

The Weather Inside Is Frightful

Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz fit icy, wooded terrains and darkly humorous narratives inside snow globes

BY RACHEL SOMERSTEIN



Walter Martin painstakingly constructs a diorama that will be photographed by his collaborator, Paloma Muñoz.

Tiny figures dance in graveyards, doff their heads in greeting, even stage executions, as if acting out scenes from fairy tales gone awry. But what underscores the absurdity of these tragicomic scenes, conceived by Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz, is their setting: they take place inside snow globes.

Most of the globes, which measure six inches in diameter, show the figures, alone or at the mercy of others, exiled to the frozen landscape in attire that is not usually associated with snowy climes. In *Traveler 132 at Night* (2004) a horse skulks away from a tuxedo-clad man hanging by a noose from a tree. *Traveler 123 at Night* (2004) shows a heavysset man in overalls sitting on a snowy ledge and bouncing a baby on his knee, while another man dangles a toddler over a well. In contrast to the morbid and disturbing scenes, flakes made from bits of silicate drift serenely to the snow-covered ground.

Martin, 53, and Muñoz, 41, work primarily in their three-story home in Dingmans Ferry, Pennsylvania, a small town in the Poconos. But the two also keep a loft in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where a vast desk nestled in a walk-in closet functions as their studio. Hundreds

of figurines and miniature houses cover the desk's surface, along with an assortment of tools. Pliers lie discarded on one side; a magnifying lamp is clamped to a corner.

Muñoz is clad in black, with her dark hair pulled into a sleek ponytail; Martin wears a knit cap pulled low, a beard of short stubble, and a short-sleeved T-shirt over a long-sleeved one. He describes how he and Muñoz alter store-bought figurines—cutting them up, painting them—to fit their story lines. The clawlike branches, leafless trees, and other bare shrubbery in the globes are crafted from plumber's epoxy, a self-hardening plastic that can be rolled out very thin and cut into planks, walls, and doors to simulate wood. To make bulkier topographic features like boulders and crags, the two employ a plastic ceramic called Super Sculpey. Though it can be baked in a conventional oven, Muñoz says, it stinks as it hardens, so they work with the material almost

exclusively in their well-ventilated workshop in Pennsylvania.

The artists met in 1993 when Muñoz traveled to New York from Madrid with her mother, a painter whose work was included in a group exhibition there. The couple moved in together shortly afterward and began working collaboratively the following year, putting their varied backgrounds to use. Martin studied literature as an undergraduate at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, before earning an M.F.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond in 1980. Muñoz studied fine arts at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid for a year but found the curriculum stifling, she says, and left before receiving a degree. Instead, she attended classes in art, geography, history, and German at various institu-

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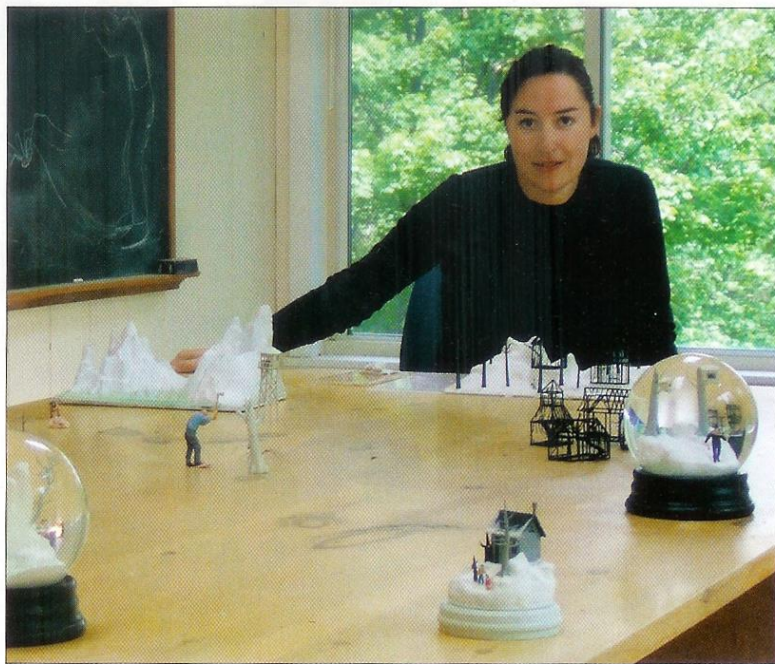
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *Crossing the Watery Glass*, 2005. *Traveler 173*, 2005. *Traveler 156 at Night*, 2005. Muñoz digitally enhances one of her panoramic photographs. *The Orchard at Night*, 2006. *Traveler 170 at Night*, 2005. Muñoz shoots a diorama using a medium-format camera.



