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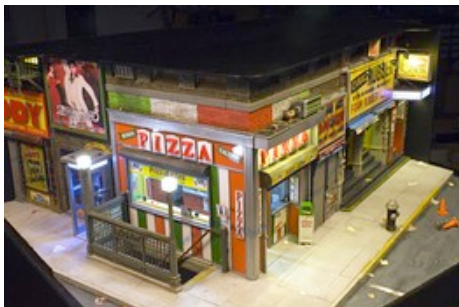
A Small World After All

By KRISTIN M. JONES

New York

In 1822, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, who had worked in theater design and panorama painting and would later invent the daguerreotype photograph, unveiled a dazzling new spectacle he dubbed the diorama. Parisians gasped at lifelike scenes generated with lighting effects, gels and painted scrimms, often depicting Gothic cathedrals or ruins. Peep-show boxes and magic-lantern shows had already emerged—entertainments that, like Daguerre's diorama, would be displaced by new protocinematic devices and eventually by cinema. Now, with our lives flooded by digital fictions of such verisimilitude it's sometimes hard to find the line separating reality and illusion, should we be surprised that some artists are creating work that highlights the tension between truth and fiction?

A Tiny World Away



Courtesy of the artist / private collection, England / Les Bernstien

'Canal St. Cross-Section' (2009-10) by Alan Wolfson (detail)

Focusing on contemporary artwork involving the fabrication of alternate realms, "Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities," at the Museum of Arts & Design, features contributions from 37 international artists and artist teams, nearly half of whom build dioramas to be photographed; many of the resulting images are exhibited here alongside the corresponding models. In keeping with the museum's emphasis on process and materials, none of the photographs were manipulated using image-modification software like Photoshop.

The museum's chief curator, David Revere McFadden, who organized the show, writes in the catalog that the works on view "engage us visually and intellectually by positioning the viewer in that 'suspension of disbelief' location somewhere between the theatrical and cinematic experience." He has divided "Otherworldly" into four themes—"Apocalyptic Archaeology,"

"Dreams and Memories," "Voyeurs/Provocateurs" and "Unnatural Nature" —although many works could fit into more than one category, and most evoke an undertow of longing or anxiety as well as the childlike pleasure of viewing miniature worlds.

The multigenerational group of artists includes such relatively familiar figures as James Casebere, who began photographing tabletop models of eerily blank-looking buildings and interiors in the 1980s and has contributed two images based on a neighborhood in Dutchess County, N.Y. Charles Simonds, who since 1970 has been creating tiny unfired-clay cities that recall ancient southwestern cliff dwellings, has created a site-specific work in the lobby that is visible from the museum's exterior (a companion piece will also be installed on a ledge across

the street).

Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities

Museum of Arts & Design

Through Sept. 18

One newcomer, though he's been creating models for years, is Michael Paul Smith, who attracted attention for his photographs—depicting environments he initially created for his collection of model vintage cars—when he posted them on the online photo site Flickr several years ago. He has envisioned an imaginary community called Elgin Park, inspired by his

childhood hometown of Sewickley, Pa. Works such as "The Diner Interior" (2005), made using materials including wrapping paper and pinheads, convey an unsettling but unsentimental nostalgia.

Other artists favor ruined, depopulated urban or small-town scenes. Peter Feigenbaum calls his desolate images of 1970s New York "virtual urban spatial realms." The burned-out cars and decrepit row houses reflect not specific areas as much as his memories of films such as "The French Connection" (1971). Alan Wolfson's work also teleports viewers to a partly imagined 20th-century Gotham, although his models are the primary work, as in his fantastically detailed cross-section of a Manhattan street, "Canal St. Cross-Section" (2009–10), complete with graffitied subway.

Rather than the eternal present that natural-history museum dioramas suggest, many of the works here look to the past, whether with nostalgia, regret or a mixture of both, or to a surreal alternative present. Some images of a natural world devoid of human traces suggest fantasies of a lost Eden. Didier Massard's elegiac large-scale photograph "The Monkey" (2011), depicting a solemn primate clutching a piece of fruit before verdant tropical foliage, has a rapt quality that recalls nature scenes before the advent of photography. Mr. Massard used to photograph real landscapes but found himself disappointed by the locations he traveled to capture.

