

Dream Scenes: *The Lethbridge artist David Hoffos takes centre stage with his impressive national touring show*

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Canadian Art - Spring 2009

Most of us have had a dream about a house at one time or another, even a recurring house dream, but here is the difference between a wizard illusionist like Hoffos and the rest of us. His dream has grown into a remarkable, major work of art.

The multimedia installation was completed in 2008. Over the previous five years, the artist, who is based in Lethbridge, showed the work in phases (five in all) at TrépanierBaer Gallery in Calgary. Seen together, the phases of the installation generate a powerful resonance and coherence that was promised by, but still not altogether expected from, the partial views. In its final form the work speaks to so many things: it provides a fuller and richer experience than one might have imagined. Hoffos, of course, had all these things in his head all along.

Scenes from the House Dream debuted as a completed work at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge last fall in an exhibition organized by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. It will begin a national tour at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa later in 2009. The installation comprises 16 scenes presented as miniature models and four uncanny life-size projections of human figures that occupy the same darkened space as the spectator. This space is a kind of corridor with forks and turns: its walls are lined with framed openings that give onto the colourful, illuminated diorama-like scenes. Each scene might be seen as the representation of a dream vision, while Scenes as a whole can be understood as a metaphor for the construction of a dream world.

Yet if dreams have been this project's fuel, Hoffos's nocturnal visions have been delivered within the framework of movies, TV and the Internet—and our experiences of these pervasive visual technologies. The Scenes of the title is a reference to these media, and the dioramas themselves are like miniaturized movies on TV or computer scale, except that the ethereal images of the moving figures they contain are projected as phantasms of light into concrete, fully appointed miniature sets.

Mind you, the sequence of scenes does not unfold as a narrative. Unlike in a narrative film, there is no story with a beginning, middle and end. Scenes from the House Dream is a series of vivid, discontinuous images that are full of cinematic references, devices and tricks, and have their own discrete soundtracks. The relationships among the scenes are like the connections between what the Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein called the “cells” of a montage.

Here and there, a spectator searching for a narrative (and encouraged to do so by the work's references to recognizable film genres) might make an imaginative leap between two scenes in an attempt to construct a story. Most often, though, the scenes—or to use another cinematic term, the shots—are related more by contiguity, their associations with dreams and Hoffos's illusions.

Hoffos has built this complex work largely around two basic kinds of illusions, both of which he has adapted from archaic forebears: the miniature model or diorama, often set into a mirror box to give a scene the appearance of vastness, and the ghost video effect, for which moving figures are projected into the models. The latter are images on videotapes that play on TV monitors placed

on stands located in the spectator's space, outside and in front of the glazed models. The moving figures are reflected into the models via small panes of glass.

Hoffos's installations are very low-tech, and how they work is not concealed. The mechanics are out in the open and they are fairly easy to figure out. The point is that even though you can see how the illusion is made, it still has the power to captivate the spectator and draw her into Hoffos's dream world. There, the house is a metaphor for the self, and movies and dreams are analogous.

As windows into the unconscious mind, the scenes develop a poetics of the dream or the dreamer rather than the story of a dream. They take place at night, when the normal world of the everyday is displaced by the fears, anxieties, loneliness, depression and mysteries that arise and take hold as darkness falls. Here are a few notes on five scenes that set the stage for the whole.

In the language of film, *Circle Street* (2003) is an establishing shot. In classical cinema, this is often a long shot that describes the environment in which a scene takes place and the characters' spatial relationship to it. The scene shows a vast panorama of a suburban street that winds up the sides of the hill behind. The darkness is illuminated by streetlights and by fireworks that explode, brightly and audibly, in the black sky overhead. Down below on the tree-lined street, a boy walks past. A skateboarder rolls by in the opposite direction. A young man cycles past.

Nothing else moves about, adding to the disquiet that comes with the observation that the houses on the street, a neat and tidy hyperreality, are all just like their neighbours, mirror images of one another. Setting the model in a mirror box creates the illusion of vast space, and Hoffos also manipulates scale within the scene to exaggerate its sense of perspective. The houses on the street are HO scale, which is 1:87, while the distant background is around 1:300.

Growing up in suburbia—the three male figures in *Circle Street*, who range from childhood to young adulthood, call to mind the passing of time—is a consistent theme in Hoffos's work. In this, he references the films of Steven Spielberg, who brings suburban childhood close to becoming a new genre subject. At the same time, Hoffos also sets his scenes on the edges of town, on the docks, in airports or at the margins of society in a wilderness.

