

# OTHERWORLDLY OPTICAL DELUSIONS AND SMALL REALITIES



TEACHER RESOURCE PACKET

Image: Lori Nix, *Violin Repair Shop (detail)*, 2011.  
Courtesy of the Artist; ClampArt Gallery, New York



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## WELCOME

Dear Educator,

We are delighted that you have scheduled a visit to *Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities*. When you and your students visit the Museum of Arts and Design, you will be given an informative tour of the exhibition with a museum educator, followed by an inspiring hands-on project, which students can then take home with them. To make your museum experience more enriching and meaningful, we strongly encourage you to use this packet as a resource, and work with your students in the classroom before and after your museum visit.

This packet includes topics for discussion and activities intended to introduce the key themes and concepts of the exhibition. Writing, storytelling and art projects have been suggested so that you can explore ideas from the exhibition in ways that relate directly to your students' lives and experiences.

Please feel free to adapt and build on these materials and to use this packet in any way that you wish.

We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Museum of Arts and Design.

Sincerely,

Cathleen Lewis  
Manager of School, Youth and Family Programs  
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Lessons written by Petra Pankow, Museum Educator in collaboration with the Museum of Arts and Design Education Department.



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**THE MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN** has been functioning as an international resource center for craft, arts and design since 1956. Through its collections, exhibitions, programs and publications, the Museum serves as a forum for critical debate concerning the nature of craftsmanship and the engagement with the process that links materials, techniques, forms, patterns and concepts in all creative work.

## HOW DOES A MUSEUM WORK?

**Administration:** The team led by the Director of the Museum determines the programs, plans and philosophy of the Museum. It also raises funds to realize the Museum's goals and works directly with the Board of Governors, which guides the Museum's functions.

**Curatorial:** This is the team, led by the Chief Curator, that works together to decide which exhibits will be shown, how they will look, what artwork is to be included, and how they are to be interpreted.

**Registration:** Led by the Registrar, this team arranges the safe handling of art to be placed in an exhibition and maintains the permanent collections acquired by a museum.

**Education:** This team provides the interactive interpretation of the objects on view through the educational programs designed for children, adults and families who visit the Museum.

**Facility Maintenance:** This is the team that allows the day-to-day operations of a museum to continue: from the lights being turned on, to the safety of all who enter the building.

**Security Guards:** This is the team most often seen in a museum, because its main task is to protect the artwork from harm so that in the future people will be able to see the same objects as seen in a museum today. They also are helpful to visitors who have a variety of questions.

Museums are places where we can learn about the past, present, and future of the world around us. The diversity of knowledge is endless when the habit of museum exploration is formed at an early age. We look forward to welcoming your group into our galleries.





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## HELPFUL HINTS FOR YOUR MUSEUM VISIT

*"I try, when I go to museums, to do two things. One, to appreciate what I'm looking at, just to see it, but then to isolate a few pieces that I really look at in detail. I study and I draw not with any purpose in mind. I mean, I don't go looking for specific things. I just try to be open-minded and keep my eyes open. It's interesting that every time I go back to the same place, I see something different."* Arline M. Fisch (1931- ) Brooklyn, New York

While visiting the exhibition try to use all your senses. Notice the way the pieces are displayed. *Are there any specific groupings of pieces you can distinguish? If you enjoy looking at one piece more than others can you explain why?*

Here are some questions and suggestions to think about as you move around the exhibition:

### *I. What can be objectively observed?*

- a. *What is the physical description? Measurement, weight, materials used, articulation of materials...*
- b. *What iconography, if any, is used? Designs, words, diagrams...*
- c. *What are the object's formal design characteristics? Lines, shapes, forms, color, texture...*

### *II. What would it be like to interact with this piece of art? How would you handle, lift, display it?*

- a. *How would the piece of art feel, move, and sound?*
- b. *What does the piece do? Does the piece have a function? How would the figures move if they were alive?*
- c. *What is our emotional response to this beaded figure? Fear, joy, indifference, curiosity, revulsion, excitement...*

