

# Union College gallery features intricate shadow boxes

Artist Charles Steckler crams a lot of life into small spaces

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Steckler--2010 Siren's Song (detail)

It's true: Charles Steckler is inhabiting the Nott Memorial at Union College like few ever have. I don't just mean his cohesive, finely resolved show of shadow box collage fantasias in the second floor Mandeville gallery, "Contrary to What Sometimes Happens." I mean Steckler himself will be there, almost daily, working on a temporary "life size diorama."

This is all good news. The artist's work is a pleasure for viewers of all heights and persuasions. There are over 30 of his finely crafted 3-D dioramas in a range of intimate proportions, with an inventive, playful and sometimes absurdist scene and story in each.

Steckler nails it in his catalog interview. "I'm a builder, a synthesist. A remix-ologist." There is so much constructive fun here, the danger might be that people don't take the works seriously. That would be a mistake. While they don't always try for the deeply intuitive poetry shown by the great modernist master of the form, [Joseph Cornell](#), they add a level of accessible, and often complex, narrative that compensates warmly.

I talked to Steckler this week, and he said he first calls himself a "theatrical stage designer," but then he quickly made clear, "I've always been a studio artist." The dioramas here, covering two decades, are surely independent objects, but they also owe a lot to Steckler's stage designs. Each feels like a compacted version of an actual play, complete from backdrops to storyline to miniature performers. They are like painstaking children's book illustrations that have blossomed into a third dimension. The materials — modestly labeled "mixed media" — are scavenged from everyday life, rescued and enshrined.

Take "Scena Prospetiva," a largely black-and-white view showing on three sides an old European city square. An oversized elephant walks above the open ground on a glittery tightrope. Tiny people gape from below, just as we peer from beyond the fourth wall. In "Miracolo," an unspecified sturdy beast is wrapped in blue thread, which becomes the reins an angel uses to guide them both over a desolate landscape. A dark backdrop partially descends like washes of moody liquid trees, and the land is made of stained paper (is that a used coffee filter?) and a clump of some dazzling golden material.

In the winter scene "Le Voyage," a traveler rides some kind of rocket ship disintegrating over a picture-book village. If the backdrop resembles a layered collage, the rocket is closer to pure sculpture. With a tactile finesse that the unruly raw materials might normally defy, Steckler entangles a broken cup, some wire, a transparent reindeer, cloth, plastic mesh, and a tiny mirror, for starters, in a mashup that declares mystery as much as mastery. It's crazy but reasonable.

It is a strange truth that some of the best art of the world is ephemeral. And here I don't mean just music and theater, which are usually written and notated in a way that encourages a legacy. The very stage

designs that defined Steckler's main life work are now gone. What remains are photographs and mock-ups. This makes the solidity of these independent dioramas, coming from the same spirit, especially vivid.

In the office space alcove, you will see what Steckler told me was a "hypothetical diorama artist's studio." This is, unhypothetically, a diorama-in-progress, and the walls are packed with raw materials organized on shelves and pinned to the wall. The artist is a great guy to talk to, and if you catch him working there, you'll be swept into his eccentric orbit. Say hello.

If Steckler's works — and Charles Steckler himself — are the main act at Union College this fall, they are only the beginning. Scoot up one more floor in the Nott for a striking show of photographs by Kian Nowrouzi. "Society after Revolution" features recent, crystalline black-and-white photographs of China and Cuba, and they sing out in a style that harkens back to classic photojournalism.

In the library is an ambitious site-specific project, "By the Patterns," created by [Kira Nam Greene](#). The normally plain square columns are decorated with repeating, delicately gorgeous designs, each column different from the others. Another site-specific project can be seen — experienced is more like it — in the atrium at the [Peter Irving](#) Wold Center. Projected moving images of falling water, aptly titled, "Slippery Slope," pour down the angled underbelly of the stairway above. The looping six minute silent piece becomes a fluid everyday backdrop.

At the Castrucci Gallery (also in the Wold Center) is a tightly conceived group of 10 aquatint prints that bely their simplicity with interior beauty. In each, a mathematical formula is spelled out in white letters as if on a chalkboard. The 10 "artists" are actual mathematicians, who chose formulas that reveal pithy numerical relationships. Visually spare, they might seem squeaky clean compared to the raw notations you'd find on a real chalkboard, but they imply other, pristine depths.

Finally, after Oct. 21, you can head to the central gallery in the Visual Arts building directly north of the Nott Memorial (turning left as you descend the main Nott steps). "The Homecoming Show" will feature works in all media, by both current students and alumni. This already promises to be a true "best of" look at what Union has been capable of as it has expanded its curriculum and its facilities in the last few years. The show precedes by one day the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the extensive new construction on the Visual Arts building, more proof that art is seriously brewing at Union College.

*William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*