

Promenade through the theatre of illusion: Dioramas in Palais de Tokyo

[Greg DeCuir](#) December 6, 2017

The exhibition *Dioramas*, curated by Claire Garnier, Laurent Le Bon, and Florence Ostende at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, proposes the first extensive cross-media survey of one of the most fascinating theatres of illusion and apparatuses of display – the diorama. The survey covers a period spanning from the beginning of the nineteenth century to today, with works by contemporary artists inspired by this form of viewing.[1] Literally meaning ‘to see through’, the diorama was invented by theatrical set designer Louis Daguerre and panorama painter Charles-Marie Bouton in 1822 as an immense translucent canvas, animated with reflected and refracted light in a controlled timeframe. The diorama constitutes a step in the invention of the optical screen in our contemporary sense, while its illusion of motion and introduction of the temporal dimension allows one to speak of diorama as foreshadowing the moving image of cinema. Jonathan Crary sees the diorama as one among the range of spectacles that contributed to the creation of modern visual culture and the formation of modern audiences, while Stephen Bann inscribes the diorama impulse to realism into ‘the emergence and development of

historical-mindedness in the nineteenth century', including historical novels, historical museums, photography, and taxidermy – the aspects that are taken into consideration in the exhibition.[2]

Since this original theatrical presentation of the translucent painting, the name has been applied to different types of display that Dioramas strives to embrace, exposing family relations among varied spectacles. The exhibition approaches the numerous identities of the diorama as a representational technology, vision machine, epistemic media,[3] and mnemonic apparatus, transmitting memory of religious, historical, and natural events; also phantasmic theatre, whose interplay between reality and imagination invites the viewer to project herself onto a virtual world. Investigating different origins of the diorama, the exhibition takes the viewer along the itinerary from the light spectacles of Daguerre's time, to overlooked media of the habitat diorama with its glass-encased multimedia assemblages of suspended animals, and to recent revisions in installation art that renegotiate and dismantle the diorama's strategies of illusionism. The exhibition is also a promenade through some of the major contradictions and paradoxes hidden in the diorama – between the screen and the box, nature and artifice, projection and reflection, movement and stasis, miniature and gigantic. The exhibition stitches together two concepts of the diorama and two lines of its genealogy swaying between the

luminous veil and open window, the screen medium and plastic art, the flat and moving opera decor without performers,[4] and the three-dimensional stage inhabited by frozen actants. Another totalising impulse behind Dioramas is its blending of a history of the gaze, imaginatively passing through the translucent screen or peering into the depth of the illuminated box, with an exploration of materiality of the diorama medium, and with a story of mimesis and image production. By allowing the ephemeral and the uncanny to gleam through the claim to authenticity and scientific knowledge at the basis of dioramas, the exhibition challenges the very notion of realism, suggesting its multifaceted nature – or, rather, the existence of numerous realisms.



Fig. 1: Exhibition view of Dioramas, Palais de Tokyo, unknown artist, Le Bailly, ca 1740, black cardboard perforated, collaged, coloured lining. Collection Werner Nekes (Mülheim). Photo: Aurélien Mole.

The exhibition invites the viewer on a media-archaeological journey that begins with the inaugural section *The Theatre of the Diorama and the Illusion of Movement* staged inside a dark cave-like gallery and devoted to the beginning of the diorama as a paradigm of the translucent screen. Transporting the viewer to another, virtual and immaterial, space the diorama proposed an imaginative travel to distant geographical or historical locales – this is reflected in a French name for the diorama: *entresort*, a space where the subject enters one world and exits another.[5] The dark gallery displays many relatives of the diorama: light spectacles based on effects of the decomposing, altering, and colouring of light that figure the screen as a site of illumination without projection, like the eighteenth century perforated black cardboard sparkling with a celestial, Catholic, and Grecian imagery when light is placed behind; or *Polyorama Panoptique*, an optical toy originally sold as a small diorama souvenir for domestic use consisting of a portable box-camera with slides held up to the light and viewed through the lens. Along with the box-camera, the visitor can contemplate a set of enchanting miniature painted slides from 1849, in which images of trains, ruins, cities, gardens, and fountains dissolve and shift from sunlit landscapes to nocturnal views marking the passage of time.[6]

