Branchline Trains, that sells model kits. Amazingly - presumably because they got interested in Yates' project - the company was able to provide him with both the house kits themselves and also, by recourse to their computers, their exact reversals - what Yates calls the "flips".

Yates assembles the kits, paints them, ages them ("I blow out the windows when I sandblast them ... it's kind of a scary moment!") and surrounds them with eerie, blackened trees that themselves look drowned. The trees, too, are from kits ("you buy them in blanks - which is to say, flat - and then I bend them to the right shapes, make wax moulds of them, and finally cast them in bronze").

It's a forlorn world Yates has so exquisitely fabricated: dreary, rubbed, smoky, abandoned. But his models scintillate with and are redeemed by a disturbingly lyrical sense of loss, both self and community. Referencing both the outwash of natural disasters, the vagaries of climate change, and our relentless human tendency to move on, Yates's engulfed communities speak to impermanence - to the mystery of change.