### *III. What is in the mind of the artist? What are the viewers thinking and feeling? Use creative imagining and free association.*

- a. Review all of the above information and consider what was going on in the world when the work was produced to develop possible interpretations of the piece. (Theories and hypotheses)
- b. *Do the figures tell a story? Does the piece have underlying political or social meaning? (Understanding and visual thinking)*
- c. Develop a program to investigate the questions posed by the material evidence. (Program of research)

### *IV. Brainstorm about an event or situation that is happening in your life at the moment which you could animate into one scene which could be made into your very own figurative sculpture. (Design themes)*



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**OTHERWORLDLY:  
OPTICAL DELUSIONS AND SMALL REALITIES**

**JUNE 7 – SEPTEMBER 18, 2011**



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## INTRODUCTION

*Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities* brings together 37 international artists who specialize in handcrafting intricately designed and meticulously assembled miniature worlds out of often unorthodox, sometimes repurposed materials. Dioramas, in the form of 3-dimensional interiors, landscapes, cityscapes, and dreamscapes, are at the center of the practice of each featured artist. However, their respective manifestations in the exhibition range widely, from snow globes and peep shows, to paintings and sculptures to videos and photography.

Painstakingly fabricated by hand, the works featured in *Otherworldly* seduce the viewer into the belief that what they are seeing is real. On the other hand, the sometimes subtle, sometimes more demonstrative artifice of these works calls into question the very notions of “reality” and “objective truth” and reveals the constructed nature of our contemporary experience and the resulting narratives.

*Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities* is organized around four themes that provide a context for the works, and offer the viewer a number of storylines by which to navigate the exhibition:

- "Unnatural Nature" features work by artists that recreate natural environments or propose alternative visions of landscape and nature.
- "Apocalyptic Archaeology" features works that reveal the darker side of the post-industrial landscape and charts the slow erosion of urban environments.
- "Dreams and Memories" includes works that capture and convey states of psychological angst, often in the form of dark and mysterious open-ended narratives.
- "Voyeur/Provocateur" includes subversively witty scenes-satirical commentaries on art, culture, and politics.

## HISTORY:

With roots in the **funerary** models of ancient Egypt and medieval **nativity scenes**, and **magic lantern** presentations (i.e. early slide shows), the **diorama** was developed in direct response to a strong interest in the phenomenon of vision and human perception that pervaded Europe during the **Age of Enlightenment**. First conceived in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, the **diorama** preceded his later invention of photography, in



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1839. Trained as a painter, Daguerre originally created hyperrealistic **optical illusions** of landscapes, historical city views and noteworthy events, which were displayed in 360-degree cylindrical settings and enjoyed instant success as popular entertainment spectacles. Visual effects, created with the help of lighting, smoke, and movement animated the scenes in a way that allowed spectators to completely immerse themselves into these **optical illusions**, whether on the grand scale of a panorama or the minuscule one of a diorama. As science and technology progressed, so did the spectacles in the form of **peepshows**, **zoetropes**, and, eventually, film. In becoming more sophisticated, these technologies and methods also grew more nuanced and more persuasive in convincing viewers to suspend disbelief and immerse themselves, albeit temporarily, into these constructed worlds, places and realities. The simultaneous consciousness, however, that our perceptions are being manipulated by artificially created images of spaces and situations persists in our digital age.

## THEMES FOR DISCUSSION:

Created in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the works featured in *Otherworldly* touch on some of the pervading themes of contemporary art. Reflections on the nature of perception and representation, of direct and mediated experience call into question traditional notions of truth and reality. Below are some themes that might serve as the basis of classroom discussion:

**History and Memory:** What is the relationship between the collective and personal mechanisms by which we remember and record past events? To what extent do objects become encoded with historical meaning on both an individual and communal scale? How does our vantage point from an ever-shifting present affect our understanding of the past? How does it affect our outlook into the future? And what does this mean for our belief in a commonly shared objective reality?

