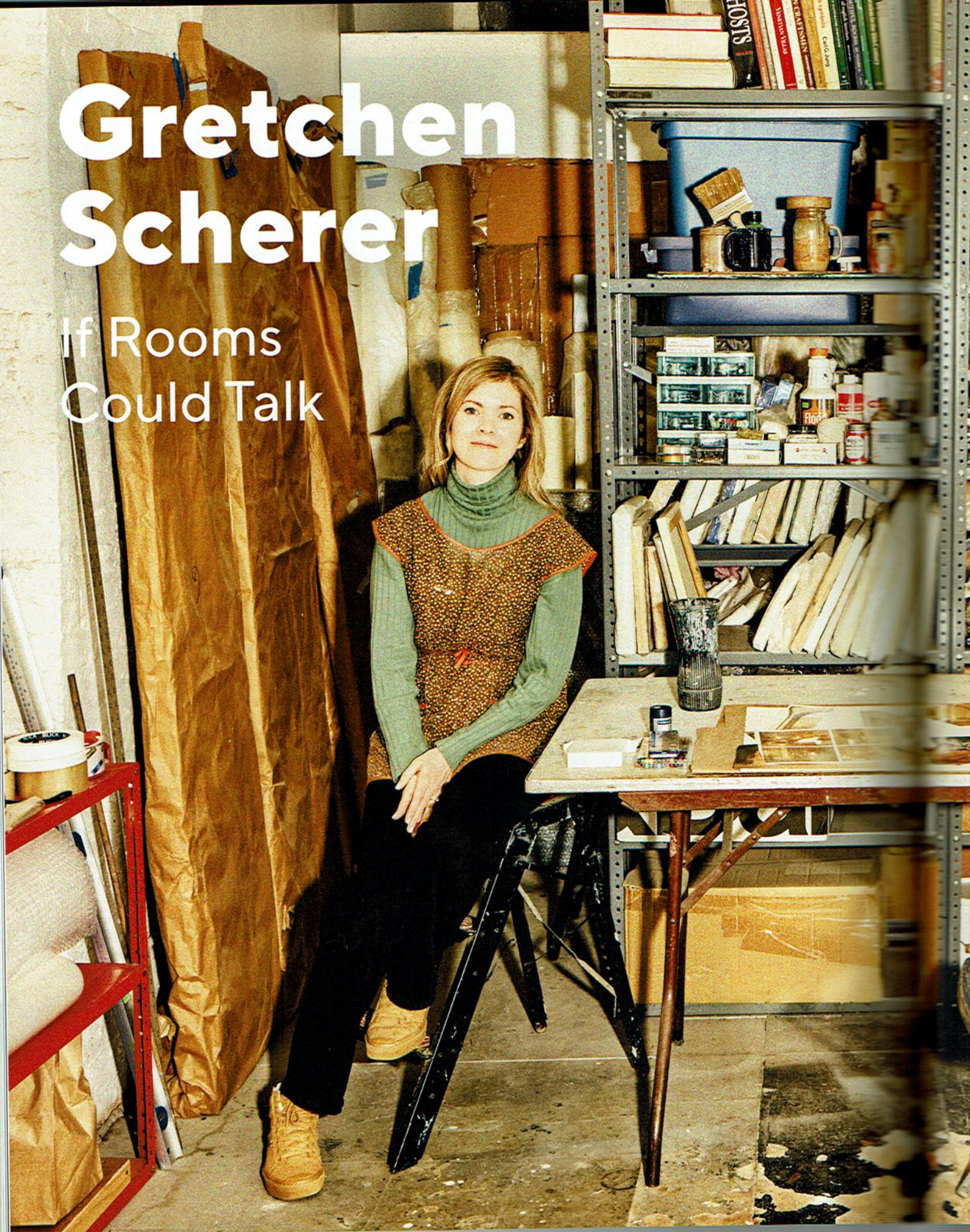


Gretchen Scherer

If Rooms
Could Talk





Interview by
Gwynned
Vitello

Portrait by
Bryan
Derballa





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The term Dollhouse Effect could infer feelings of confinement, being trapped in a small place. In psychology, it is considered a process that creates a safe space to design one's own narrative—perhaps a fantasy, but certainly a small place to feel in control. Then again, in her *Miniature Manifesto*, Louise Krasniewicz maintains that it is “a way to engage, confront, and consider,” a way of world-making that requires narrative, measurement, and continuity. Gretchen Scherer recreates scenes of museums and stately homes—actually reshuffles them—in tableaux that pulsate with unexpected color and vibrancy. In fact, the abundance of imagery seems to change like a personal kaleidoscope. Made by this painter for you, the beholder.

1: *Sepulchral Chamber*, Oil on panel, 18" x 24", 2020

2: *Nostell Priory, State Dressing Room*, Oil and acrylic on panel, 18" x 14", 2023

Gwynned Vitello: As soon as I saw your work, I thought of the Thorne Miniature Rooms at the Art Institute of Chicago.

