



Through the Looking Glass

Peering into the hyper-real dreamscapes of diorama master Patrick Jacobs

Story by Alex Hoyt · Feb/March 2018

Staring through a three-inch porthole in the wall of artist Patrick Jacobs's studio, you're transported from industrial Brooklyn into a seemingly vast landscape—an intensely verdant pasture with lichen-covered stones and a brook that shimmers in the sunlight. It's a little bit like what Bob Ross must have been seeing

in his imagination but couldn't quite get down in paint: a lush, intensely detailed, hyper-realistic world that seems to border on the impossible.

But not quite. "I built it all in this steel box," says Jacobs, leading you around the wall to reveal a shoebox-size diorama lit by LEDs. It's through a pair of thick, biconcave lenses, their surfaces curving inward, that he achieves the effect of "pincushion distortion," in which scenes are bent toward their edges, creating an illusion of great depth. The brook, he explains, is merely tinfoil; the blades of grass are cut from tracing paper. "The cheapest, simplest things work best." And what about the dandelions? "Cat hair," says Jacobs. "A friend has a Persian cat—she's really white and sheds by the fistful."



The scene is one of dozens of miniature wonderlands the 46-year-old artist has built into the walls of his studio, art galleries, the houses of collectors, and institutions like the Hudson River Museum, in Yonkers, where in

February he'll install a mammoth diorama that's currently standing in the middle of his warehouse workspace under wraps. "Imagine looking skyward, straight up, and up above your head you can see swirling bowers of branches and trees and foliage and roses," he says, teasing a reveal he's saving for later. "There's no horizon, no perspective, no logic. It's like Fragonard on acid."

Just as transfixing is a bigger work-in-progress looming in the corner of his studio: a life-size sylvan scene rendered in a surreal, bubblegum pink that he's creating for the Armory Show in March at Manhattan's Pier 94. "Pretty nature on steroids," Jacobs calls it. Its centerpiece, he says, will be a tree stump of strange beauty. "When I go through the forest," Jacobs explains, "I relate to stumps, weeds, these sickening, hallucinatory, poisonous mushrooms—nature's misfits and antiheroes. Then I put them in these celestial landscapes. They're unwanted yet exalted."

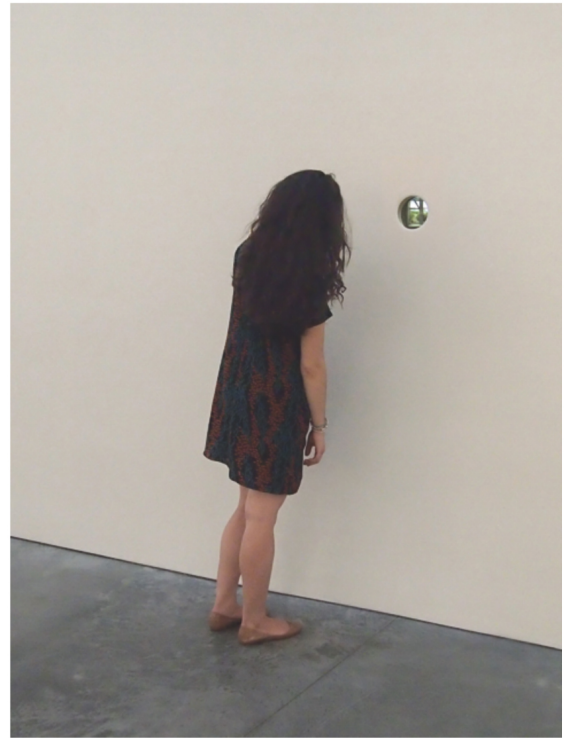


Jacobs's visions first took hold during childhood drives along the highways of rural Georgia, past fields and valleys and glades of trees, and later took on an otherworldly quality when he encountered the miniature landscapes of Northern Renaissance painters like Jan van Eyck, with their uncanny distortions of perspective. But it wasn't until his grad school days at the Art Institute of Chicago that he came up with the idea of immersive vistas writ small. Set into a wall behind a pane of glass in the basement of the school's foreign collection, he found a series of period rooms—Henry VIII's bedroom, the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles—built on a dollhouse scale. “The curtains were just drawn,” he recalls with a bit of reverie.



His current work has a bit less in common with the palace halls of French kings—he's lately been drawing inspiration from images of an empty garden in an old pest-control manual. “You're led to believe something could be lurking there that needs to be eradicated,” he says. “They're so banal, yet loaded with meaning. They're foreboding in a beautiful way.”

And with that, he ushers his visitor over to the massive diorama in the middle of the room and finally offers a peek through its immensely powerful magnifying lens, about two feet in diameter and as thick as a forearm. On the other side is a seemingly boundless world of mesmerizing green, concentric wreaths of vines and flowers swirled like the layers of a wedding cake, garnished with a dainty nest of robin's eggs. Following the spiral toward its radiant center, you could be looking up or down or through a long tunnel, but what's at the other end seems to take on the glow of the afterlife. "This is a window on a world," Jacobs whispers. "It's not exact realism. But there has to be a level of reality. Just enough to convince you and hold you there in wonder."



A curious gallerygoer