**Dreams and Fantasies:** Many of the meticulously crafted alternative worlds in *Otherworldly* seem to erode the boundaries between the real and the fantastical and offer viewers literal glimpses into scenes that seem to originate in dreams rather than real life.

**Ruins and Nostalgia:** By presenting abandoned places marked by the passing of time, some of the works in the exhibition encourage us to become archeologists who excavate stories, digging into layers after layers of meaning.





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**Constructed Realities:** The question of what is real pervades almost every single work in the exhibition. The obvious artifice of these miniature realities highlights the ways in which “reality” is constructed. On one hand it is influenced by the highly mediated visual culture of our time; but it is also formed in our own consciousness, in which every new impression exists only in the context of our previous experience.

**Absence and Presence:** Many of the works in the exhibition are empty places, without any human presence. As such, they not only demonstrate the eerie ways in which the objects that surround us are charged with meanings so powerful that they take on a life of their own. They also invite the viewer to project themselves into the spaces created by the artist and/or to decipher the traces left by imaginary inhibitors and recreate their stories.

**Unnatural Nature:** Photographs and dioramas depicting natural phenomena, from billowing clouds to fields of flowers, abound in *Otherworldly* and illustrate the craftsmanship by which artists manage to create near-perfect imitations of the natural world. Awe striking in both scale and detail, they pull the viewer into the illusionistic alternative reality they create. Simultaneously, these works can be read as an apt commentary on how our experience of nature is often highly mediated and how harmful to our natural environment this estrangement continues to be.

**The Role of the Viewer in Contemporary Art:** While many of the works point to the role of the artists as creators, directors and manipulators, these dioramas also endow the viewers with a sense of authority, as it is the gaze of the beholder that truly brings them to life and charges them with personal meaning and emotion. By thematizing perception in this way, they pose more general questions about the ways in which we construct stories and that narratives are always filtered through individual perspective.



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Alan Wolfson  
*Canal St. Cross-Section*, 2009-2010  
Mixed media  
27 x 23 1/2 x 19 1/2 in. (68.6 x 59.7 x 49.5 cm)  
Private Collection, England

"To me, the most important experience you take away from my work is the story. I'm providing you with clues to a **narrative**, telling a story with minute details. There are no people in these scenes, but so much of what *is* there are the things people have left behind — the graffiti, the trash, tips on a counter, a half-eaten hamburger."<sup>1</sup>

Alan Wolfson

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.alanwolfson.net/qanda.htm>



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## LOOK:

- Look closely at this work. What different components do you see?
- What place or places are depicted in the artwork?
- “Reading” the image from top to bottom, list as many different details as possible.
- What strategy does the artist use to help us shift perspective between the different levels?
- What sorts of materials might the artist have used to create the many parts that make up this work?
- How did he manipulate his materials in order to create this scene?
- Why do you think the bottom section of the sculpture is surrounded by a black box while the top part is not?
- What role do words play in this work?
- How would you describe the mood or atmosphere? Does the mood or atmosphere change according to the different levels of the sculpture?

## THINK ABOUT:

This **diorama** was created by artist Alan Wolfson and depicts a cross-section of the Canal St. Subway station in New York City. Wolfson grew up in New York and remembers taking the subway from an early age. While his sculptures are inspired by real places, they combine documentation and memory.

- Knowing New York and its subway system, in what way is the depicted scene similar to or different from the city you are familiar with? Share some specific examples as well as general observations.
- Why do you think Wolfson didn’t include any people in his sculpture?

## DISCUSS:

“Canal St. Cross-Section” is devoid of any human presence. Nevertheless, according to the artist, there is a strong **narrative** aspect to his work. Lacking protagonists, the story unfolds in our imagination through the various objects that make up the scene.

- Imagine a character anywhere in the **diorama** and describe him/her to your classmates. What is this person wearing, carrying, doing? Locate in which part of the **diorama** the imagined action occurs? Go around the classroom until you have assembled a whole cast of imagined characters and **narratives**.