I know they weren't the inspiration for your work, but have you ever visited them?

Gretchen Scherer: Yes, absolutely! I visited them throughout my time in graduate school at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the late '90s. I was only there for a year because it was too expensive. I transferred to the University of Illinois in Chicago.

I really want to know what led you to such a unique and very identifiable subject matter, so let's start at the beginning.

Well, I grew up in Indianapolis, and I was just very lucky—one of those people who got to go to art class on the weekends in high school. I just knew right away. I went to a school where they offered Saturday classes in figure drawing, walked in, and was just like, “I'm going to be an artist.” It was instant! It was immediate—something even about the building, even just entering the vestibule area.

Knowing what you paint, I love hearing that the structure itself made such an impression.

It was an old historic building, and I don't know; even the smell of it attracted me. I feel lucky to have known, even at 15, that I wanted to make art. I did ceramics in high school, then painting and drawing. At the Art Institute, I studied my foundation courses and then did more painting at UIC.

So, you studied ceramics and the figure, but you really found your focus early on.

Although I did study figure painting, I was always interested in interior spaces, in the spaces around the figures. What was hard for me was that when putting a figure in a painting, that's the focus. Edouard Vuillard could sort of diffuse the figure within the interior, but I think most times a person in an interior space ends up being the focus.

Which maybe connects to your early interest in collaging, where the parts are almost greater than the whole.





I was sort of painting and cutting up works on paper and collaging them together. And then I was also doing printmaking, where I could also do a monoprint and then cut it out and kind of shape it while the paper was still damp. Like I said, I did ceramics in high school, so there's always been a 3D element in my thinking. It took me a long time to do this, but now I create a two scale collage for every painting. That's how I plan where everything is going to go, and also what the colors will be.

You must have been good at math, too!

That's funny because I wasn't, though I believe that art is mathematical. It's about where things are spaced, about proportion, and how much space there is between each thing. I think about it a lot when placing things, using a ruler occasionally, but it's more like eyeballing it. I get everything pretty much where I want it to go and then paint based on that.

Did you always do so much preliminary work before a painting?

No, I used to sort of just try things out. But when you do that, you have to redraw and redraw. There are so many little details; it's better if I know where everything is going to go. If something's not working, I'll sand it down and start over, but it's better to be prepared.

Your ceramics background must have helped in terms of proportion and composition—really, a lifetime of “construction.” Not to get too Barbie, but did you make dollhouses?

Oh yeah, but you know, and this is going to sound really crazy, but what I would do is build spaces in my mind. I would think, “Well, what if there was a spiral staircase that led up to another room?” And then, just in my head, I would think about spaces a lot. I did think about being an architect, but there's that math thing again.

Having such a fantastic imagination, let me jump to another stereotype. Were you an only child?

No! I'm from a family of four girls. My sister Fran paints, Mary is a filmmaker, and Libbie makes music. My mom is really creative—sewing, sewing, sculpting—she can do anything, and my dad is a lawyer, but his real passion is jazz. He was always taking us to museums.

So, after being surrounded by creativity and then going to art school, you moved to

New York City to get a graduate degree at Hunter College. Was that a big transition?

Absolutely! Chicago. It was so cerebral and serious, so my study there was, well, very non-commercial. And when I came to New York, it was sort of like, "All bets are off; you can do whatever you want!" In Chicago, you had to have a reason for what you did; it had to be conceptual in some way. In New York, it was more, "If you're interested, explore it. So I think I felt a little unmoored for awhile.

Ha, the Midwestern sensibility is more scheduled and plainspeaking; grow the crops, early to bed and early to rise, all with a particular outcome in mind. And in New York, you're up all hours, right? I'm thinking of the one painting made from the vantage point of a bartender at night. Funny, I can't imagine you had experience making drinks.

No, I didn't, but I needed a job and wasn't having any luck. I ride horses and even tried to get a job at a stable. I was pretty despondent and was at a bar one night, telling a young man sitting next to me about my situation. Coincidentally, he suggested I come down to his bar for an interview. So I went and got the job! I would never have thought to do that if it hadn't been for him.

I would think it would be a great source for artistic inspiration, you standing there with so many different types of folks approaching you and getting involved in conversations.

I'm thinking of the song "Closing Time."

It's so visual. With the glasses, sinks, and everything. It's not like working in an office where everything is gray; there are so many colors, movements, shapes, and people. It was very visually stimulating. I kept bartending after I graduated and also went to work with the Joe Mitchell Foundation, a nonprofit that basically supplies grants to artists and, at the time, had a teaching arm where we would go to different schools. I was doing my art on the side, but I didn't feel ready to enter the art world. I think I was scared of it.

Was it the aspect of getting representation and trying to get a gallery show?

Yes, and I guess I was still looking for my style. I mean, I had a studio the whole time because if you have a studio, you have to keep making the art. I was making a huge installation of a house out of paper. It was humongous, really unwieldy, and hanging from the ceiling. I was determined to make this whole house out of paper. It had cups, utensils, clothing, and furniture—all flat pieces of paper hanging in space—and I did that for about three years. I was sort of cocooning myself, but it was also kind of a way not to have to make the leap.

