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## Alternative Worlds Where Even McMansions Are Tiny

KAREN  
ROSENBERG

ART  
REVIEW

In the age of the flat screen, a show about the diorama sounds charmingly naïve. The word itself conjures benign images of hobbyists with tweezers and sixth graders with shoeboxes.

Yet “Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities,” at the Museum of Arts and Design, circles back to the two-dimensional image in ways that feel very sophisticated. A good number of the show’s more than 40 artists build model homes, cities and landscapes mainly to photograph them.

The connection to photography, it turns out, isn’t new. In his catalog essay, “Seeing and Knowing,” David Revere McFadden, the museum’s chief curator and this show’s organizer, traces today’s model worlds back to the 19th-century dioramas created as mass entertainment by the photographic pioneer Louis Daguerre. Their stage-lighted scrimms offered audiences immersive, Imax-like tours of Gothic cathedrals (also a popular subject of early photographs).

The “Otherworldly” show can feel like a Hollywood film-studio tour in miniature. Occasionally it also has a forensic element, as if the dioramas had been based on photographs rather than the other way around.

Some artists don’t exhibit photographs because they’re known primarily as model makers. In this category is Joe Fig, whose meticulous models of famous artists’ studios are driven by an enduring fascination with the working lives of creative people. Mr. Fig acts as a journalist or historian, conducting on-site interviews whenever possible; even the smallest minutiae in his sculptures conveys a deep understanding of habits and processes.

He gives us Jackson Pollock the action painter as an action figure, trailing a frozen swoosh of paint as Pollock hovers over his canvas. Another piece peers in on Chuck Close at work in Bridgehampton, N.Y.; no detail is too trivial, down to the spectacles resting on a desk and the bottle of cleaning fluid by the sink.

James Casebere, meanwhile, shows his photographs but not the architectural models of suburban housing developments on which they are based. By controlling the lighting and printing his images on a large scale, he makes sprawl seem even more aggressive and insidious. In “Landscape With Houses (Dutchess County, N.Y.) #8” tightly spaced McMansions tower over a quaint white-clapboard farmhouse.

Mr. Casebere is something of an anomaly in this show because he is so focused on the present. Other examples of model architecture tend to indulge nostalgia, along the lines of Michael Paul Smith’s bland 1950s strip mall and Alan Wolfson’s gritty little slice of 1970s Canal Street in New York.

Few of these are as haunting as the 1940s Venetian streetscapes created by Paolo Ventura, who is representing Italy in this summer’s Venice Biennale. His models and photographs take their cues from historical fiction, with invented



characters — in this case an elderly watchmaker — occupying recreated places. And his use of natural light in the pictures is a smart, understated touch.

Artists who don’t photograph their models sometimes control the gaze in other ways, in the tradition of the peephole theater. The show includes several examples, none of them worthy of Duchamp’s “Étant Donnés” (the conceptually titillating tableau of a spread-eagle nude brandishing a lantern in a landscape). Some, at least, make creative use of mirrors and motors. Inside David Lawrey and Jaki Middleton’s “Consolidated Life,” a free-standing box painted to look like a skyscraper, are endless rows of desks seemingly plucked from the corporate offices of “The Apartment.” A single chair rotates, as if propelled by an invisible typist.

In Frank Kunert’s “Menu à Deux,” meanwhile, the V-shaped dining table and perfectly symmetrical place settings imply a (nonexistent) mirror — or perhaps a difficult relationship.

Frequently the wall texts invite viewers to match the models with their corresponding photographs. Children will probably enjoy this game; adults may find it infantilizing.

The same might be said of the show’s site-specific installations, by Charles Simonds, Thomas Doyle, Gregory Euclide and David Opdyke. Mr. Simonds, who has a well-known piece in the Whitney Museum’s stairwell, builds a comparable clay city for his imaginary race of “Little People” in a window off the lobby.

The trip through all of these microcosms can be tedious: too many shoeboxes, not enough ideas. One exception is a video by Junebum Park, who uses his hands and a rooftop camera to turn an ordinary parking lot into a kind of moving diorama. A simple trick of perspective is all it takes to make him the master of Matchbox cars and ant-size pedestrians.

Also innovative is Jitsuro Mase and Tom Nagae’s “Palm Top Theater i3DG,” a small device that transforms a smartphone into a miniature 3-D theater. It’s not exactly “Avatar,” but the concept of an analog app is promising.

Had “Otherworldly” offered up additional examples of artists thinking outside the box, so to speak, it could have been really transporting.

“Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities” runs through Sept. 18 at the Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle, Manhattan; (212) 299-7777, madmuseum.org.