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## DO: CLUES AND TRACES

**Materials:** Carboard boxes, cardboard, paper in different colors, markers, mixed media materials like wood, wire, cloth, thread, etc.; project glue

**Process:** Think of a story featuring one or several persons at a specific location (inside or outside, public or private) and imagine what the scene would look like right after they left it. What traces did they leave? How can we tell they were there and get an idea of what they were doing? Using the cardboard box as the abandoned stage for your story, reconstruct this scene. Make sure you leave a number of clues for your classmates that will allow them to solve the riddle of your story.

## EXTENSION:

Peter Feigenbaum is another artist in *Otherworldly* who recreates New York City street scenes in minute detail. However, as opposed to Wolfson, he photographs his models and exhibits the prints, not the **dioramas** themselves. Compare and contrast the work of the two artists. In what way does the medium (sculpture vs. photography) influence the meaning of each?



Peter Feigenbaum  
187.1, 2010  
C-print  
16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist



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Lori Nix  
*Beauty Shop*, 2010  
C-print  
40 x 52 in. (101.6 x 132.1 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist; ClampArt Gallery, New York

“The photographs I create do not reflect the tradition of grand idyllic landscapes. I am more interested in the forces of **entropy**, the ruins left in the wake of humans. My scenes are usually devoid of people, and this emptiness becomes an important element. The impact of civilization is shown by what remains in the absence of humans. Walls are deteriorating, ceilings are caving in, the structures barely stand and Mother Nature is slowly taking them over.”<sup>2</sup>

Lori Nix

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<sup>2</sup> *Otherwordly*, p. 183.





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## LOOK:

- Describe the scene in the image?
- What colors do you notice?
- What sorts of objects do you see and how are they arranged?
- What do the objects in the scene reveal about the setting?
- What sort of place is depicted in the image?
- What happened here?
- What do you think the colors were like when it was new?
- What title would you give this image?

## THINK ABOUT:

Lori Nix's photos, which are based on models she builds herself, are reminiscent of documentary photographs. Like pictures a journalist or police reporter might take of an abandoned location or crime scene, they function as evidence for an imagined event.

- What story does "Beauty Shop" (2010) evoke? What is the imagined event that took place here?
- The place in "Beauty Shop" is marked by time. In what way do nature and civilization compete in the work?
- Do you see any signs of nature taking over?
- Imagine another 10 years passing. How would the scene change?
- Now imagine what the place would look like in 100 years.

## DISCUSS:

Interested in ruins, urban decay and the relationship between nature and civilization, Lori Nix could probably find subjects that resemble the scenes in her photographs and document them firsthand.

- Why do you think she decides to build her scenarios instead?
- How does the relationship between real and artificial, construction and documentation influence the meaning of her work?





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## DO :

**Materials:** images of ruins or abandoned places. Poster paint, construction paper, fabric scissors, glue

**Process:** Research photographs of ruined or abandoned places, then print out the one image you find most evocative. Imagine how the natural environment would encroach on the spaces in your photograph. Using poster paint, construction paper and/or fabric, add these natural elements and create a collage in the process.



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Joe Fig

*Jackson Pollock*, 2008

Wood, polymer clay, canvas, pencil, oil/acrylic paint, metal, plastic

8 x 21 x 17 1/2 in. (20.3 x 53.3 x 44.5 cm)

Collection of Bush Helzberg

“I usually begin by sculpting the figure. Working with polymer clay I first sculpt the head to capture their likeness and then add the body, sculpting each body part piece by piece. When creating the studio and its environment I use the same materials when possible, just in a miniature (one-inch-to-one-foot) scale. However, such things as paint tubes are sculpted from polymer clay, paintbrushes from plastic tubes, easels are built from wood. The trick is getting the materials to appear in the right scale.”<sup>3</sup>

- Joe Fig

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<sup>3</sup> *Otherworldly*, p. 99.



