



Featured in Issue 218

## The Shrunken World of Denis Savary

At Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich, the artist's series of dollhouses reference literature and art history to reveal a bygone bourgeois ideal

BY CAMILA MCHUGH IN EU REVIEWS, REVIEWS | 10 FEB 21



Denis Savary's exhibition, 'Ithaca', at Galerie Maria Bernheim comprises three large dollhouses modelled after the red-shingled roof and stucco exterior of Swiss suburban family homes. By distorting these generic forms, the Geneva-based artist unsettles associations with a bygone bourgeois ideal, projecting a literary and art-historical phantasmagoria onto its components. It is as if an altered centre of gravity has warped these oversized miniatures, leaving roofs concave and doors slanted. The effect is uncanny, precisely in the way Sigmund Freud's defined the term in his eponymous 1919 essay about the familiar-yet-erie nature of dolls.



Denis Savary, 'Ithaca', 2021, exhibition view, Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich; photograph: Annik Wetter

Savary has worked with dollhouses before: for his 2010 exhibition, 'La Villa', at Villa Bernasconi in Geneva, he wall-mounted one from the same New York toy store that the artist Robert Gober used to supply dollhouses for. Such appropriation is characteristic of Savary's practice; he borrows generously, flirting with the derivative. In 'Ithaca', he makes further allusions via a variety of wallpapers, such as the one in a ground-floor room of *Villa III* (all works 2021), which is based on Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) – or, more precisely, the 5 × 7 cm version Duchamp created for collector Carrie Stetheimer's dollhouse in 1918. Savary's houses interrogate the line between art and craft by riffing on Duchamp's foray into miniatures, as well as Gober's meticulous re-creations. Here, the impression is of something labour-intensive and consistently imprecise: globs of glue remain visible and cement steps sit askew.



Denis Savary, *Villa III*, 2021, mixed media, 150 × 150 × 150 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich; photograph: Annik Wetter

A dark humour undergirds the process of repurposing cheap materials, like laminate and plastic, used to mass-produce dollhouses in order to handmade disproportionate versions. In the upstairs floor of *Villa III*, the rooms covered wall-to-wall with lemon-coloured paper invoke Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story 'The Yellow Wall-Paper'. Underscored by the import of literary reference in his *oeuvre* more broadly, Savary's subtle reference to Gilman's feminist tale acknowledges the oppression embedded in the domestic structure, positioning it, perhaps, as that centrifugal force by which these otherwise unremarkable houses threaten to buckle.

Denis Savary, 'Ithaca' runs at Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich, Switzerland, until 27 March 2021.

Main image: Denis Savary, *Villa I* (detail), 2021, mixed media, 150 × 150 × 150 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich; photograph: Annik Wetter

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