tions in Madrid and Salzburg. “I decided to take my education into my own hands,” she says.

Martin and Muñoz draw from art history, referring to Goya and Persian miniatures, dreams, and literary sources ranging from William Blake to Zadie Smith. “Paloma comes up with ideas, I come up with ideas, and we kind of blend them together,” says Martin. “I think individual artists—people who have to work by themselves—are at a disadvantage.” Their surroundings in the Poconos also play a role. “We’re in an area that’s kind of a hideout for people,” says Martin. “You always get the feeling that it’s a good place to go if you’re an ex-con.”

Once they’ve settled on a concept and constructed the miniature sets, they insert them into the globes, a process that they developed through much trial and error. First the artists invert the globe and fill it, like a fishbowl, with a solution of water and alcohol. (They used to add glycerin to the water to slow the fall of the snowflakes, but the combination produced bacteria.) Then they attach a gasket to the underside of the landscape and push it into the glass orb, displacing excess water and pushing out air bubbles. The seam between the lip of the globe and the gasket is then sealed with silicone, a soft glue that can be easily peeled off, allowing them to open the globes at a later time—for restoration purposes, for instance—without destroying them. Their least favorite task is sanding and varnishing



Muñoz in the sunroom of the artists’ studio in a remote area of the Poconos.

on their own. Several of the images feature eerie and dramatic shadows—like those cast by the giant tree and diminutive man in *Facing Silence* (2004)—that result from the tungsten lamps Muñoz uses when she shoots.

The globes and corresponding C-prints from the artists’ “Travelers” series (2000–6) are on view through the 30th of this month in “Escenografías Simuladas: Fondos de la Colección Caja de Burgos” at the Chiesa di Santa Eulalia dei Catalani in Palermo, Italy, and they will also be shown next February in “Comfort Zones” at Oriol Davies Gallery in Wales. Additionally, Martin and Muñoz have a solo exhibition scheduled for next spring at their New York gallery, P.P.O.W., where their globes sell for \$5,000, and the C-prints fetch between \$4,500 and \$10,000. Next summer they will show at MAM Mario Mauroner Contemporary Art in Vienna.

The artists recently began constructing wider sets—solely for the purpose of photographing them—that allow for more complex narratives than the globes. *The Orchard at Night* (2006), a C-print that measures 35 by 72 inches, shows several ramshackle tree houses, each inhabited by different childlike figures that star in their own story lines. For these pieces especially, Martin and Muñoz explain, they take their cue from the pictorial



Martin uses a magnifying lamp to craft the finer details of his diminutive sets.

the three-inch-high wood stands on which the spheres are set. The process is tedious, they say, and toxic.

Once the whole process is complete, Muñoz photographs the globes from dramatic angles against a white or black background. The resulting C-prints—33 by 40 inches, on average—are sometimes shown alongside the globes, sometimes

conventions of Chinese landscape paintings, which use “a lot of negative space as atmosphere,” says Martin. “We go with that in a technical way, working toward that kind of atmospheric fog where there is something but you’re not sure what it is. It’s a counterpoint to the detailed, small figure in this wide expanse.”