

R O B I N G I B S O N G A L L E R Y

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SPECULATIVE SPACES

Saturday 2 March – Tuesday 26 March 2013

ARTISTS: Kylie Banyard (Galerie pompom), Anna Carey (Arterea Gallery), David Eastwood (Robin Gibson Gallery), Eugenia Ivanissevich (Robin Gibson Gallery), Col Jordan (Mossenson Galleries & Peter Pinson Gallery), Mark Kimber (Stills Gallery), Amanda Marburg (Olsen Irwin Gallery), Rob McHaffie (Darren Knight Gallery) and Peter Nelson. Curated by David Eastwood as part of Art Month Sydney 2013.

Speculative Spaces examines a range of practices that employ miniature models constructed by artists to inform or complement their spatial and pictorial investigations. In this exhibition, sets, dioramas or maquettes, fabricated at tabletop scale, are subsequently mediated through drawing, painting, photography, video, or a combination of these. Through such processes, hypothetical *mise en scènes* postulate versions of the world that can appear both startling and half-familiar.

The model is a surrogate reality. It is often understood as a prototype, proposing yet-to-be-realized ideas, as in the maquette, conventionally produced by architects and sculptors as a precursor to a larger, more durable structure. The nine artists in this exhibition, however, build models that are not constrained by regard for the feasibility of construction on a larger scale. Instead, their ideas are brought to fruition through the virtual space of the image.

According to Susan Stewart, “The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination.”¹ The small-scale model possesses a pervading sense of self-containment and insularity. Ralph Rugoff describes dioramas as “Inhabiting an isolated and inviolate space that is profoundly remote from that of the viewer, they call to mind Platonic archetypes rather than actual physical specimens. In effect, they function as images of themselves, dematerialized signs which we consume with a distanced fascination.”²

Rugoff points to the apparent virtuality of the diorama, commensurate with images and separated from the space of the viewer. Despite the sense of impenetrability inherent in the space of the miniature model, it remains accessible to the eye. As Gaston Bachelard wrote, “the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world.”³ Thus, the space of the model can transcend its miniaturization, intimately coaxing the viewer toward a visually immersive or voyeuristic experience, like peering through a keyhole. Each of the artists in this exhibition reinterprets reality, formulating a strange and precarious world to peer into.

Mark Kimber assembles miniature sets in order to stage his photographs of nocturnal scenes embroiled in tense filmic narratives. Mysterious dramas play out amid eerily lit sets suggestive of ominous scenarios and supernatural encounters. His works deal in a kind of visual trickery reminiscent of cinematic special effects of the pre-digital era.

The artifice of fabrication evident in the model is a central characteristic of Amanda Marburg’s paintings. The handmade nature of the scene is readily detectable in the carefully painted images based on photographs of her plasticine dioramas, replete with impressions from the fingers that shape the artist’s wonky constructions. The juxtaposition of Marburg’s often macabre and adult-oriented subject matter rendered in children’s modelling clay reveals a dark sense of humour at play.

Rob McHaffie constructs his paintings from multiple sources and influences. The artist mines personal photographs, found pictures and his own odd assortment of sculpted characters. The protagonists in these paintings posture comically with a dishevelled vulnerability that strikes a balance between humour and pathos.

Anna Carey’s rickety architectural models are assembled in lightweight materials, loosely held together like the foggy recollection of a dream or a childhood memory. With names like *Star Dust* and *Golden Palm*, these simulations of pastel-hued coastal retreats exude an air of nostalgic charm, but the lustre has long since faded from the holiday brochure’s veneer of glamour. Photographed outdoors amid a backdrop of distant palm trees and bathed in sunlight, the images of imitation roadside motels are grounded with a degree of plausibility that dissipates upon close inspection.

Similarly, the scenes photographed by Eugenia Ivanissevich for her series *On the Island* are characterized by modest connotations of seaside vacations overshadowed by their makeshift

materiality. Making do with only a handful of props in the studio, it is as though the artist is imagining other, more salubrious locales beyond her London workspace, while simultaneously revealing the studio as a pronounced presence. Ordinary materials such as rulers and masking tape share the drab reality of the studio interior with snapshots of coastal scenes, not to mention an errant beach ball making an improbable cameo.

Col Jordan's constructions are a conflation of sculptural object and painted surface. Unlike other works in this exhibition, they are not interpreted through a secondary mode of representation. Rather, the structures are brought into direct physical contact with painting: acrylic colours and patterns cover the sculpture like a skin. While the scale of the abstract forms are not overtly miniature, they suggest the stature of buildings and monuments, calling to mind desolate and mysterious piazzas of a metaphysical dimension.

Extensions of a No-Place is the expansive landscape project that has been the focus of Peter Nelson's practice for the past few years. His work in *Speculative Spaces* borrows from the invented space of Zhao Mengfu, a Yuan dynasty painter whose landscapes dynamically reconfigured geographical forms as though they were props on a stage. Working with celadon ceramic mountain forms, video footage and drawing, Nelson reinterprets Chinese landscape and introduces his own cryptic narratives located somewhere between utopia and dystopia.

Incorporating painting, photography, dioramas and optical devices such as kaleidoscopes and peep boxes, Kylie Banyard peers into the past and investigates whether the faded optimism associated with discarded utopias of the 1960s can be regenerated and adapted in a contemporary context. Her work engages with alternative approaches to habitation and lifestyle informed by the counterculture of the flower power generation, seeking out alternative models of life from recent history.

The theme of this exhibition originated from my own investigations into posthumously reconstructed artists' studios. Part of the research has involved the fabrication of a miniature version of the bedroom studio of Giorgio Morandi, facilitating an exploration of the peripheral and ambient space of the 20th century Italian artist's still life paintings. Limitless configurations and perspectives for pictorial interpretations are made possible by the 1:15 scale interior. The replica objects, furniture and personal effects are not fixed in place. Likewise, the ceiling and each of the walls are removable. Here, Morandi's life becomes a still life; a prop to explore the boundaries between object and image, private and public, authenticity and artifice.

The currency of model making in contemporary art is evident internationally, as indicated by exhibitions focussing on artists' dioramas such as *Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities*, curated by David Revere McFadden for New York's Museum of Arts and Design in 2011. Similarly, the practices of artists such as Thomas Demand and William Daniels indicate the significance of models to various modes of image making. Related approaches were contextualised in relation to four Melbourne-based painters in *Model Pictures*, curated by Bala Starr for the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne in 2011. *Model Pictures* included the work of James Lynch and Moya McKenna, along with both Marburg and McHaffie who feature in *Speculative Spaces*. The Melbourne exhibition exclusively featured paintings as the culmination of a process in which the absent models could be described as subsidiary.

Speculative Spaces further investigates the relationship between model making and imaging. The various tabletop constructions evident in this exhibition are indicative of a key strategy in a somewhat protracted process towards imaging across various media. For some of the artists involved in the exhibition there is no hierarchy among the image and the object, i.e., the models exist as finished artworks in their own right as well as provoking investigations in image-based media. For others, their models are but a step within a process, akin to a study or maquette rather than a resolved artwork per se. Irrespective of the model's status within the process, what these miniature constructions offer are opportunities for speculation beyond our immediate reality, providing a stimulus for images and ideas about how the world could be, asking "what if" questions, rather than describing the world as we know it. These speculative spaces are distinct from the world we inhabit and all the more compelling for it.

David Eastwood, February 2013

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 69. Also quoted in: David Revere McFadden, *Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2011), 15.

² Ralph Rugoff, 'Bubble Worlds', in Toby Kamps, *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 13.

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 155.