



Roland Reiss, *The Castle of Perseverance* (detail), 1978, mixed media, dimensions variable.

Roland Reiss

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

Roland Reiss died at ninety-one in December 2020. His career spanned sixty years, and he was actively making art until the end of his life. Two solo shows in 2018 and one in 2019 featured his recent “unapologetic” (as he deemed them) flower paintings alongside newer iterations of his “small stories,” the boxed Plexiglas dioramas he became known for in the 1970s and ’80s. “Roland Reiss: The Castle of Perseverance” at the Diane Rosenstein Gallery was a presentation of objects made between 1962 and 2020, with a focus on the sculptural. Included were six of the artist’s tableaux from the series “Adult Fairy Tales,” 1983–2020, miniature versions of the American workplace—stages for ambiguous psychological dramas—in vitrines. In five pieces from this body of work, men and women in office attire stand stiffly in proximate yet isolated positions, flanked by vertical posts inscribed with words such as JUSTICE, HOPE, RECTITUDE, AVARICE, DECEIT, and ILLUSION. In the most elaborate construction, *Adult Fairy Tales: Language and Myth*, 1983, a woman watches from the corner of a monochrome-gray office while another woman speaks to a man; elsewhere, a pickaxe leans conspicuously against a desk.

Suggestions of vice, virtue, and violence are threaded through three additional Plexiglas tableaux in the “Morality Plays” series, 1980/2018, and in the large central installation, *The Castle of Perseverance*, 1978, which was originally created for the Orange County Museum of Art in Santa Ana, California, and has been seldom exhibited since. *The Castle’s* title is taken from a fifteenth-century vernacular play in which an everyman struggles between good and evil. But as in all of the works in this vein on display, Reiss’s approach is anti-didactic, open-ended. *The Castle* is a life-size re-creation of a middle-class ’70s living room, rendered in flat golden-brown particleboard. It’s attractive, stylish, uncanny—the sculpture’s color made me think of how things look at night, when illuminated by orange streetlights. Walking through the piece, I noticed an arrangement of incongruous objects carefully “strewn about”: scattered keys; a handsaw laid across the corner of a club chair; a hammer lying on the sofa next to a large slice of layer cake on a plate; a loose hamburger on the sofa’s arm; tubes of paint, a paintbrush, a can of beer, and an unwrapped Popsicle on another chair; a taco on its side on top of a thick book; and, on one barstool, a gun. The objects evoked a formal pleasure and a sense of fun—as though the viewer and Reiss were collaborators on a morbid treasure hunt—that continued into the trio of “Morality Plays” pieces, which replicate a miniaturized rectangular living room, sans people, that you could peer into like a fish tank. Each chamber in the series—respectively subtitled *Repasterium*, *Literatium*, and *Planterium*—is cluttered with tiny props, including books, potted plants, hamburgers, Coke and Budweiser cans, cigarettes, trophies, gold bricks, guns, and doll-size versions of Reiss’s floral paintings, all of which encourage and reward sustained looking from every angle.

For a 1991 catalogue essay, critic Richard Smith stated: “Dissatisfied with the term *symbol* to describe the multitude of objects that began to crowd his work, Reiss began to use the term *clue*, then later shifted to *cue*.” *The Castle* and the “Morality Plays” brought to mind noir fiction, the dollhouse forensics of Frances Glessner Lee, and author Luc Sante’s writing on empty rooms and crime-scene photography. Later, I learned that Reiss began making his dioramas after someone killed a student at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where he was teaching in 1968. Smith recounted: “Every evening [Reiss] made a drawing of the murder scene, as described in the newspapers. Over the days, Reiss noticed that the descriptions and drawings changed. Eventually, he was able to realize, on the same day the police made an arrest, that a custodian had committed the murder.”

Much has been said about the literary qualities of Reiss’s work, and in fact the artist originally wanted to be a writer. In this presentation, one found the most generous and pleasurable kind of narrative—mysterious and participatory, full of possibility and intrigue.

—Kathryn Scanlan