

# A Peephole Perspective On Tiny Worlds

TWO years ago David Revere McFadden, chief curator of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, found himself thinking a lot about dioramas. He was installing a show that included work by Thomas Demand, known for slightly creepy photographs of rooms that look realistic but are actually fabricated with colored paper. “How reality is defined is one of those questions that has plagued human beings since the beginning of culture,” Mr. McFadden said. “I suddenly thought maybe there are other artists out there working in the same vein but on a smaller scale.”

The results are now on view at the museum in “Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities,” through Sept. 18.

As soon as Mr. McFadden began hunting for tiny worlds, he found himself confronted with “a hornet’s nest of possibilities,” he said. Overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of dollhouse makers, miniature train enthusiasts, theatrical maquette designers and the like, he focused on artists who create dioramas as stand-alone sculptural environments or use them as the subject of photographs and videos.

The 37 artists he chose include well-known ones like the photographer James

Casebere and the installation artist Michael C. McMillen, as well as new talents he unearthed using Google and Facebook. Some made work especially for the show, including David Opdyke, who installed a disaster-movie scene in the lobby that depicts Columbus Circle, which the museum faces, upside down and in ruins.

The work varies greatly in mood, from Jonah Samson’s lurid crime and peep-show scenes to the tiny realms of dandelions and grass that Patrick Jacobs appears to have trapped under glass. There is also a tremendous range of scale: Amy Bennett’s two-inch-high medical clinic diorama has been a model for her even smaller paintings, while Kim Keverer photographs his Hudson River-like landscapes underwater in a 200-gallon tank.

Although Mr. McFadden found it surprising that most of the artists building tiny worlds were men, he didn’t find it odd that most work in New York. (As he put it: “What’s the biggest problem an artist here faces? Space.”) But the “real eye opener,” he noted, was that in an age when digital technology reigns supreme, these artists gravitate to the handmade and low tech, adding, “It is a wonderful return to the basis of making things.”

CAROL KINO



COURTESY OF SYLVIE MATTON, FRANCE

## Charles Matton

*‘Bibliothèque Avec le Souvenir d’Anna’ (2004)*

After a long career as a designer, illustrator and filmmaker, the French artist Charles Matton (who died at 77 in 2008) began creating his mysterious boxes in 1985.

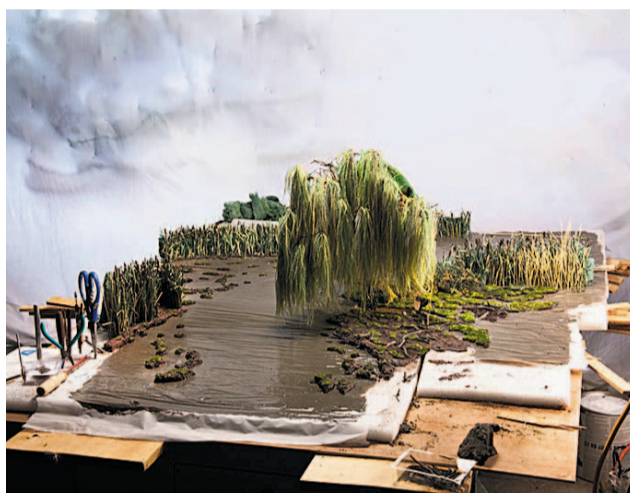
“It all started because Charles wanted to make realistic paintings of interiors,” said his widow, Sylvie Matton. But whenever he chose a space, “the colors on the walls were not the right ones” or “he would have to wait hours for the sun to set,” she said. To solve the problem Mr. Matton started building miniature rooms, which soon grew so richly detailed that he wanted to make them for their own sake. “It was not like, ‘Oh, I am going to do boxes,’” Ms. Matton said. “It was a whole adventure of creation.”

His subjects included the studios of artists like Francis Bacon and Giacometti, the empty halls of grand hotels and the librar-

ies of Proust and Freud, for which he researched and modeled each individual book and bibelot. His longtime friend the philosopher Jean Baudrillard referred to the tiny atmosphere-packed environments as “theatrum simulacrum.”