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## LOOK:

- Give a detailed description of the image.
- What sort of objects do you see?
- Describe the person in the image, including his clothes, facial expression, and body language.
- What is he doing?
- Find as many adjectives as possible to describe the “painting” he is working on.
- How do you think he got the canvas to look the way it does?
- Imitate the painter’s pose. Then bring the scene to life by reenacting some of his movements. What parts of his body does he use to make his painting? How is this different from the way you usually move when drawing or painting?
- How does re-enacting the movements that the artist Jackson Pollock may have made in his studio add to our knowledge of the artist’s (Pollock) intent? Please explain.

## THINK ABOUT:

The image depicts a three-dimensional model created by artist Joe Fig, who explores the ways different painters create their artwork.

- What materials did he use to make this sculpture?
- The sculpture captures one single moment frozen in time, like a photographic snapshot. Why do you think the artist wanted to recreate this particular moment?
- In what way does this one moment include what comes before and after?
- Joe Fig started out as a painter. Can you tell by looking at the model? How?

## DISCUSS:

The image shows the American painter Jackson Pollock, who became famous in the 1940s and 50s as part of a group of artists called the “**Abstract Expressionists**.” Following the traumatic experience of World War II, Pollock and his colleagues tried to come up with a new way to express themselves through painting. Less interested in depicting the world around them, they set out to paint their inner feelings as well as psychological states they felt were universal to all people.

- Sometimes Pollock’s painting style is referred to as “**Action Painting**”. Do you think this is a fitting term? Why or why not?



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Traditionally, artists would stretch a piece of canvas over a wood frame, put it on an easel, and while standing in front of the easel and canvas, paint on it. One of Jackson Pollock's innovations was that he worked directly on the unstretched canvas laid out on the hard surface of the floor. "On the floor, I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and be literally *in* the painting," he once said,

- Pollock liked to listen to music while painting. How do you think this influenced his style? What sort of music do you think would be a good backdrop for Joe Fig's scene? Please explain.
- Curator David McFadden writes that Fig's works "give intimate glimpses into physical spaces that are usually off limits to us, as well as into the thought processes of these creative individuals."<sup>4</sup> In what way does this statement hold true for Joe Fig's "Jackson Pollock"?

## DO :

**Materials:** Clay, paint

**Process:** Research a famous person, fictional or real, living or dead. This could be an artist, actor, musician, politician, or anyone else of interest. Look at some pictures of this person and find out what makes him or her recognizable (think of Charlie Chaplin's hat and cane, John Lennon's glasses, Donald Trump's hairstyle or Superman's cape). Then create a three dimensional sculpture of this person featuring this trademark. Also think about body language and try to capture the essence of your character.

## EXTENSION :

Do an online search for images of "Jackson Pollock in the studio." How are the photographs that come up similar to or different from Joe Fig's sculpture?

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<sup>4</sup> *Otherworldly*, p. 26.





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James Casebere  
*Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #8, 2010*  
Digital chromogenic print  
69  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 86  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (177.2 x 219.7 cm), edition of 5  
Courtesy of the artist; Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

“I hope to draw attention to the artificiality of what we believe is actual and true and how we construct our subjective responses to life.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Steven Vincent, “James Casebere,” *Art & Auction* (November 2003), 39.



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James Casebere

## LOOK:

- Describe the scene in the photograph.
- What natural and architectural features do you see in the image?
- What colors do you notice?
- What season is it? Can you guess the time of the day? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Where might you expect to see a landscape like this?
- Some of the houses in the image look historical. What elements of the work point to contemporary life?
- What is the relationship between nature and civilization in the image?

## THINK ABOUT:

Like many of the works in *Otherworldly*, James Casebere's "Landscape with Houses" is a photograph based on a large-scale **diorama** built by the artist. Inspired by an area of Dutchess County, NY that Casebere happened upon during a trip, the work plays with the idea of what is real and what is fake.

- Do you find the illusion complete or are there any elements of the scene that strike you as staged? Please explain and give examples.
- Why do you think the artist choose to make his scene look less than realistic?

## DISCUSS:

Unlike some of his fellow **diorama** makers, Casebere works on a large scale. Both, his models and the resulting photographs are massive in size. "Landscape with Houses" is about as large as a Queens size bed.