Evocations of Daguerre's experiments with the screen technology of the transparency painting (his only piece

exhibited is a glass daguerreotype with Gothic ruins) are dispersed through other artists' displays, especially through contemporary works inserted in different sections of the exhibition to reflect on the diorama's major codes. The absence of Daguerre's own works emerges as a blind spot, around which the exhibition fabricates its own memory of the diorama, while making a self-reflective gesture by transposing the evocation into the only true approach and the instrument to make a contemporary exhibition about the diorama. The closest way we can experience the original diorama is the centrepiece of the dark gallery: Jean Paul Favand's recreation of the diorama's moving image in two light installations from the Musée des Arts Forains: *Naguère Daugerre 1* (2012), a hypnotic night sequence of Vesuvius' eruption on the Bay of Naples with molten lava bursting out like fireworks, and *Naguère Daugerre 3* (2015) with the Brooklyn Bridge slowly appearing above the East River. Both installations use authentic nineteenth century double-sided diorama canvases coming from a fairground theatre. To serve the scenario of the immersive metamorphosis and the impression of movement of time, Favand recreates the effect of Daguerre's technological theatre of light effects by animating the colourful, semi-transparent canvases with illumination from old and new lighting tools such as LED spotlights and torches hidden behind the canvas, supplemented with digital video projectors that cast the gradual eruption of Vesuvius.



Fig. 2: Jean-Paul Favand, Naguère Daguerre I, 2012, view of the canvas illuminated from the front, 19th century painted canvas, luminous installation and scenography, 270 x 410 cm. Photo: Jean Mulatier. Courtesy Jean Paul Favand, Paris.



Fig. 3: Jean-Paul Favand, Naguère Daguerre I, 2012, view of the canvas illuminated from the back, 19th century painted canvas, luminous installation and scenography, 270 x 410 cm. Photo: Jean Mulatier. Courtesy Jean Paul Favand, Paris.

The ephemerality of Daguerre's romantic subjects of ruins, clouds, and atmospheric effects reverberates through a mixed media installation *Panorama 14* (2012-2017) by Belgian visual artist Armand Morin. To convey 'the idea of geological motion, the transformation over time of materials that seem immutable', [7] the artist fabricates a sand storm inside the box with a 3D landscape inspired by the Chelly canyon in Arizona, emerging behind the glass pane as a miniature science fiction film set or a moving sculpture. In his miniaturised sublime, Morin ruminates on the diorama's intimate relation to the history of landscape representation: appearing as a view framed by the dioramic box, this landscape is also a temporal and fleeting territory, wiped out by a sand storm, a ruin, defined and redefined by fluidity of sand representing time itself. Alluding to the phenomena of erosion, displacement, or edification, embedded in the diorama's imagination, the installation captures its fleeting nature, the diorama's being both here and elsewhere simultaneously.



Fig. 4: Armand Morin, Panorama 14, 2013-2017, divers material, 260 x 260 x 300 cm. Photo: Armand Morin. Courtesy of the artist.

The second section, Giving Form to the Mysteries of Faith, traces the diorama's genealogy in religious display – three-dimensional restaging of Biblical scenes and hagiographic narratives that became widespread from the time of the Council of Trent held in the sixteenth century. These proto-dioramas take both the shape of monumental life-size scenes typically placed in Baroque chapels featuring trompe-loeil frescos and small 3D paintings and boxes used as devotional objects. The latter are richly detailed mixed-media artworks, in which the utmost attention was paid to mimetic rendering of facial expressions, bodily attitudes, and textures of skin utilising many materials for this spiritual illusionism: real hair, polychrome wax, lavish textiles, dried vegetables, cut engravings, and mirrors that expand the sense of space including the viewer into the box. This form of artistic production seems to be reserved for women artists such

as Caterina de Julianis (1695-1742), a Neapolitan nun who, specialising in wax modeling, represented with astonishing illusionism two other venerable women of the Christian world: *Maddalena Penitente (The Penitent Magdalene)*, 1717, and *Santa Maria Egiziaca (Mary of Egypt)*, 1717. The most fascinating are the boxes with demonstrations of the daily life inside convents and the quotidian routine of Carmelite nuns either receiving the last rites or praying in their cells. These windows into a world of faith resemble tiny models of theatre settings or doll houses vivified by techniques of Baroque illusionism. Staging encounters between sacred and profane, wondrous and mundane, they embody the immaterial mystery in a tangible display alluding to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation as one of the versions of image production.



