

PATRICK JACOBS Familiar Terrain

by Charles Schultz

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Déjà vu is a French expression that literally means “already seen.” It describes such a universal phenomenon—the experience of feeling inexplicable familiarity—that the phrase was long ago adapted into English vernacular. The predilection of contemporary artists to draw upon traditional modes of art can function as a catalyst for such sensations. But there has to be an element of the uncanny, otherwise the feeling gives way to mere recognition. The line between the two can be tenuous, though the territories marked out are quite distinct. There is an element of mysticism in a moment of déjà vu that creates an enigmatic quality. To recognize, however, is to successfully employ the memory in an action, the sole purpose of which is to diffuse all aspects of the unknown.

Patrick Jacobs has situated his exhibition, *Familiar Terrain*, on the boundary of mystical experience and logical explanation. Part of this has to do with the pure physicality of Jacobs’s work and the optical illusions it creates. Jacobs builds dioramas in high definition. They are so intricate and precise that even the strands of grass and the wispy white seeds on a dandelion’s head are carefully attended to, which is remarkable considering the deep-space perspective of Jacobs’s landscapes. Each of the dioramas is built into the gallery walls and is viewable through a circular, concave glass lens creating the illusion of incredible depth (like looking through binoculars backwards). The largest of these, “Three Fairy Rings (In Monochrome),” is installed to give a view of the diorama’s structure, yet even with the illusion laid bare the work maintains its occult character.

The subject matter of the dioramas augments the duality inherent in their construction. Jacobs primarily represents fairy rings, which are either patches of



“Three Fairy Rings (In Monochrome).” 2011, Paper, acrylic, extruded styrene, copper acrylic gel medium, hair, steel, acrylite, tin, lighting, BK7 glass; 19-inch exposed lens. Image courtesy the artist and Pierogi. Photo credit: John Berens.

mushrooms or dark grass growing in a circle. The rings (there are no fairies) appear in the foreground of landscapes that suggest the Hudson River valley on an overcast day, locating these mythic occurrences in a familiar, even mundane, setting. Folklore holds that these rings are the consequence of fairies dancing in a circle. As such, the fairy ring is an example of a myth given to explain a natural phenomenon. Science obviously has its own—radically different—perspective on how these rings form. Yet the rings’ cohabitation with symbols of technology, such as power lines, bridges, and paved roads, suggest the coexistence of these mutually opposing forces.

While the lion’s share of the art focuses on the fairy ring motif, two pieces make a decisive departure and broaden the scope of the exhibition as a whole. The first is “Window (View of the Gowanus Heights #2),” a diorama depicting a window view overlooking the Gowanus Canal, complete with apartment buildings in the distance and an arcing Gowanus Expressway. The second is “Where We Are Going From Here,” which the inattentive viewer might easily overlook as it blends almost seamlessly with the gallery itself. For “Where We Are Going From Here,” the artist poured concrete into four quadrants on the gallery floor (the installation completely covers, and essentially becomes, the floor) and while it was still wet, he imprinted the tracks of a meandering pigeon.

Whereas the fairy rings illustrate the human desire to understand and explain natural phenomena, these latter works speak to the human need to control, modify, and generally urbanize nature. “Window” is the only work in which the viewer is situated inside (an apartment) looking out, rather than being in the same space as the natural world. Yet the window looks out on an unnatural site, the canal. All of these things—buildings, bridges, windows—speak to a sense of rational progress that has nonetheless severed the human connection to nature just as science debunked the lovely myth of the fairy dance. The pigeon tracks, scratched into the quadrants of concrete, reverse the equation. Rather than a man-made scar on the face of nature (the Gowanus Canal), they represent a trace of nature on a manufactured ground. Simultaneously the most invasive and yet subtle work in the entire exhibition, “Where We Are Going From Here” suggests that the rigidity of logical order will always be subject to the vagaries of nature.

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