- How does scale play a role in the way we see an artwork? In what way does it shape the relationship between viewer and image?
- In "Landcape with Houses," where do we enter the image? What is our perspective on the scene? How does this influence the meaning of the work?
- In what way does the image strike you as familiar?
- What about it do you find mysterious? Please explain.
- The idyllic small town landscape in the photograph is reminiscent of a train set or toy landscape set up by a playing child. In small groups of 3-4 students, think of a number of dramatic scenes that might happen in the landscape. Write them down and share with the entire class.





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## DO : COUNTRY-LIFE: A ONE-PAGE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Turn the scene of Casebere's landscape into a page from a comic book or graphic novel by inserting a number of papercut figures, complete with speech or thought bubbles.

**Materials:** printout of Casebere's "Landscape with Houses" (ideally filling an entire letter size sheet of paper), white paper, colored and lead pencils, glue sticks.

**Process:** Think of a story that might take place in the Casebere's idyllic scenery and design a number of characters that populate the place. Think of what they might wear and what they might be doing, saying, or thinking about. Draw these characters on paper, cut them out and add speech or thought bubbles to reveal their thought or stage miniature dramatic dialogues. Your scenes may range from the everyday to the fantastical to the funny.



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David Lawrey and Jaki Middleton  
*Consolidated Life*, 2010

Timber, paint, aluminum, glass, polyurethane, polymer clay, felt, cardboard, velvet, light-emitting diodes, gatorboard, motor, wire, and electronics

106 5/16 x 47 1/4 x 39 3/8 in. (270 x 120 x 100 cm)

Courtesy of the artists

“Our practice draws inspiration from the themes and aesthetics of popular forms of entertainment, both past and present. We are especially interested in pre-cinematic **optical illusions**, traditional museum displays, and theatrical magic, and the way these practices were used to explore existential questions and supernatural possibilities.”<sup>6</sup>

David Lawrey and Jaki Middleton

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<sup>6</sup> *Otherworldly*, p. 129.



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## LOOK:

- Look closely at this image and describe what you see.
- What colors, shapes, and patterns do you see?
- What sort of objects do you notice? How are they arranged? What is the perspective in the image?
- Describe the place.
- Make a list of words that best describe the atmosphere.
- Not a single person is visible in this work. How would the scene change if we could see one or several human beings in this scene? Why do you think the artists left them out?
- What title would you give this artwork?

## THINK ABOUT:

Australian artist duo David Lawrey and Jaki Middleton created “Consolidated Life” in 2010. Approaching the artwork in the gallery, the viewer is invited to look through a window where the scene presented in the image above reveals itself.

- While the title evokes the name of a life insurance company, it can also be read as a phrase in and of itself. What are some associations that come to mind when you hear that phrase?
- How do the empty rows of desks and chairs relate to the general idea of life insurance?

## DISCUSS:

The actual artwork incorporates sound (the white noise of a humming air duct) as well as a visual effect that makes one centrally placed, empty office chair spin around over and over again. In a statement about their work, David Lawrey and Jaki Middleton say that they are interested in “recurring psychological crises relating to life, death, work, human relationships, and society.”

- How do these themes relate to “Consolidated Life”?
- How do sound and movement underscore the overall impression they set out to create?
- How does the depiction of office life in this work differ from Frank Kunert’s perspective in “Office Nap”?



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## DO:

Write a story about someone who works in the “Consolidated Life” office tower by imagining what happens to him or her during the course of a regular workday. What does this person think about? Whom does he/she encounter?



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Frank Kunert  
*Office Nap*, 2010  
C-Print  
13 3/4 x 15 3/4 in. (35 x 40 cm)  
Framed dimensions: 25 x 25 x 1 3/16 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

“For me, architecture and the interior are a metaphor for the human condition. The conditions under which humans live say a lot about their society, history, development and their dreams and fears as well as how they treat each other. I try to work at these themes with a sense of humor. The building of dioramas for me is a way to get a general idea of the absurdity of life in this world. It is also a way to control the things I can't control in the „real world.“<sup>7</sup> Frank Kunert

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<sup>7</sup> *Otherworldly*, p. 117.



