

## ELEGY IN WHITE

### Carlo McCormick

Inasmuch as the home, for most of us, exists as a physical fact, it also occupies a psychological space in our imaginations. And by the same emotional construction, we regard all that is not the home as another kind of domain within our minds. If the former dysfunctional family dynamics aside constitutes an idealized site of tranquility, safety, comfort, familiarity, and all the other cherished attributes of the domestic, then the latter is not specific, but is defined in contrasting opposition. Your home is a dot on some map, but when you are not at home, wherever you are is also a place in and of itself. Call it out, or away; the designation doesn't determine the location. It is the absence of the material and social condition of being at home. To be not home is to occupy an ontological other space.

It is this other realm that is conjured in the snow globe sculpture photographs of Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz: an exterior manifestation of the internal topographies of adventure, alienation, dread, discovery, and destiny that we, from our proverbial spot on the couch, have come to view as the greater world.

Images of what lies beyond the window of the home front, contained within that precious, rarefied sphere of the snow globe's kitsch picturesque, Martin and Muñoz's "Travelers" are sly inversions of dimensionality. This is a skewed perception: not the typical aesthetic voyeurism of outside-looking-in; rather, here we are outside-looking-in-at-being-outside-we are outside this outside space that is all about drawing us in. The lure of these snow globes is their pure fantasy, so seductive that they are currently invoking a frenzy among collectors along the lines of a fetish obsession. Illusion and escapism become, in Martin and Muñoz's hands, a picaresque adventure in the world at large one that is nonetheless plainly drawn from an internal reverie. The outdoors that we see here is particular to the indoor and in- one's-head way of imagining.

Martin and Muñoz recently moved from New York City to the Pennsylvania Highlands, and these isolated, barren winter scapes are certainly like what the artists' gazes might fall upon from their rural vantage in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The icy palette, the gray, leafless trees like jutting pikes, the land obfuscated by the blanket of snow, all might be observed from their studio window while they are making these pieces. But the work is perhaps more subtly informed by the alienation, paranoia, and dread of the artists' former urban environs. The less overt, deeply personal content of the Martin, and Muñoz snowglobe project is not the place itself so much as the placelessness. "Travelers" offers a visual metaphor for the journey of two artists uprooted from a stable home life and set upon the road of itinerant exploration. Dividing their time between the United States and Muñoz's native Spain, these artists' home is not a final destination; home for them is a site of interim exile. Rather than a sanctuary, it is a point of social remove, a state of being away, an orbit whose mobility offers no illusion of permanence, only an arc of perpetuated distance. And this disconnect-in-motion -as Martin recently put it: "When people stay in the same place for too long they lose their walking shoes- has its formal echo in the vaulted arc of the snowglobe that is so carefully delineated in these photographs: insubstantial yet absolute, the epiphenomenon of those metaphysical spheres mapped in Copernicus's cosmos and Dante's ascending Paradiso.

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Morbid: the perversely nasty black humor of those hunted, rounded up, or murdered in these lonely woods of terminal escape. Or still more haunting: the enigmatic and cinematic scenes of those seemingly lost people traversing an inhospitably frigid nature in white-out. The open-ended narratives of "Travelers" suggest a more epic story of futile struggle, loss, and consequence, in frozen time. Adding up to a kind of film noir rendered in white, the specifics bleached out, these are fragments that both provoke us to fill in our own plot and function as talismanic snaps: there but for the grace of God go I, an intonation of silent suffering as a meditation on temporal frailty, on mortality. Taken of course from the kitsch of tourist memorabilia (yes, we were there, and we have this cheap three-dimensional rendering of what we witnessed as a plastic experience to prove it), the effect of stillness here is a transformative pleasure in the transitory. These are memento mori.

Related to the vulgar knickknack of today's snow globes, which were first introduced in the United States on a large scale as novelty items in the 1940s, these works are also descendents of *tue boules de neige* popular in 19th century France. But Martin and Muñoz resist the easy amusements of camp. The artists are not celebrating the saccharine and sentimental language of the snow globe so much as they are using it as a benign sugarcoating for the more bitter and serious content within. This is a different kind of pop, not the promotion of low-brow through a transgressive effacement of fine art but the articulation of the mundane within a poetics of the sublime. It is a re-positing of the quotidian through *tue* consciousness of a disturbed dreamscape.

The magic here is very much about the premonitory, a way of tapping into the globe as a kind of fortune-teller's crystal ball. The cryptic misfortunes, the intimations of mortality, the panoramic tableaux of misadventure, bad luck, and wrong decisions, are all ultimately a medium of futurity -not a story in the past tense so much as a parable of mock-moralistic consequences, a fatalism that is not certain, but is, rather, based on the lurking demonology of uncertainty. These pictures, redolent of destiny and memory at once, preserve that precious quotient, both fleeting and eternal, wherein life's journey, knowledge, and the fall from grace must walk together. Here it is impossibly fixed, frozen in time, an arctic wonder that, like the snow-globe slipping from the dying grasp of Orson Welles's Charles Foster Kane, suspends one last breath in space before it goes crashing, as all things must do, into oblivion.

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