Fig. 5: Caterina De Julianis, Santa Maria Maddalena in adorazione della croce, 1717, polychrome wax, painted paper, glass, tempera on paper and other materials, 53,7 x 59 cm. Photo: Artefotografica, Rome. Courtesy Galleria Carlo Virgilio & C, Rome.

The third section, Windows into the World, explores the habitat diorama, [8] a three-dimensional assemblage of lifelike animals, frozen in time and space, meticulously arranged to foster a semblance of reality. A mélange of landscape painting, taxidermy, narrative, macabre, and nostalgia, the habitat diorama represents a form of ecological theatre and 'mausoleums of a vanishing heritage' (Karen Wonders, 1993), aiming to objectively record a fragment of nature at a unique moment by using a visual medium of taxidermy that would achieve a convincing approximation of liveness. The exhibition's

habitat diorama gallery begins with a central figure in early twentieth century natural history and the art of taxidermy, Carl Akeley, who was responsible for the iconic dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Through Akeley, the exhibition links the diorama to the history of representation based on capturing reality in different forms and, while omitting Akeley's version of taxidermy, it concentrates on his other expertise relevant to the habitat diorama: sculpture and film. Akeley's sculptural sketches for his major dioramas – gorilla death mask, gorilla hand cast, and the bust of the old man of Mikeno – neighbours another brightly illuminated 'window into the world' – the film screen running a clip from *Meandering in Africa* (1921-22), a recording of a gorilla sanctuary in Belgian Congo shot with a unique motion picture camera invented by Akeley for mobile and close capturing of the animal in the wild.[9] The art of taxidermy is fully presented in several ornithological vitrines by renown taxidermists Edward Hart and Rowland Ward who convey the illusion of glimpsed reality, a veritable metonymy of nature, by placing preserved animals against painted backdrops and among dried vegetation and soil from their habitat. Commenting on taxidermy, Donna Haraway refers to the limitations of its version of realism that 'does not appear to be a point of view, but appears as a "peephole into the jungle"'. [10]



Fig. 6: Exhibition view of Dioramas, Palais de Tokyo, Walter Potter, Happy Family, ca 1870, wood, glass, paint, paper, preserved animals. Private collection, courtesy of the artist. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

The uncanniest example of the habitat diorama's hermetic world and its anti-naturalistic impulse is offered by the monumental display of an idealised state of peaceful coexistence of various animal species, *Happy Family* (1870), by Victorian taxidermist Walter Potter, whose works oscillate between the accurate preservation of the animal body and a kind of *phantastike techne*, [11] a recognisable yet distorted mimetic version of the natural world. What goes the most against the naturalistic trend is how Potter shapes his animals with specific attitudes, facial expressions, and even with outfits, to anthropomorphise them. [12] The taxidermic mimesis here exceeds imitation of nature, and becomes about fiction, commenting on the ability to tell stories as central to the

strategy of the habitat diorama, as well as evocative of Ernst Jentsch's concept of the uncanny as the unsettling experience of the epistemic uncertainty between real and artificial, living and dead. Taxidermy, a medium terminus of the diorama, sutures the contradiction between the pictorial or theatrical conventions and the status of real objects, while aligning its ecological awareness, the drive toward preservation of life, and pedagogical value with the dreadful and lurid exposé. A peculiar form of image production, taxidermy holds a special place in the history of representation, often resonating with the range of media that share André Bazin's 'mummy complex': sculpture, photography, and cinema. Nevertheless, the diorama's taxidermy is more complicated and macabre than the recording functions of the photographic-based media; free from time and space, from the process of death and decay, suspended in the glass utopia, the artefact of a skilfully executed taxidermy mount is not a trace or imprint, but the literal presence of the referent – the empty animal skin becoming a stuffed membrane. Undoing the diorama's real and fake binary, taxidermy epitomises its inability to distinguish animate from inanimate.



