

Roland Reiss: The Castle of Perseverance is Elegant and Haunting

Written by Genie Davis on May 22, 2021

On view until May 28 at Diane Rosenstein Gallery, *Roland Reiss: The Castle of Perseverance* is a stunning, immersive collection infused with exquisite detail and sharp wit. From a full-sized recreation of home furnishings to richly detailed miniature figures in dioramas, the posthumous exhibition is absorbing and enchanting.

The artist and educator, who passed in December 2020, was well known for his miniatures, his large-scale paintings, and his devotion to expressing the drama, sorrows, and joys of human life.

Curated by Jorin Bossen, the life-sized sculptural works of *The Castle of Perseverance* central to the exhibition were first shown in 1978. Using unpainted particle board, Reiss creates a thoroughly recognizable environment that invites viewers directly “inside” his work, which represents a sleek American living room from the period in which it was created. There’s a small bar, a stack of books, a coffee cup, ash tray, and randomly placed burger in the living room. There is also a hammer, and what appears to be an artwork being readied for hanging. Elsewhere in the room is a child’s dump truck and a potted plant, an aquarium with fish and decorative seaweed, a fireplace with trophy on the mantel and broom leaning against the side. Predominantly, the “set” is both loving and with its limited palette, austere. Elsewhere, it is more ominous – there is also a gun, which calls into play just how that discarded hammer was actually used as well, and why uneaten food is left scattered about. Entering this space, viewers may feel as if they’ve set foot on a stage or film set, or in a simulacrum of a real-life home, something invented for us to see how only our interaction with this life can bring the vivid color it requires to have practical purpose or an understood storyline. Reiss has created a dream-like memory of daily life that elevates it and freezes it – in its prosaic comfort and potential for disaster – in the literal amber of the golden-brown particle board used to construct the mammoth work.

Elsewhere in the exhibit space, “Bank Vault Door” from Reiss’ 1980 Security Specific, glows

with the gold falseness of securing what we believe valuable. This vault door is made of particleboard and acrylic paint, accentuating the illusions we perpetuate and believe in. His 1962 acrylic and epoxy on canvas work, "Sight Specific," is a dark ruby abstract, its dimensional composition giving us two sets of eyes and amorphous but evocative shapes that resemble a monocled bear and an owl. But they also remind the viewer of a security camera, watching.

Also on view are plexiglass-encased miniatures of the artist's *Morality Plays* and *Adult Fairy Tales*, series of works which spanned a 38-year period of creation. Here small humans and animals are depicted in intimate if open-ended scenes, and we are invited to join their lives, if we could eliminate the problem of our gigantic size. Reiss's most recent works are a part of his *Adult Fairy Tales* series. In 2020 these pieces took what began decades ago as a witty if pointed commentary on the toxicity of workplace interactions and revealed how such workplaces divide those who inhabit them, with plexiglass, digital screen, social distancing. Small columns are inscribed with words such as "Maliciousness" and "Perseverance" in his series *Adult Fairy Tales III*, "Situation I-V." Some of these remind the viewer of being lost in a maze of fun-house mirrors. In older pieces, such as *Adult Fairy Tales: "Language and Myth,"* adults have a "discussion" that looks more like a pleading argument, while a sculptural construct on the floor resembles barbed wire.

Other miniatures appear as detailed film or television sets, such as the monster-creation in "F/X: In Search of Truth," a piece from 1981 that has certainly only become more prescient with time.

Reiss's miniatures *The Morality Plays*: "Repasterium," "Planitarium," and "Literatium" provide the viewer with another depiction of a living room, in a much smaller and more colorful iteration than that of *The Castle of Perseverance*, but equally curious.

From large to minute, each of Reiss's spectacularly narrative works form a wonderful exhibition, a tribute to the artist without being a full retrospective, intelligently curated, and rewarding to see.