



THE ARTS

# Charles Steckler's dioramas draw you into compelling, eccentric narratives

William Belcher | Friday, November 11 2016

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The Mandeville Gallery at Union College wraps around the second floor of the Nott Memorial. In a small office with glass walls, I find the collage and diorama artist Charles Steckler at a makeshift worktable. The space itself is a life-size diorama, designed specifically for the run of *Charles Steckler: Contrary to What Sometimes Happens*, which is now on view.

Captivated by the random assortment of artifacts and colors, my eyes can't help but wander around the hijacked office while the artist sits comfortably in his chair, surrounded by boxes and brochures, blocks and books, puppets and paper models, and a wall of shelves filled with jars, containers, frames, and unidentifiable objects. This is his workspace. These are his tools.

Steckler is known for his collage, assemblage, and dioramas. In addition to the living studio, the exhibition features 32 works created over nearly two decades (1994-2012). Organized by Julie Lohnes, Curator of Art Collections and Exhibitions at the Mandeville Gallery, the work ranges from a seemingly simple cigar box treatment of *Flor de Tabacos* (1994) to layered, intricate dioramas such as *Deus Ex Machina* (2006) and *Traveling Panorama* (2012). The artist's ability to transform household detritus into meaningful, often moving scenes is on full display. Each individual work elicits an immediate emotional response, but if inclined, the viewer could spend an afternoon exploring the details. The exhibition is both compelling and eccentric, and the artist has the remarkable ability to convert the chaos of random materials into something provocative and absorbing.

Steckler is always on the hunt. He collects discarded items and found materials in boxes. With a smile, he says he's been known to grab a handful of brochures, rack cards, or pamphlets from other museums and galleries. Often, cutouts from this paper material provide a backdrop, a character, or a telling detail in a new piece. He starts by dumping the bric-a-brac he's collected out on his worktable to look for interesting pairings and arrangements. "A sense of randomness determines what objects are used," Steckler notes when asked about his process. "The idea is to bring disparate elements together to find narratives, relationships, and compositions." He is careful to note that the objects are arranged in an abstract way, often providing the illusion of narrative. Eventually, a sense of coherence is gained through the layering of objects, color, or composition.

Together, the exhibition offers a remarkable survey of Steckler's art, which is expressive, sometimes humorous, and often surreal—an angel floats a hippo center stage, an elephant walks a high wire, a spaceman hangs his head in sorrow. The dioramas are bursting with images from art history, including familiar angels, sculptures, faces, and scenes from the ancient world. In many of the dioramas, a sense of nostalgia permeates and a child's sense of play is visible.

Mixed together, a longing rises to the surface. This is especially evident when Steckler employs sentimental illustrations of country life as a backdrop.

Steckler has a long history of exhibitions, awards, and accolades. He has been a Yaddo Fellow, a resident artist at the Vermont Studio Center, and a Prix de Rome Finalist and visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome. He is professor of theater and designer-in-residence at Union College, where he's worked for more than 25 years and designed over 100 shows. The overlap between Steckler's two practices is fascinating. In some ways, the dioramas resemble small-scale stage sets, maquettes, or Toy Theater. Moreover, the first layer in much of the work bares close resemblance to a theatrical backdrop, and he often uses framing devices like stage curtains to set the scene. "It's about drawing the eye in and then directing the eye around," Steckler adds.

“Infinite Time of Reverie” is a particularly striking example of how Steckler directs the eye around the work. Similar to “Traveling Panorama,” it features a classic figure in multiple locations and direct references to art history. The scene is framed with a gold curtain; it represents an off-kilter proscenium stage. The viewer is first drawn to the Colosseum at center, which is topped with a glacier-like mound that slides down to the paper figure in the foreground; the figure gazes down to his right at several branches. The curves of these tiny branches bend the viewer’s attention toward the next figure and onward to a repeated image of a hand, which in turn, points to the next figure. Eventually, the viewer’s eye is directed up the curtain and back over the Colosseum. We are back to where we started. This loop not only moves the viewer’s eye around the diorama, it reinforces the idea of “infinite time.”

*Contrary to What Sometimes Happens*, the work from which the exhibition takes its name, also seems to comment on time, but in a different manner. The backdrop, a farmhouse and winter sleigh ride, is standard Christmas card material, but the viewer can’t ignore the three pious figures who are huddled together on the left side of the scene. One figure appears to be praying while the other two trade disapproving looks. On the right side, the scene is disrupted by a figure in a throwback space suit, standing sheepishly apart from the others. His head is lowered as if he’s been sent away. Between the two groups, a tiny magnifying glass directs the viewer back to the farmhouse, a scene from an earlier era. The gap of time is magnified. An odd sort of nostalgia surfaces.

Back in the life-size diorama, I lounge in a camp chair like those ones that parents bring to their kids’ soccer games. As Steckler talks about what’s next, he holds up an empty black box. “It’s a swing of the pendulum,” he says. After creating several layered, intricate dioramas, he feels a desire to examine a simpler form. “This empty box is full of potential.” Perhaps the emptiness, the imagined potential tells the next narrative. The sentiment reminds me of the opening lines of *The Empty Space*, where Peter Brook writes, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across an empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theater to be engaged.” Behind me, a cut-out of Samuel Beckett’s head, which is pasted on a stick for puppeteering, is pinned to the wall. Steckler is never far

from his work in the theater, but this smash-up of stage design, collage, and Toy Theater is what sets his work apart, and it’s what brings it to life.

*The exhibition continues through Dec. 11, and is free and open to the public. Those interesting in catching the artist at work or seeing this “life-size diorama” can visit the Mandeville Gallery for a special “Artist on Site” event between 11:30 AM and 2:30 PM on Nov. 15. Visit the Mandeville Gallery’s website (<https://muse.union.edu/mandeville/>) for more details.*