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Patrick Jacobs' Keyhole Pastorals

by Benjamin Sutton | 01/27/2011 4:00 AM |

Marcel Duchamp's infamous installation "[Étant donnés](#)" invites viewers to peer into a crack in an old wooden door, through which they glimpse a nude woman lying spread eagle in a similarly open landscape of hills and streams. The piece invites our gaze then confronts us with a voyeuristic spectacle that, even at the time of its posthumous unveiling in 1966, was a practically pornographic affront to notions of art world propriety—distinctions between nudes and naked women being notoriously contentious throughout art history.

Brooklyn-based sculptor [Patrick Jacobs](#) provokes similar acts of voyeurism, albeit without the scandalous nudes or elaborate mis-en-scene. Upon entering Jacobs' new exhibition [Familiar Terrain](#) (through February 20), regular visitors to Williamsburg gallery Pierogi may first notice that the walls are thicker than usual and the floor slightly raised so that they're easily eye-level with a series of glowing green dots distributed throughout the main gallery. Each spot, from two to 19 inches in diameter, is part telescope and part peephole, revealing a verdant miniature environment embedded behind the wall, visible through a convex lens.

These trompe l'oeil interiors are actually tiny dioramas that Jacobs assembles out of styrene, acrylic, neoprene, hair, paper, polyurethane foam, wood and steel inside small lit capsules. The majority of the sculptures on view portray a view onto a green (or, in one startling piece, monochrome) field bounded by trees on its sides and near the horizon. In some, crop circle-like forms are visible in the foreground. Elsewhere there are mushrooms or dandelions in the grass, and sometimes a river or highway can be glimpsed in the distance, snaking its way through the landscape. One piece, "[Window \(View of the Gowanus Heights #2\)](#)" (2010), adds another frame to the equation, portraying a view out an apartment window onto a river-traversed forest. One could read an environmentalist agenda into these works: that in an era of deforestation, over-exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation, untapped greenery is more taboo than untapped flesh.

The exhibition's most scandalous, Duchampian views, though, are the two sculptures whose backsides we're allowed to glimpse. One of the smaller pieces can be seen from the back in the Pierogi foyer. The largest, "[Three Fairy Rings \(In Monochrome\)](#)" (2011), which occupies the back gallery, is revealed in full from the rear, looking like a flying saucer crash-landed and became lodged into the drywall. In these privileged views we apprehend the dirty secrets behind Jacobs' hermetically sealed illusions, and though the effect isn't quite as disturbing as seeing the amount of distortion involved [in fashion photography](#), it's something of the same order. It also drives at what's so engaging about Jacobs' work: its ability to transport us.

Like the oppressive realist maxim dictating that the frame should act as a window onto the world (rather than, say, a trapdoor into the artist's psyche), his sculptures present us with sufficiently meticulous and realistic miniatures that we can imagine occupying such landscapes. These idealized green spaces take on a nearly magical, fairy-tale quality, like peering into a snow-globe. The preciousness of Jacobs' craft and the semi-secretive presentation of his sculptures make the viewing experience all the more immersive. He offers us blissful escape, even if only for the duration of a surreptitious glance.

(images courtesy Patrick Jacobs, Pierogi)