At once hyperreal and unnatural, Kim Keever's radiant vista "West 104k" (2009), also echoes sublime landscapes by Thomas Cole or J.M.W. Turner. Mr. Keever arranges scenes in and around liquid-filled tanks into which he drops clouds of paint and then quickly takes photographs with lighting and gels. Bethany de Forest uses a pinhole camera to produce landscapes with a more fairy-tale-like, off-kilter quality, while Patrick Jacobs's ravishing Wonderland-like microgardens are viewed through lenses that create an illusion of depth.

As for the works that include human figures, many involve absurdity, melancholy or noirish violence. In Tracey Snelling's "Foot & Ass, KFC" (2010), a loving simulation of a tawdry block in China, people appear in found video footage on a tiny screen. Some of the show's strongest works return to the origins of cinema, such as Mat Collishaw's "Garden of Unearthly Delights" (2009). A three-dimensional version of the zoetrope, a spinning optical toy that exploits the phenomenon of persistence of vision, it summons a tainted Victorian paradise in which cherubic fairies beat at fish and nests beneath frantically flapping birds and butterflies.

Where are these works leading? "Otherworldly" presents an LED piece by Chris Levine, an elegant hologram of eyes that can only be glimpsed through peripheral vision, as one possible diorama of the future. It's an oddly ghostly presence in a show rife with emotion and obsessive craftsmanship, but the disembodied eyes are an apt metaphor for the resurgent fascination with the mechanics of illusion.

Ms. Jones writes about film and art for the Journal.

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Event details

Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities

Until 18 Sep 11

NEW YORK. "Otherworldly" at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) presents artists' hand-built depictions of artificial environments and states of being, either as sculptures or as objects to be photographed or videoed.

"For me the thrill is the idea that we are so accustomed to digital manipulation, but every one of these artists has taken the low-tech approach," says David McFadden, the museum's chief curator.

He discovered the 37 artists through an internet search, the show taking only seven months to organise.



Mariee Neudecker, Everything is Important and Nothing Really Matters at All (detail), 2009

Although most of the exhibits are models, dioramas and site-specific installations, this is the first show in the museum's history to embrace photography; of the 92 pieces on view, just over a dozen are photographs. B.R. Categories: Curious Design

Venue details

Museum of Arts and Design (MAD)

40 West 53rd Street, New York 10019, USA

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www.madmuseum.org



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June 7, 2011

'Otherworldly' dioramas open at MAD Museum



Dioramas, deceptive lasers and a zoetrope populate the [Otherworldly](#) exhibition that opened today at the [Museum of Arts & Design](#).

A miniature Chuck Close makes a cameo in a diorama by Joe Fig (pictured, top) as does a Jackson Pollock action figure. Elsewhere, photographs of many of the models take them out of context making them look absolutely real.

Many of the works in the group show by 37 artists intend to "seduce the viewer into the belief that what they're seeing is real," according to the introductory text for the exhibition.

[Chris Levine's](#) "My Deep SEE Adventure" uses lights to leave the viewer guessing if they saw anything at all. two strips of light momentarily turn into digital eyes (or the word SEE) as a viewer changes his own point of view, my moving his eyes or head. the glimpse is fleeting and the image returns to the innocuous light strip.

"We live so much in our own heads," Levine said during a media preview of his work this morning. "Hopefully it brings people into the now."

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[Alan Wolfson](#)'s "Canal Street Cross-Section" is perfect for anyone who misses Old New York, specifically 1979 New York. Wolfson spent 18 months working on the specially commissioned model, which allows viewers details of a semi-fictional stretch of Canal from top-level pizza shop, to a BMT subway platform and finally another lower level of subway tracks - sans people or rats.

"I live in L.A. now and every time I come back there's less and less of the old architecture," Wolfson said of his fondness for the era. Plus, the 1970s-era "graffiti allows me to tell a story," he said.

"Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities" will be on view until Sept. 18.

Picture credits: Amy Langfield/NewYorkology.

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Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities

Critics' Pick

[Museum of Arts & Design](#)

2 Columbus Circle, New York, NY10019

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Type of Show:

Multimedia/Installation, Museum Exhibits, Photography, Sculpture



Courtesy of the artist, Lori Nix, ClampArt Gallery

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Profile

Recently Opened

Fascinating hand-built depictions of artificial environments and alternative realities, captured through sculpture, photography, or video.

Small wonders

If you love peering into dioramas and gawking at elaborate miniatures, you'll find plenty to be excited about at this unique, titillating exhibition. Highlights include James Casebere's photos of surreal model suburbs; Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz's lurid snow globes; and Paolo Ventura's photos of his handcrafted, miniature World War II era cities.

Find this article at:

<http://www.nymag.com/listings/art/otherworldly-optical-del>

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