Fig. 7: Richard Barnes, *Man With Buffalo*, 2007, archival inkjet print, 137.16 x 167.64 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Joseph Cornell's *Owl Box* (1945-1946) offers a perfect commentary on the habitat diorama's phantasmatic aspect. In this miniature poetic theatre of nature, Cornell exhibits the diorama's yearning for an escape into the fantastic Neverland through a Surrealist collage of *objet trouvé* that figures nature as a realm of the marvellous. [13] The owl trapped behind a glass pane is not an intricate piece of taxidermy but a cut-out paper figurine that introduces the logic of the archive into the diorama. By bringing incongruous items together in a richly allusive assemblage, Cornell denies fixed narratives or a single meaning, envisioning the box as a meeting place of

several realities in a space that is not befitting them. Cornell's diorama tempts with the illusion of access but is, in fact, a trap, framing and holding the animals as liminal figures existing only in a hallucinatory in-between space. Anselm Kiefer continues the theme of obsolescence of the diorama as a form of display and world of fantasy and nostalgia in his black-and-white landscapes *Family Pictures* (2013-2017), a story taking place in a forest in Germany told via a series of sixteen niches disposed so to alter the chronological order. The artist's fascination with the diorama comes from his recognition of the diorama as "'not-yet", as something that must be considered as an ongoing process', contrary to a painting as something finalised 'in a solid, coagulated state'.^[14] For Kiefer, the Greek etymology of the diorama as translucent (from Greek *di-* 'through' and *orama-* 'that which is seen, a sight') means that the image never unfolds on a single level of the surface, but always refers to something else that is behind, in a space between layers – indeed, our gaze peers through several black scenery layers to find the brain of Heidegger resting on the snow among the forest trees.



Fig. 8: Exhibition view of Dioramas, Palais de Tokyo, Anselm Kiefer, Family Pictures, 2013-2017, metal, glass, lead, plywood, acrylic, emulsion, photography, watercolor on paper, mixed materials. This work is supported by Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac (London, Paris, Salzburg). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

The fourth section, Seeing Through, offers a meta-reflection on dioramas and plays on this desire to look beyond the surface by exhibiting photographs and films all discovering the hidden mechanisms behind those spectacular artificial displays. Staging the diorama's history as a history of a representational technology striving to obscure its own operations, here the exhibition forces the diorama to expose its own artifice, through Richard Barnes' images of backstage activities in natural history museums or Armand Morin's introduction of movement into the static display by filming it in a long tracking shot. Section five, A Brief History of Humankind,

exposes the diorama's historical and anthropological gazes embodied by the ethnographic human diorama that, emerging in the museums of northern Europe, spread through popular, educational, and sensationalised displays of world fairs, universal expositions, department stores, and wax museums.[15] From the macrocosmic embrace of the staged historical events and military battles (Arno Gisinger's *Faux Terrain*, 1997), the exhibition refocuses its gaze to the windows into microcosm, like Charles Matton's boxes conceived as small theatrical models housing pieces of daily life and informed by intimate knowledge of details or personal memories of artists, like *L'atelier de Giacometti* (1987), with objects veiled with the patina of time, or *L'Ombre du Peintre II* (2002), which restages the diorama's play of shadows, reflections, false mirrors, and deceptive semblances.



Fig. 9: Charles Matton, L'Ombre du peintre II, 2002, mixed media, 68 x 59 x 62 cm, private collection. Photo: Tessa Angus / All Visual Arts / Estate Charles Matton. © ADAGP, Paris 2017.

The last section, The Great Hall of Dioramas, marks the concluding step in deconstructing the diorama's illusion by invoking challenges facing the diorama in the twenty-first century hypermodernity, when the apocalyptic land supersedes romantic landscape and the industrialised urban world appears overflowed with objects, images, and

screens. A designated model of reality for contemporary artists, no longer does the diorama need darkness – the exhibition space transforms from the black gallery-cave to the white expanse suited for contemporary explorations of the diorama box, the separating glass, the backdrop, light choreography, and the moving surface. The major areas of the artists' research are the loss by the observer of its privileged position at the centre of the diorama's viewing mechanism and limitations of the dioramic gaze; turned into one direction, from the viewer to the hallucinatory depth, it can slightly scan panoramically but remains within the confines of the box, persisting, in this sense, as the theatrical gaze.