3: *The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 1769-1915*, Oil on panel, 30" x 24", 2021-2022

4: *Belton House, Tapestry Room*, Oil and acrylic on panel, 24" x 18", 2023

5: *The Circuitous Staircase*, Oil on panel, 18" x 24", 2017



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“if you have a studio, you have to keep making the art.”

Then an odd thing happened. I went home to Indiana to visit my family, and I found this little painting I'd made in college. I pulled it out from under my oyster's bed; it was 9 by 12 inches. I looked and thought, "This is pretty fine. Why don't I just paint on panel or canvas?" I had been making these fragile, huge things, but when I started working on wood, I felt a lot better, as if it balanced me out. I felt like I could really communicate with this.

I know I read that a particular book was your "A-ha" moment.

While I was teaching at the Joe Mitchell Foundation, some of the teachers asked if I wanted a particular book. It was odd because the front had no label, just a plain paper cover. I opened it and it was all these historic old rooms, all in black and white. Then a friend gave me the same book, so I realized I could cut up the second and not feel bad about it. I was cutting and creating new rooms out of existing ones, and I felt like I was actually making something.

When you were cutting and rearranging pieces, did you have a specific vision in mind, or were you arriving at the story as you were snipping and moving things around?

It was like a little bit of both in the beginning. I remember that one of the rooms I saw really reminded me of a scene from *Great Expectations*—I'm a real Charles Dickens fan. So I sort of tried to make a scene out of these pieces. Other times, it was a dream. Did I tell you that I have a lot of dreams? I was having dreams where I was stuck in a mansion that was very high up, and I couldn't get down. The stairs would slant, and I would just be stuck. It was a nightmare, and eventually I'd just wake myself up. The dreams might have been in color, but I do think that I painted my way out of it because I stopped having that dream.



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A lot of your rooms are narrow at the top, and there are those long back-and-forth staircases, which have a real dream element. Maybe they are your way out of the dream. There's definitely an element of mystery, or, at the very least, you weave a real story. And so, you never paint a museum room or old home as it truly appears, right?

In the very beginning, when I got that old book, I painted a couple exactly as they were, but in my style. Then, once I started collaging, I created my own scenarios. For example, take the Frick, which has so many rooms. There's the staircase leading up to the second floor, and I might have that staircase as it is. But then below it, I insert windows that are not there but are from a different part of the museum. Everything is

from life; it's just rearranged. And as you can probably see, I'm very drawn to Neoclassicism, Baroque, Rococo, and Gothic.

Have you ever had a direct reaction from any of the institutions?

I do feel a little embarrassed about it, like, "Ooh, I shouldn't be touching these things or rearranging them." But I was really lucky because the Frick reached out to me, saying how much they loved it. They even invited me to take photos, and that was great. But that was the only time I've heard from anyone.

What was it like when you finally got to travel outside of the States and see all these ancient places in person?



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I went to Germany for a very brief, very cold trip in grad school, and I really enjoyed it. But I feel like Rome was where and when I was able to really spend some time and walk around. I went for a group show at Galleria Anna Marra in 2015, I think. That was amazing. And I did get to see the Sistine Chapel.

Which is looking at a lot of detail. I've read a lot of interpretations of your work, especially in terms of the absence of people. Some write about alienation in modern times. Can you articulate your fascination with interiors and quiet?

I actually don't know if I can. I think it was David Lynch who said he really doesn't know what his work is about, and I feel

like many, if not most, feel that way. I just think there's something down inside that comes out that you don't even know—something that's driving you. That's very deep. What I can say is that I love painting, and I want other people to enjoy painting. I feel like because we're so saturated with information and images, our attention span, or maybe tolerance, has become greater. I think I'm just trying to get people to look. When you see my paintings in person rather than online, I think they can slow you down so you can just be still and get lost in them.

I will say that when I paint, I want certain things to happen. I want your eye to go to a certain place, feel a certain emotion, or enjoy this color. When I'm making a show, I'll think, "Well, I have a bright yellow; I've got to pick one." I'm sort of balancing because color is very important. I feel

like it is very healing, and each color is different in how it makes you feel. Pale pink can really mess with your eyes, a red really sucks you in. A blue, like a bright blue, is almost divine sometimes.

You paint in layers, each tiny thing having four layers of paint, and with your pieces so specific and detailed, do you have to rest in between?

I have to commit to the color, whatever it is. I'll do a painting for a full day and then switch and do another for a full day. When you paint tiny, it really slows you down, and I think that is calming, so I enjoy it. Still, I get scared - that old fear I told you about building that big house and being locked inside. So, I do battle my fear, and there are a lot of false starts, and I just keep going. But it's nice; it's really nice. ●

GretchenScherer.com

6: Belton House Staircase, Oil and acrylic on panel, 18" x 24", 2021-2022

7: Doria Pamphili, Oil on panel, 30" x 24", 2021