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## LOOK:

- Describe the room pictured in the image.
- What are its architectural features?
- How would you describe the overall color scheme?
- What different types of objects do you see?
- In one word, what sort of room is it?
- Focus on the central piece of furniture and describe everything you notice about it.
- Have you ever seen anything like it? What types of things that you have seen before are combined here?
- What do you think is the function of this object? How could it be used?
- If you were to date this scene, what time period would it be? Why?
- Imagine a person in this room. What would this person look like? Where in the room would the person be and what would he/she do?

## THINK ABOUT:

German artist Frank Kunert is a photographer by training. For his “small worlds,” he crafts **dioramas** from a variety of materials, including found objects that he **repurposes** to become elements of his architectural spaces and interiors. *Otherworldly* features several of Kunert’s photos as well as the **dioramas** they are based on.

- For Kunert, the photographs are the final product of his artistic process. In what way is this important for the way we make sense of the work?
- In what way is looking at a photograph different from looking at a diorama? Please explain how each of these media creates a particular response in the viewer.
- Like many of his works, “Office Nap” (2010) features everyday objects that take on a new life as elements of the worlds he creates. Looking at the image once more, do you notice any examples of found objects that were given a new life in the context of the **diorama**?
- What other materials did the artist use?

## DISCUSS:

Frank Kunert’s work is a commentary on the way we live. His creations employ humor to point out the absurdity in the way we conduct our day-to-day lives.

- What in “Office Nap” strikes you as funny?
- What circumstances of (adult) life does the work comment on?





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- What do you think the overall message of “Office Nap” is?
- Do you think that approaching these issues with a sense of humor is a good way to draw attention to them? Please explain and discuss.

## DO :

**Materials:** cardboard, glue, string, found objects

**Process:** Taking the cradle-desk in “Office Nap” as your inspiration, think of another, similar combination of different kinds of furniture or other objects morphed into one and create a model for such a hybrid object from the materials at hand. What is/are its function/s and how could it be used? Can you think of a name for your fantastical design?

## EXTENSION :

In some ways this work is reminiscent of Andrea Zittel’s multi-purpose constructions. Research her work (<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/zittel/#>) and discuss similarities and differences between the artists.



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Matthew Albanese  
*A New Life #1, 2011*  
Lambda C-Print mounted to Gallery Plexiglass  
53 x 60 in. (134.6 x 152.4 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist

“My work involves the construction of meticulously detailed miniatures using simple household materials and objects. [...] Using a mixture of photographic techniques such as scale, **depth of field**, color balance, and lighting, I am able to drastically alter the appearance of my materials. Each landscape takes months to complete and includes various elements that are not intended to be permanent but will deteriorate over time. I sometimes spend weeks searching for materials specific to the world I am creating. The final piece comes to life when the landscape is viewed through the camera lens.”<sup>8</sup>

Matthew Albanese

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<sup>8</sup> Otherworldly, p. 33.



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## LOOK:

- In one sentence, how would you describe the scene in this image?
- What individual things is your description based on?
- What time of day is it? What time of the year? How can you tell?
- What are some of the natural features you notice in this image?
- Where do you think you could find a landscape like this?
- Have you ever been at a similar place? Where was it? Describe your experience.
- What title would you give this image?

## THINK ABOUT:

Though his landscape photographs look like shots of actual places during a specific time of day and year, Matthew Albanese carefully creates the **dioramas** that are the foundation of his scenes himself. They are not based on actual places or other photographs. Rather, the artist stages the force and beauty of nature through visual effects intended to evoke strong emotions in the viewer.

- What is your emotional reaction to the image? If you could step inside of this image what impact could this environment have on your state of mind?
- What in the photo triggers these feelings?
- Imagine a musical soundtrack for this image. What would it sound like?
- Matthew Albanese entitled this work “New Life.” How does this title relate to the image?