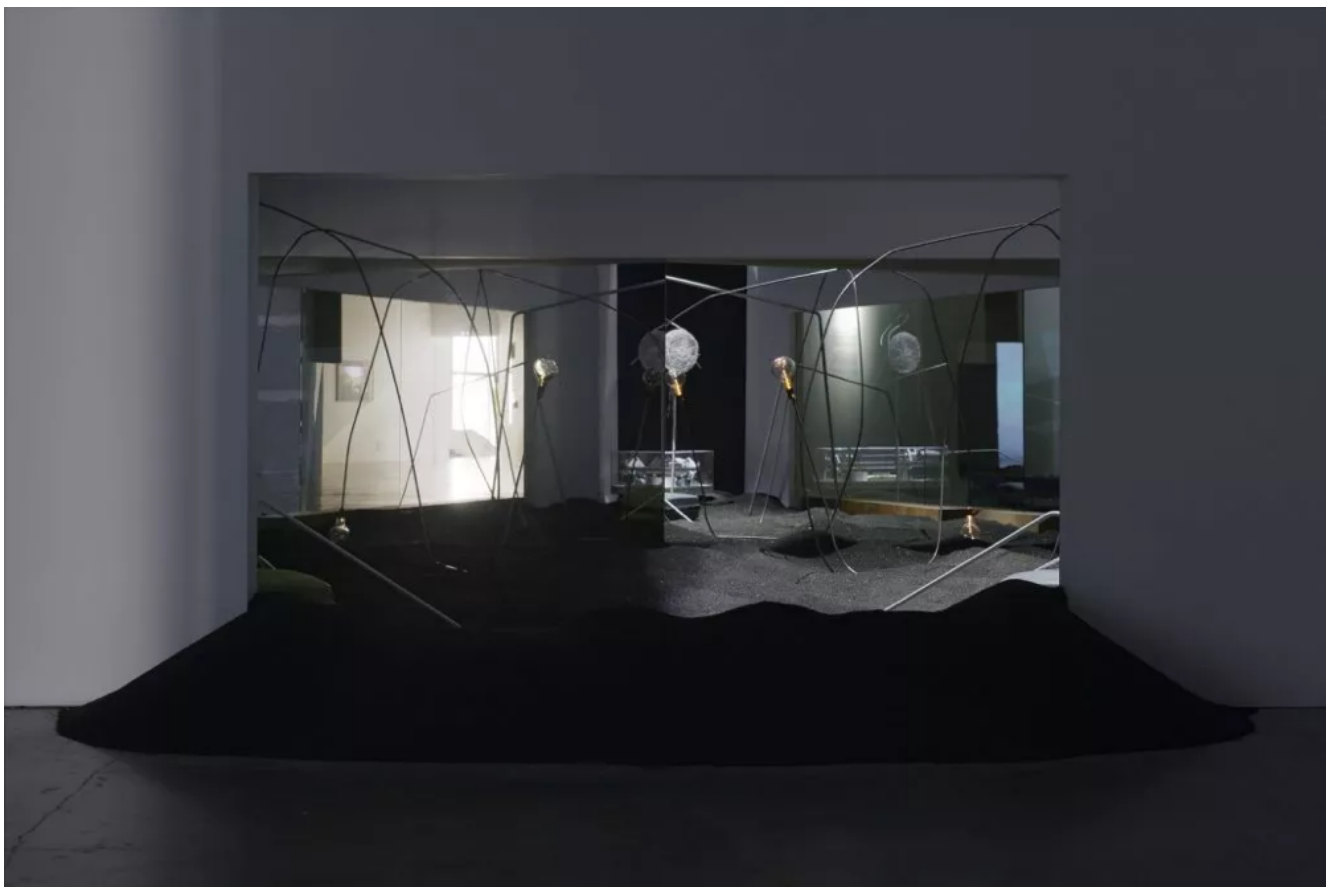


Fig. 10: Exhibition view of Dioramas, Palais de Tokyo, Tatiana Trouvé, Untitled, 2017, mixed media, courtesy of the artist. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

