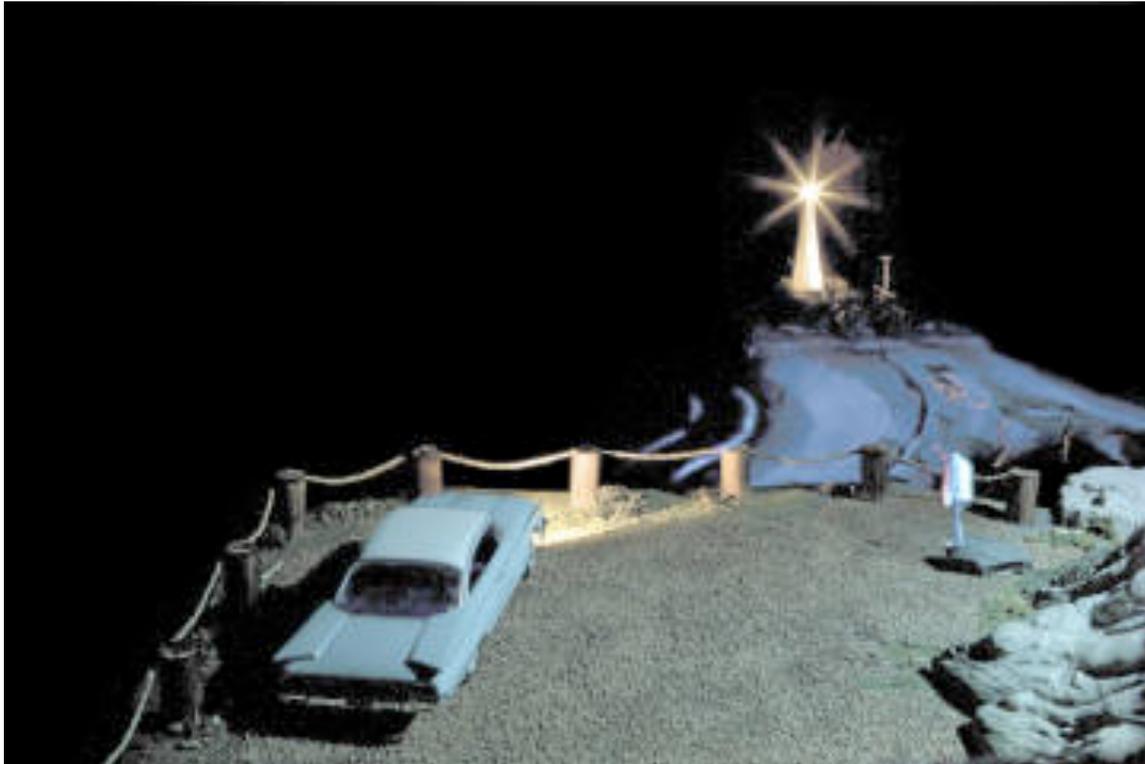


Tiny sets offer views to vast spaces

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Sean Flinn



Bachelor's Bluff, by David Hoffos. The artist explores the connections between physical dwellings and the emotions they inspire.

“People’s identities are tied up in their physical surroundings,” artist David Hoffos says. “If they lose their house, their home and family, or it’s falling apart, identity goes with that.”

Hoffos’s touring exhibition, *Scenes from the House Dream*, now at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax, nods to our times’ fascination with all things property-related, but it delves deeper into the idea of home as a space for the unconscious, exploring the connections between physical dwellings and the emotions they inspire.

Sarah Fillmore, the chief curator of the AGNS, describes the work as an “immersive environment.” Entry and exit points are marked, and from start to finish, the visitor stops at 20 separate but sequential scenes, which Hoffos developed over the five years that he worked on the project. Each installation is created using miniatures, models, video, sound and light. The majority of scenes are small-scale sets, dioramas. Peering through a portal,

the visitor looks into and through these tiny worlds. Paradoxically, these downsized depictions offer views to vast, sometimes monumental, spaces.

“It’s definitely an ecstatic kind of experience,” says Fillmore, who likens it to childhood reverie. “You had these little worlds you imagined people living in.”

As well, along the way, the visitor encounters lone life-size figures, who appear via video projection on plywood cutouts painted black. “I didn’t know how to approach those people,” Fillmore says. In the dark, one approaches all tentatively, especially the brooding drinker in *Absinthe Bar* (2004), who imbibes the psychoactive drink to escape troubles back home. Or can one be sure just by looking?

Hoffos leaves such questions up to his audience. For him, the life-size figures illustrate a theme of the work: that the immaterial crosses into the immaterial, the emotional, or intellectual, into the physical. “When you see the life-size figures that materialize in the viewer’s space of the gallery, it’s an indication that one world infects the other world. The material world doesn’t exist without the immaterial world.”

Since completing and touring the work, it has taken on even greater personal meaning for Hoffos, who was born in Montreal and lives in Lethbridge, Alta. “I’ve struggled with mental-health issues all my life,” he says. “I have Tourette syndrome. I’ve had serious bouts of anxiety and depression,” Hoffos says. “And so when I see these figures alone at night, kind of wondering about the world or trying to figure out their problems, to me it becomes more than a dream about a house, it becomes a statement on the modern condition.”

Tiny people inhabit several of Hoffos’s scaled-down spaces via video monitors playing back actual performers’ movements and gestures. They’re reflected into the milieus using mirrors and panes of glass. In both *Bachelor's Bluff* (2005) and *Airport Hotel* (2004), a solitary figure paces on the edge of wide-open space, the sea and an airfield, respectively. Viewers recognize and relate (some first-hand) to the characters’ palpable preoccupation and dislocation, mindsets that become a second, metaphorical presence in these scenes.

“There’s still stigma and shame around [mental illness]. But I’ve definitely had response from people in the same boat [as] me going through the exhibition and feeling that thing: that feeling that you are alone but you’re also living with it too.

“To me it’s an elegy, almost a tribute to the idea of living with mental illness and getting through it. Because I work. I’m functioning. I have a career. There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” he says.

David Hoffos: *Scenes from the House Dream* continues at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax until July 18.

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