Meticulously crafted, Albanese’s sculptures are made from common household materials. The **diorama** for “A New Life” is made out of dyed ostrich feathers, sewing thread, wood, wire, dyed raffia, chocolate, parchment paper, paint, masking tape, ground coffee, broom & brush bristles, dyed cotton batting, synthetic potting moss, preserved moss, twigs, and cotton.

- Can you guess which parts of the **diorama** are made of which of the materials listed above?
- In what way do these materials change the meaning of the work?
- Do they change the way you look at it? Please explain.

## DISCUSS:

Matthew Albanese’s medium is photography, Think about the nature of photography for a moment.

- Why do people take photographs?
- What do they do with them once they took them?



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- Why are photographs important in our society? Think of public and private situations in which photographs play a role.
- How has the digital age changed the ways we view photography?
- Based on these previous questions, discuss “New Life.” Consider how such issues as truth, memory, documentation, and other ideas that might have come up in your discussion relate to Albanese’s work.

### DO:

Matthew Albanese uses many everyday materials in his artwork, including things you would rather expect to find in a pantry than in an artist’s studio. Working with air-dry clay and wood, leaves, etc., create a three dimensional landscape that captures the expression of a particular place at a particular time of the year.

**Materials:** Air-dry clay and any combination of the following: flour, rice, grains, and/or spices (i.e. turmeric, cloves, ginger, dried herbs); found objects from nature like twigs, leaves, moss, etc.

**Process:**

1. Use the air-dry clay to sculpt a landscape (i.e. a desert, mountain, forest, meadow, swamp, etc.)
2. Think about what season it is and how the climate of the place might have influenced the way it looks, then work on details by coating parts of the landscape with spices, herbs.
3. If cameras are available, take a picture of your landscape. Experiment by zooming in to particular parts of it and by using different lighting and/or camera settings like flash or long/short exposure times.
4. Discuss the individual sculptures and/or photos in class and have students describe the physical features and atmosphere of each place.

### EXTENSION:

In addition to the image above, *Otherworldly* presents the **diorama** it is based on. Moreover, the exhibition includes a second photograph with the same landscape, which features a drastically different atmosphere and weather conditions. How does the addition of these materials change your perspective on the initial photograph and the way you think of Matthew Albanese’s work process?



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Matthew Albanese  
*A New Life #2, 2011*  
Lambda C-print mounted on gallery plexiglass  
53 x 60 in. (134.6 x 152.4 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist



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## GLOSSARY

**ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM:** post-WW II American art movement emphasizing emotional expression through innovative, non-representational, often gestural painting styles.

**ACTION PAINTING:** style of painting in which paint is spontaneously dribbled, splashed or smeared onto the canvas, rather than being carefully. The resulting work often emphasizes the physical act of painting itself.

**DEPTH OF FIELD:** the distance between the nearest and farthest objects in a scene that appear acceptably sharp in a photograph.

**DIORAMA:** a three-dimensional miniature or life-size scene in which figures, stuffed wildlife, or other objects are arranged in a naturalistic setting, often against a painted background.

**ENTROPY:** inevitable and steady deterioration of a system or society.

**MAGIC LANTERN:** a device having an enclosed lamp and a lenslike opening, formerly used for projecting and magnifying images mounted on slides or films.

**NARRATIVE:** a story or the act of telling a story

**NATIVITY SCENE:** a depiction of the birth of Jesus as described in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

**OPTICAL ILLUSION:** An experience of seeming to see something that does not exist or that is other than it appears.

**PEEPSHOW:** an exhibition of pictures or objects viewed through a small hole or magnifying glass.

**REPURPOSE:** reusing an object but changing its original function in the process (e.g. a tea cup is used as a flower pot).

**ZOETROPE:** a 19th-century optical toy consisting of a cylinder with a series of pictures on the inner surface that, when viewed through slits with the cylinder rotating, give an impression of continuous motion.





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## WEBOGRAPHY

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### **JOE FIG**

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<http://www.alanwolfson.net/>

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