Bachelor's Bluff (2005) takes place on a promontory above a point with a lighthouse at the far end. As waves roll out of the dark ocean into the curve of the beach below, a solitary young man moves around aimlessly on the heights. He throws stones at the sea in the headlights of a 1960 Ford Starliner that he has left running. The only sound is the sighing of the waves that animate the infinite space of the void beyond. Is this tiny isolated figure on the edge of the black beyond a spurned lover, an unhappy teen? Is he angry, anguished, thwarted, misunderstood, a little drunk or desperately lonely?

The scene, for which Hoffos has created a foreground, middle ground and deep space, all in a box, is an illusion of the void in miniature, and quite a feat. He uses mirrors to expand the vista in a different way than in *Circle Street*, so that the lighthouse is not multiplied. That would spoil things by turning a realistic, even familiar scene into science fiction. Masking and lighting make the mirrors disappear, and the lighthouse beacon shining in the spectator's eyes increases the dark of night and the depth of the space. Miraculously, Hoffos created the wave effect by videotaping two crescents of bristol board as he moved them across a piece of black velvet. The addition of a digital effect softened the edges of the whitecaps.

In the scene 65 *Footers* (2003), a lone woman paces the deck of a yacht tied up at a vast, otherwise deserted dock under a high bridge. This scene has overtones of film noir but is more closely related to the horror genre. As the yacht rocks back and forth in the eerily lit waves, the shadowy tentacles of a giant squid appear on the hull.

The faint shape of the squid is discernible beneath the water, yet the whole scene has a subterranean feel that makes it seem almost like a premonition. The presence of the leviathan, which the woman senses and has come on deck to investigate, creates a moment of Hitchcockian suspense from which the scene offers no release.

The video projections in *Scenes from the House Dream* run on loops that vary in length from five or 10 seconds to 10 minutes. Although it is not immediately apparent, the yacht, as well as the figure of the woman and the lapping water, is a video projection. The boat is Hoffos's first projection of something other than a human figure into a model. In his first use of split-channel video, the projections of the woman and the yacht are synchronized. And the water, created with cut paper and a blue light bulb, is his first projection of a water effect. *Bachelor's Bluff* came two years later.

Airport Hotel (2004), which shows a close-up of a woman alone in her hotel room, is seen through an oval-shaped portal rather than a rectangular frame. She paces and smokes cigarettes, stepping out of sight to make a drink and again to change into a Japanese robe. She paces and smokes and then changes back into street clothes. Duke Ellington is playing on the soundtrack. Outside the room's sliding windows, planes taxi past on the tarmac in the cold blue night. The hotel room is furnished in a generic modernist style and bathed in warm orange light. The view into the room is close enough that the spectator can see the woman's pensive face. What is she waiting for?

The portal suggests that she is being spied on through the peephole in the door from the corridor outside. In fact, this is similar to what the spectator, feeling something like a voyeur, is doing while looking at the scene from the installation corridor. The scene sets up the equivalent of a point-of-view shot, making the spectator another character in the fictional space. Like the woman in the fiction, the real-life spectator waits for something to happen with rising expectations.

Airport Hotel is unique in its use of the point-of-view shot, and also in employing two models to create what Hoffos calls a "forced perspective." The room is dollhouse scale, which is 1:12, while the planes and airport buildings beyond it are 1:500 scale. Hoffos created a forced perspective—one of the oldest perceptual tricks in movies—in *Circle Street* and *Bachelor's Bluff* too, but the scale shift is most dramatic in *Airport Hotel*.

The zoom shot of *CP Fail* (2008), one of the most recent of the scenes, reveals a dark forest in which a train can be seen through the trees. Three luminous figures in the window of one of the train cars quickly draw the viewer's eye. The man, woman and child are sharing a can of cold beans. Their conversation is barely audible above the sound of crickets and a faraway train whistle. But there is no track and the train, a ruin that is angled away from the spectator as if it were headed deeper into the trees, has no wheels.

Thin moonlight shows that the forest floor is a bog, with standing water among the trees that seems to stretch on forever. The family is stranded, isolated and alone, going nowhere, small figures in another kind of vastness. Hoffos makes this wilderness of close trees seem not only

vast but claustrophobic, as if there is no escaping it. A site of deep primal fears, the forest is a trap reclaiming a failed civilization.

A scene from a terrifying nightmare, CP Fail comes near the end of Scenes from the House Dream. It is not the very end, though. What the ending really is it would not do to tell, except to say that as in awakening, or in waking dreams, you will know you have been dreaming.