



February-March 2008

Islands: The Art of Martin & Muñoz:

An Interview With The Artists:

The Penleaf in Conversation With Martin & Muñoz:

Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz have been collaborating together since 1994. Their work is exhibited internationally and is in many museum collections, including Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, La Caixa in Barcelona, Spain, and the KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland. Their current exhibition, "Islands," runs through February 9th, 2008 at P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York City. Concurrent with this exhibition, the artists also have solo exhibitions at Mario Mauroner Contemporary Art in Vienna, Austria and at Cerealart in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Martin & Muñoz honored *The Penleaf* with an interview:

THE PENLEAF: First off, your work is amazing. The "Islands" panoramas and the "Travelers" snow globe series are magical, sightful, dark and beautiful simultaneously, and forewarning. I love the vision and bridging and connection that are embodied in the pieces individually and together as a whole. When and how did you conceive of the idea for these works, and choose the mediums you are working with for them, to best speak to your thoughts and questions you were seeking to address?

MARTIN& MUÑOZ: We lost our Brooklyn studio to a developer in 2001. In our eight years together, we had moved six times and we were sick of it. Friends of ours had recently bought a farmhouse in Eastern Pennsylvania. Their enthusiasm was infectious. With our eminent eviction from Brooklyn looming, we ended up buying a place in the same area in pretty short order. By March of that same winter, we found ourselves officially relocated. When we bought the place, there was a heavy midwinter layer of snow that brightened and simplified the surroundings in the most idyllic way. We began, however, to get more of a sense of where we had landed as the spring thaw set in and the details of the landscape began to emerge. What had not been apparent to us was that the properties on either side of us were pretty much abandoned. The snow had covered their overgrown yards peppered with the detritus of forgotten summers: discarded lawn chairs, a rotting picnic table, the overturned birdbath, the collapsed stairs to the scenic stream, and a garden folly/romantic nook smashed under a fallen tree. Why hadn't we noticed the slump in the neighbor's roof or the broken window in the back? We saw in the remnants of these earlier projects shades of our own greenhorn enthusiasm overcome by nature, time, and apathy.

The idea for these works was a slow process, a sort of organic response to our new surroundings. Our first snow globes appeared about a year after our move. I think we saw in the format of these commonplace

kitsch objects a latent potential to express and explore aspects of the human condition that we were, and are still, trying to come to terms with. The globe is an encapsulator. When all is said and done it is essentially a novel framing device particularly well suited for the kinds of scenes we imagined. The sense of isolation and helplessness that permeates our narrative scenes is partly due to the intrinsic power of the snow globe format to encapsulate, miniaturize, and distort its subject matter. Also being glass and water, the thing itself is quite fragile. This is especially clear when one is handling it.

MARTIN& MUÑOZ: A palpable sense of our own eminent collapse propels us through the day as it should any sentient mortal. From the general to the particular, it's always something isn't it? The war, the stock market, the environment, plagues, infestations, droughts, potholes, sleeplessness, bad dreams, hair loss, memory loss, impotence, impudence, a death in the family, death of the family, etc. We feel our way around things we don't understand. To imagine a world after the worst has happened somehow relieves some of the anxiety of anticipation and unknowing. Typically our scenes are after the fact. We don't know how this or that scenario unfolded or what line of cause and effect brought us to a given point. Most of the scenes we imagine depend on a history of more than one unexpected turn of events. They imply layers of unknowable evolution. Paradoxically, experience teaches us to be very suspicious of predictions based on historical precedent. I like very much Kurt Vonnegut's summation of the human condition in a word: embarrassment. In that regard, our operating word would probably be "loss."

THE PENLEAF: What has been the response to these bodies of work? Has there been any difference in response in your shows in the United States, versus your shows in Europe?

MARTIN& MUÑOZ: There is a lot of space between the lines in our work. Our scenes suggest very different things to different people, but I can't really discern any categorical distinctions between the way our work is perceived in the United States as opposed to the way it is perceived in Europe. Americans and Europeans are so similar in terms of privilege, affluence and education. At a certain level our cultures blur together. How would a sampling of the contemporary art of our culture be understood by the indigenous pygmies of the Isle of Flowers? That could be an interesting dialogue.

THE PENLEAF: You work on these pieces collaboratively. What are the benefits and strengths of collaborative creation for you two as artists, and what are the challenges of working together?

MARTIN& MUÑOZ: We both worked on our own for a considerable time before we met so we know how that feels. Practically speaking, we brought different strengths to the table allowing us to imagine projects we could never have accomplished on our own. Our differences in age, culture, language, educational emphasis, and gender were all important ingredients. Instead of being obliged to wear many hats badly, as is often the case when flying solo, we were able to hone our strongest assets while allowing any redundancies to atrophy. If there is a downside at the moment, I don't see it. If anything, it would be interesting to expand the collaboration.

THE PENLEAF: What has been something really meaningful or surprising that has come about from your creations and being on the path you are on that never would have happened otherwise?

Also, has there been a particular project or creation in general that has been most meaningful to you personally?

MARTIN& MUÑOZ: Practically speaking, the most meaningful development for us was the transition from our earlier work to this current work. Prior to this body of work, we had done larger-scale sculpture. We did public commissions for the MTA as well as the Public Art Fund in New York. At a certain point though the idea of making large, cumbersome sculptures lost its appeal. We were constantly moving, or rather being moved, and we just couldn't handle the logistical nightmare of decamping a sculpture studio and reconstituting it in yet another tentative situation. The small, portable aspect of the snow globes were an answer to that. Even so, despite all of their appeal, we couldn't help but miss the bravura and presence of our earlier large-scale work. It was only later when we realized the potential through macro photography to capture the scenes and enlarge to the monumental that we felt we had found a project that could satisfy all of our objectives. We felt as if we had found, for a while at least, a way to have our cake and eat it too.

For us, the biggest surprise came at some point after having waded fairly deep into our initial series, "Travelers." We began to realize that this frozen world we had conjured up was a personality in its own right. Masquerading as a backdrop, it was in fact the essential protagonist/character that threaded all of our narratives together. We realized that as we progressed from one scene to the next, we had to respect the way in which this character had already been defined. At the same time, each new scene presented an opportunity to expand the possibilities of this character and further develop and deepen it. The biggest surprise, I suppose, is that we found ourselves in a possession of a vast piece of real estate that could fit quite comfortably in our carry-on.

THE PENLEAF: What is coming next for you in 2008?

MARTIN& MUÑOZ: We are working on a book with the Aperture Foundation which incorporates our two most recent series of photographs, "Travelers" and "Islands," with a text by novelist Jonathan Lethem to be published in the fall. Later on in the fall, we are planning a one-person show in Moriarty Gallery in Madrid. P.P.O.W Gallery in New York will show us at the upcoming New York art fair in March.



*"Traveler CCXXX " 2007.
Image courtesy of the artists and P.P.O.W. Gallery.*