

Scenes from the House Dream: David Hoffos on the almost familiar

David Hoffos creates those places so many of us visit while sleeping, but can't quite locate in wakefulness

Toronto Star

September 10th, 2010

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Circle Street, 2003: A two-channel video, audio and mixed media installation. You've never seen scale models like this before.

A low rumble seeps out from behind black curtains, the vague but familiar register of urban white noise: The rumble of trains, the thrum of freeway traffic, waves lapping a concrete shore. Inside, it's louder but no more distinct

as you plunge into near-blackness. From a corner, a dull glow — a projection of a young girl sitting on the floor — slowly draws your eyes into a dark labyrinth lined with small, framed windows. Inside, a sombre ghost world in miniature unspools: tiny, spectral figures pace small apartments, linger under an overpass or perch on the edge of a cliff, all part of a nocturnal world created entirely by one person.

This is how you enter *Scenes from the House Dream*, a series of miniature dioramas and life-sized cut-outs layered with ethereal projections that David Hoffos began in 2003 and wrapped up, finally, in 2008. *The House Dream*, simply put, is that recurring, nocturnal vision of a place so many of us visit while sleeping, but can't quite locate in wakefulness. Here it's also a portal into the inner workings of Hoffos' mind — which, by his own admission, can be a dark place in more ways than one.

“In principle, the work was to make a sort of narrative about this recurring dream that many people have, about a familiar place that's warm and comforting, but also has these wonderful, undiscovered places,” he says. “But living with the project for as long as I have, so much comes up from underneath — my own lifelong struggle with anxiety, depression, addiction tendencies. When I see these lonely figures pacing around at night, I see the modern condition — this state of mild mental illness that most of us have experienced, I think.”

Hoffos has been in Toronto for the past three weeks, hard at the exacting, labour-intensive process of rebuilding each of the pieces — there are 20 of them, 16 dioramas and four cut-outs — by hand for the huge, holistic installation into which it's evolved (it opened Sept. 10 at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art).

He's not the first to take on the disorienting churn of modernity and how its various promises — lives lived faster, cheaper and more conveniently — came freighted with a corresponding set of disconnects: suburban enclaves, environmental destruction, the creeping sense of estranged isolation. One scene, of a young couple hanging out under an overpass across the street from a row of near-identical tract homes, could be a Jeff Wall photograph rendered in model miniature and cast in darkness, its static characters come to life.

But Hoffos is certainly the first to address it quite like this. His homespun sensibility struck a nerve: In the past two years, *House Dream* has grown from an ongoing project — a small number showed at Gallery TPW here in 2004 — to a much-lauded, monumental body of work now playing on the biggest national stage. The series first showed in Hoffos' home in Lethbridge, Alta., before being picked up this winter by the National Gallery, where it became a major draw. It went to Halifax in the spring before landing here, where it'll stay until the end of the year.

House Dream's handmade, low-fi technique is disarmingly intimate, like the wares of a particularly dark, intense craft fair. Each of the dioramas, including tiny furniture, intensely crowded forests, tiny houses, streets, cars and shrubs, are assembled by hand.

The scenes are animated by precisely positioned tube TVs — remember those? — that place Hoffos' spectral characters into the confining spaces he's made for them. A man wanders anxiously in the darkened chambers of an art gallery, pausing to sit momentarily before rising twitchily and pacing on. Another man kicks back in an armchair next to a picture window crowded with the trunks of thick, dead trees. Three tiny figures gaze worriedly out from a rail cars trapped in a claustrophobically dense forest that seems to be closing in on them.

Hoffos plies a theme popular to post-modern art-making, where utopic visions of an industrial, machine-age hyper-urbanized world instead produce rot, disorientation and estrangement. But Hoffos' dream world takes that critical strain into the realms of the unreal, imbuing it with eerie warmth.

A little cheekiness helps, too. Hoffos plants telltale signposts of his Modernist critique throughout — here a tiny Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chair; there a dollhouse-sized version of Barnett Newman's abstract masterpiece, *Voice of Fire*. More familiar tropes of popular culture are also generously provided.

Hoffos has a keen eye for visual genre, and the works often have a self-consciously Hitchcockian, film-noirish sheen/ A dull grey yacht bobs at an industrial dock that stretches off in every direction (the dioramas have mirrored walls, which create the illusion of endlessness). On deck, a woman cranes her head nervously over the side to see the tentacles of a giant squid creeping up from the deep. In the final scene, near the exit into the light, a decrepit ballroom filled with furniture draped with sheets, reflects into a ballroom of disheveled herringbone hardwood, barely there — an evocation of *The Shining*, among other things.

House Dream, the series, takes in all the psychological freight with which dreaming has been loaded — Jungian archetypes, Freud's theories of the unconscious — yet demands little while offering much. Viewers are free to wander, engaging all the scenes, or only a few, at their leisure. Hoffos would want nothing less.

“The viewer should be in a dominant position,” he says. “Ultimately, they decide how they experience things and how they take them apart, how much they want to be seduced by the illusion.”

My guess is they very much want to be seduced. Hoffos' tiny worlds have a disconcerting familiarity, occupying a unique space between the physical and the other-worldly that's magnetic in its draw. Meanwhile, his own House Dream is fading.

"I don't go there so much anymore," he says, smiling and looking around. "I guess I kind of got it out of my system."



David Hoffos beside one of his eerie installations. His hit show Scene from the House Dream has just opened at MOCCA in Toronto.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR