



Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz

"Islands"

PPOW Gallery

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Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz just might trump the controversial British artist brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman with the scale-model visions of hell they displayed at their recent exhibition. Less in-your-face than the British bad boys, who were short-listed for the Turner Prize, Martin and Muñoz disarm and draw in the viewer with bleak, insular miniature landscapes filled with dead trees and waters of glacial turquoise. The artists pit model-train-scale figures against the elements and zoological tormentors. Their scenes are frozen in the anachronistic visual language and scale of 1950s model train sets, the last moment of glory for the railroad age. Their wee figures are both legible and enigmatic in their Brueghel-like settings.

These visions are offered in two very different formats—large-scale C-prints and intimate snow globes. The photographs depict iceberg tableaux that are much larger and busier than the snow globes. Martin constructs these worlds from model figurines and polymer clays. Muñoz's photographic blowups have a shallow depth of field and turn Martin's efforts into

painterly renderings by magically obscuring the actual scale. The notion that the photographs are a window looking into the globe's hermetic space is echoed by the vitreous optics of the C-prints' lamination onto Plexiglas.

In the prints, the figures struggle in groups or processions. *Blindness* (2007) reveals tiny ciphers dressed in Capri pants and skirts. They poke their way with walking sticks as they traverse rocky ledges and mountain streams. *The Nursery* (2007) offers a symbolist vision of several bare trees growing from sprawled fresh human bodies. In *The Cliff* (2006), figures fly or dive like lemmings into the rocks and ice below; as they leap they are borne up in a glycerin atmosphere.

One by one, all expressions of visual culture are repositioned under contemporary art's critical lens; here, the snow globe is subjected to reinterpretation through conceptual practice. The 16 "Traveler" globes (all 2007) are interventions on ready-made glass balls with wood and plastic bases. It is the owner's license to shake these works, to swirl the evocative white plastic flakes and cue a programmed deeper desperation—as if the isolated, hypothermic figures didn't have things bad enough.

The globes are studies of isolation and vulnerability; not only are the scenes much smaller than their photographic counterparts, but most of the globes have only one or two figures. The domes communicate a hopeless solitary confinement; some figures even seem lucky to have mythical man-beast tormentors.

Three globes from the "Traveler" series, 2007.
Glass, water, wood, plastic.
H 9, W 6, D 6 in. (each)

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Traveler 245 offers a dead man in a gray suit and a noose whose body is beleaguered by five brown monkeys, while Humpty Dumpty, perched upon a snowy wall, contemplates a great fall in *Traveler 228*. A lone female sweeps a rocky protuberance beside Cocytus, Dante's ice lake, in the canto that is *Traveler 230*.

Much has been made of the fact that the two artists work in Dingman's Ferry, in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains, and it has been suggested that their isolation must precipitate such nightmares. But seriously, they're closer to Manhattan in this middle-class retreat than the residents of the Hamptons are. Still, the wintry landscapes evoke the urbanite's fear of the sticks, especially as the works' little city slickers stumble through the elements in woefully inadequate clothing and inappropriate gear. Far from an idealized tourist spot made prettier by a transfixing white swirl, these snow globes are souvenirs from the depths of Martin, Muñoz, and a Manhattanite's psyche; the flip side of utopia is the middle of freaking nowhere.

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