

The miniaturists

For Lucy and Rebecca Clayton, bigger is definitely not better. GRACE CAIN steps inside the tiny world of the Kensington Dolls House Company



Clockwise from above: Harrods grocery boxes take pride of place in the Claytons' tiny kitchen; Lucy (left) and Rebecca with The Manor House and The Town House, two of the three doll's houses they have created exclusively for Harrods; Lucy's first ever doll's house was a renovation for her daughter, Bunny, which sparked the idea for the business

Work has just begun on the ballroom. The undercoating is almost finished, and the drum kit is assembled, but the floor is still strewn with gargantuan rolls of bubble wrap and colossal Post-it notes that look as though they've fallen from a giant's notebook. For most people, decorating one space is enough of a challenge. But for Lucy Clayton and her mother, Rebecca, the ballroom is just one of 24 rooms spread over three houses that they are currently creating from scratch. For the two founders of the Kensington Dolls House Company, it's their largest miniature challenge to date.

By the time you read this, those three new-builds will be attracting prospective buyers to the Harrods Toys department. However, when I first see them, it is the cusp of summer, and they are still diminutive construction sites. One – The Cottage – is still with the joiner. The other two – The Townhouse and The Manor House (complete

with ballroom) – are taking shape in Lucy's converted flat and studio space in Sherborne House, a former stately home in a corner of the Cotswolds that's heavy on charm and light on phone signal. "We're doing three because we want it to feel like a fantasy street," Lucy explains. "Like your dream property portfolio."

"It's so wonderful to have our first commission from Harrods, because when I was growing up, visiting the Harrods Toys department was an extreme event," she continues. "It was always like arriving in a different universe. And I think that's what we enjoy doing – creating an entire world within a house."

Lucy is the first to admit the Kensington Dolls House Company was an accident. Her first house was a renovation – a 12-room mansion she intended to decorate with her pre-teen son, Kit, as a gift for his baby sister, Bunny. "We very quickly forgot about her," she admits. "I just wanted it to be the most fabulous doll's house that anyone

had ever seen." She recalls how it all spiralled out of control over the course of a summer; how they had to buy a tabletop saw and her boyfriend had to learn miniature grouting. And, of course, how Rebecca was first recruited to sew all the soft furnishings (still her principal and favourite task, although her skill set has expanded considerably; when we meet, she has just spent three days completing a piano).

After that first house – which they still affectionately refer to as 'Bunny's House', despite Bunny's alleged lack of interest in the entire affair – was finished, they held an opening party with Borrower-sized invitations and tiny Martinis. It featured in *House & Garden*, and became a viral hit on their Instagram account. And then it was all over. "We were bereft," Lucy recalls. "We went on holiday, and realised how much we missed it. We wanted to keep going. We had, like, four Piña Colodas and commissioned our logo by the pool."

"This isn't a great Steve Jobs-style founder story," she continues. "We don't have a strategy. Our business plan is to make exquisite things we love and collaborate with people who appreciate that process." Over the past few years, the duo have developed a little black book of master craftspeople from the doll's house community whom they can call on when they need something particularly special. "I'm talking super-specific skills, like Georgian silversmithing at a 1:12 scale," says Lucy. "We love identifying those people and forming relationships with them. It's important to celebrate this craftsmanship, especially as a lot of them are edging towards retirement." So do they think these skills could be lost? "I do. I'm really worried about it," says Rebecca, as Lucy nods in agreement. "I'm not sure these people are passing on their knowledge. Like, who's going to make our beautiful plaster fireplaces?"

"That's definitely the sort of thing we worry about at 3am," says Lucy. I hazard a guess that there are probably



quite a few night-time worries. "Yes!" both squeak in unison. And for the Harrods project, tight schedules and a quest for excellence have meant the pressure is really on. They begin doing the maths on how many hours of work

each of the three houses will ultimately require, but give up in a flurry of mild hysteria after realising that each silk dining chair will take a day to upholster. "But you know, this isn't brain surgery," Lucy caveats. "We're making doll's houses."

Both mother and daughter agree they are at their happiest when they're sitting at opposite ends of a table, George Michael playing in the background, each completely absorbed by whatever they're making. They tell me they don't chat – "We're not like *co-workers*," says Lucy – but when they do talk to each other, it's in the sort of code you develop with someone to whom you're very close. "If you overheard us in the studio, you genuinely wouldn't understand what we were saying. It's like a foreign language," says Rebecca.

Before that stage, however, there is a lot of preparation. All of the Harrods Houses (as the Claytons call them) have been designed by architect Will Creech, so each one is structurally accurate. "We plan it like real-size interior design," explains Lucy. "Everything is mapped out, from the joinery to plasterwork and cornicing." Plans and schemes cover the walls of the studio at Sherborne House like an evidence board, 24 rooms plotted in two dimensions. Sometimes, it can get confusing. "If we're talking to one another on the phone, we'll always start the conversation by saying RH or DH – Real House or Doll's House," says Rebecca.

Paradoxically, while the world of the Kensington Dolls House Company is a place where the laws of reality do >

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Above: The design of each room is always led by a particular colour; right: The attention to detail the Claytons devote to their work is astonishing – it took Rebecca three days to craft this grand piano

not apply, there are a surprising number of rules. The first, and seemingly most important, is that there are no stairs allowed. The Claytons feel very strongly about this. “We hate stairs,” says Lucy. “It’s a total waste of space. Our houses aren’t really meant to be played with, but if you *were* playing with them, you’d *never* play on the stairs.”

“We only ever put things in our houses that we absolutely love,” agrees Rebecca. “And we don’t love stairs.” The only exception to this rule would be for a vintage doll’s house renovation – then, the stairs would have to stay. But the Claytons’ second rule is unbreakable under any circumstance: no dolls allowed. “We don’t really like anything with a face,” says Lucy, “... though we sometimes allow a robot. It sounds like we are mad – and we are mad – but we love when it’s impossible to tell if you’re looking at a doll’s house or a real house. As soon as you put a doll in, that illusion is shattered.”

No animals, either. “No predators. Nothing dead. Lots of people will do tiny stag heads, but I would never,” says Lucy. However, there *is* always a doll’s house within each doll’s house, and the design of each room is always led by a particular colour. “So that when you stand back, the overall house has that kaleidoscopic quality,” she explains. And then there is an underlayer of smaller, more specific rules. “We couldn’t imagine having a wardrobe in a guest room that wasn’t lined in complementary wallpaper,” Lucy says very seriously, before laughing at herself.

The houses exist in a timeless space, but there are no laptops or iPhones. Gramophones, however, are permitted. “Some people within the miniature space really care about

historical accuracy or making their houses hyper-real,” says Lucy. “But what we do is kind of hyper-whimsy. For us, it’s about the raw joy of being able to imagine interiors as you might want them, even if you can’t achieve that in real scale. There’s nothing difficult or high concept about it – we just want it to look lovely.” □

Toys, Fourth Floor

