

Next stop, Wonderland for fanciful Salem artist

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By Kristin D'Agostino/North Shore Sunday
GateHouse News Service
Tue Sep 04, 2007, 12:35 PM EDT

Salem -

When artist Sharon Shea was a child, she enjoyed capturing caterpillars and watching them hatch and transform into moths within her dresser drawers. Insects provided a glimpse into a miniature world that captured her imagination.

Now in her own work, the 62-year-old assemblage artist attempts to create worlds of her own, arranging and

photographing insects, fossils, and other ethereal objects to evoke a sense of magic and mystery. For the last month Shea has focused all her energy on creating a world within an antique wooden dollhouse set up on her dining room table.

Though at first glance it looks like an ordinary toy, furnished with tiny tables and plastic dolls, a tour from the artist reveals layers of meaning attached to each of the four rooms. Tucked in hidden corners, and pinned onto walls are details from Shea's own life left up to the viewer's interpretation.

When furnishing the dollhouse rooms, Shea drew from her love of fairytales, dedicating rooms to Hansel and Gretel, and Alice in Wonderland.

"I love Alice because she is in a completely controlled imaginary world and she comes out OK," Shea says. On the bed inside one room lies a tiny cloth Alice doll presided over by two portraits of cats which call to mind Billie, a real-life cat Shea rescued from an animal shelter.

In the other bedroom a grandmother doll sits in a rocking chair reading to three children who sit on the floor, a scene that represents Shea's relationship with her own five grandchildren, which is one steeped in imaginative storytelling.

Downstairs in the living room inside a gilded cage sits a photo of a green parrot, a miniature version of her own bird Pippinella who was named after Dr. Doolittle's talking canary.

The exterior of the house is inspired by Salem's history. It appears haunted, decorated with black cats and spiders that provide a stark contrast to the house's innocent fairytale interior. A carousel horse meant to represent the Willows sits beside a fence modeled after the one at the Common.

Wandering through Shea's own house, you can easily follow the artist's inspirations like a trail of breadcrumbs left for the curious minded. On the mantelpiece in her living room a framed photograph of silvery haired artist Tasha Tudor sits beside a long row of dolls collected from all over the world.

"That picture represents being a grandmother," Shea says. "Grandmothers to me are symbolic of comfort and wisdom."

In her bedroom atop a bureau sits a kind of Buddhist shrine with statues from a Tibetan temple and a tiny basket full of ceramic cats, one to represent each of the cats Shea has kept over the years. She says this area of the house helps her feel connected to her lost loved ones.

A collection of fossils piled high on a bookshelf serves as a passport to another time.

"I love things that come from far away..." Shea said, "Going back to dinosaur times is fascinating to me. Or watching a Jacques Cousteau program where you're going into another world. "

The house tour ends with a peek inside a room where, perched on a tall piece of driftwood, sits the real-life

Pippinella chatting merrily to himself.

Given Shea's own sense of childlike wonder its no surprise she's dedicated much of her life to working with children. While her three children were growing up during the '70s and '80s, Shea worked as a volunteer for an exotic animal show, traveling to schools and shopping malls where she helped children overcome their fears by bonding with 20-foot pythons. After earning a master's degree in psychology from Cambridge College, she continued to help troubled children gain confidence, often using animals as a tool to get them to open up.

"Animals are therapeutic because they need to be cared for," she says. "I like to give empowerment to disempowered people, children who have something to say... I like to create something that allows them expression."

Now, Shea hopes to use her dollhouse as a similar tool. In an interactive exhibit next month at the Sass:C Gallery, Shea will let kids peer inside the rooms and touch the whimsical props outside the house, in attempt to get them to create their own stories.

"Usually we work with kids with the idea that we're going to tell them all about something," says Shea. "I like to reverse that. They're going to come up with things I never thought of."

Interested?

Sharon Shea's dollhouse will be on display at Sass:C Gallery, 24 Derby St., Salem Sept. 7- 14. There will be an opening reception Friday, Sept.7 from noon to 8 p.m. To see more of Shea's work, check out the Museum of Sentimental Art at www.mosa.virtual.museum.

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