Commissioned for the exhibition, Tatiana Trouvé's mixed

media installation *Sans titre* (2017) deconstructs the diorama's major device: the Cartesian perfect perspective, the single point of view from the outside. For Trouvé, 'the purpose of defining a point of view is not to assign a position to the viewer from which he could have a "good view" on an object or a scene, but it allows to twist the surrounding space, as if it was turning around that object'.^[16] Three large openings surrounding the installation reveal three distinct perspectives onto its central ground: two are made with impenetrable glass panes and the last one is without any barrier, letting the 'inside' spill out, becoming an ambiguous presence in the viewer's space. Redefining the notions of the image and the screen, the exhibition traces how from the translucent screen to the three-dimensional presence the diorama's image, and even its entire apparatus, becomes a sculptural object, as in Richard Baquié's full-scale replica of Marcel Duchamp's enigmatic final work *Étant Donnés: Given* (1991), which allows visitors to walk around, exploring the complex mechanism behind the diorama's apparatus of illusion.^[17]



Fig. 11: Mathieu Mercier, Sans titre (couple d'axolotls), 2012, showcase, neon light, earth, aquarium, water, couple of axolotls, 219,5 x 180 x 330 cm. Exhibition view of Sublimations, Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry – le Crédac. Photo: André Morin / le Crédac. Courtesy of the artist and le Crédac. © ADAGP, Paris 2017.



Fig. 12: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Gorilla*, 1994, Gelatin silver print, 38,7 x 58,8 cm, courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 13: Sammy Baloji, *Hunting & Collecting*, 2015, various dimensions. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès, Paris.

Mathieu Mercier's *Sans titre (coupe d'axolotls)* (2012) redefines the natural history museum glass vitrine by mixing various displays inside his complicated box-within-the-box construction that multiplies representations and mediating filters. Mercier examines the shifting status of objects, their oscillation between the scientific and the

spectacular, on the verge of the monstrous through an exotic curiosity animal: the axolotl or the 'walking fish', swimming in a small aquarium that is a mise-en-abyme of the diorama itself. The amphibian animal with a capacity to metamorphose in its passage from water to earth emerges as a figure of the diorama's aesthetics of complexity and paradox, while simultaneously cancelling its many contradictions, its illusionism and mimesis with the living presence replacing the simulacrum of life.

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[1] The exhibition was held from 14 June to 10 September 2017. An exhibition catalogue in French is published by Flammarion in partnership with Palais de Tokyo. This exhibition is organised in partnership with the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. The exhibition is on view from 6 October 2017 to 21 January 2018 in the Schirn Kunsthalle

Frankfurt. Exhibition curator at Schirn Kunsthalle
Frankfurt: Katharina Dohm.

[2] Crary 1990, pp. 98, 113; Bann 1984.

[3] Othold & Voss 2015.

[4] Bowen 2014.

[5] From the curatorial introduction to the exhibition.

[6] Huhtamo 2007.

[7] From the curatorial notes on the installation.

[8] Wonders 1993.

[9] The camera rapidly became a favorite of documentary filmmakers. Robert Flaherty used two Akeley cameras to shoot *Nanook of the North*. On Akeley and cinema see Alvey 2007.

[10] Haraway 1984.

[11] On *phantastike techne* in Plato's theory of mimesis see Böhme 2013.

[12] On Walter Potter see Henning 2007 and Creaney 2010.

[13] The artist's boxes also invite nostalgia via the association of the miniature world with childhood. On the miniature see Stewart 1984.

[14] Anselm Kiefer notes on the installation in the exhibition catalogue, *DIORAMAS*, p. 276.

[15] On a connection between the museum 'life group' or ethnographic dioramas and early ethnographic film see Griffiths 1996.

[16] From Tatiana Trouvé's notes on the installation.

[17] On Marcel Duchamp's special interest in stereoscopy and an ambivalent attitude towards perspective see Haralambidou 2007.