Mirrors create the illusion of labyrinthine corridors and make the interior of a box appear larger than its confines. In the library, above, with nine views, Mr. Matton amplified the confusion by introducing a ghostly figure — a video projection — who prowls the shelves without casting a shadow.

“We love it when people try and understand” how a box is made, Ms. Matton said, speaking as though her husband were still alive. “But we also love it when they just accept the fact that it’s there as a magic thing.”



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

## Matthew Albanese

*‘A New Life #1’ and ‘A New Life #2’ (2011)*

Even as a child, Matthew Albanese said, “I always wanted to be a photographer, however it manifested itself.” Now a product photographer at Barneys, he happened upon his creative bliss in 2008, while shooting gadgets for his family’s former online business.

Bored by the subject at hand, Mr. Albanese, now 28, was playing around with lighting when he overturned a can of paprika in the warehouse kitchen. “It reminded me of the surface of Mars,” he said, “and I thought I would try to create a barren landscape with it.” Hundreds of pounds of sugar, spice and steel wool later, he

had grown adept at coaxing humble materials into looking like something else (an ice floe, say, or a tornado) when fixed by his camera.

The photographs, top and above right, and the diorama for them, above left, are homages to the wetlands of the Hackensack River in New Jersey, near where Mr. Albanese grew up. This is the only diorama he has built to last. He spent more than seven months turning ostrich feathers into willow trees (a painstaking process that involved dyeing, stitching and weaving each individual barb), tying raffia ribbon bits into cattails, and carving chocolate into mud. To capture the stormy scene Mr. Albanese turned on a fan and planted dry ice behind the cattails; for the sunset version, he placed cotton batting and colored light bulbs behind a muslin sky. But as with all his work, he said: “A lot of it is about how it’s photographed. That’s when the process comes alive.”



JULIE SAUL GALLERY, NEW YORK

## Didier Massard

*‘The Monkey’ (2011)*

Twenty years ago Didier Massard was a studio photographer in Paris who amused himself by shooting European landscapes in his spare time. Gradually he felt compelled to photograph more exotic locales, but only as they existed in his mind.

“There were many places in the world I wished to photograph and visit,” Mr. Massard, 57, said, “and I realized that they wouldn’t be as I imagined them.” Eventually he decided to build a scene in his studio.

His early photographs depicted places like India and China; then came nature scenes. More recently he has added animals, like this monkey, left, clutching an applelike fruit, inspired by a Dürer engraving.

Mr. Massard spent six months creating the monkey, first using layers of cardboard to suggest its form. The face, hands and feet are made of dental composite and the fur of darning wool, which he blended, combed and glued in tiny tufts to mosquito netting.

This Edenic diorama is the first Mr. Massard has shown in public. It also represents the first time he has captured an animal facing his camera. “I wouldn’t say that it is a self-portrait,” he said, mentioning the primate-human bond, “but there is something of that in it.”



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

## Peter Feigenbaum

*‘187.1’ (2011)*

Although Peter Feigenbaum, 27, grew up near Boston, he was always obsessed with New York — particularly the ruined street-scapes he knew only from films made long before his birth, like “The French Connection” and “Serpico.” While studying architecture as an undergraduate at Yale, he began making scale models of archetypal New York buildings and photographing them in different combinations. His concept for the project, “Trainset Ghetto,” he said, is that “New York has a certain style of vernacular architecture and blocks often feel like they’re interchangeable.”

Although Mr. Feigenbaum has worked in different architecture firms since moving to New York five years ago, he has not changed his basic approach to building a row house. Although sometimes he makes a wooden mold and casts it in plaster, and other times he designs on a computer and has plastic parts cut in a shop, the trick is always in building up enough layers of tempera paint, along with plenty of wet brushing, dry brushing and air-brushing, to summon up the necessary patina of grime and decrepitude (left and above right). Sometimes he adds a dirtied model car to the scene to suggest a sign of life.



These days, to make sure his project “evolves away from a hobbyist aesthetic,” Mr. Feigenbaum said, he often disassembles his models and photographs them outside, amid the real streets of New York. In the resulting pictures it’s hard to tell where toy town ends and the full-scale buildings start. But that’s the point. “I’m trying to create scenarios where reality tries to fight back against hyper-reality,” Mr. Feigenbaum said, “and makes itself known again.”