

# Scene Stealers: ‘Dioramas’ Set Many Stages at the Palais de Tokyo

By [Richard Kalina](#) Posted 08/17/17 10:09 am

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Installation view of “Dioramas,” 2017, at Palais de Tokyo, Paris. AURÉLIEN MOLE

For many years we have been seeing installations and groupings of objects and figures either culled from the real world or meticulously fabricated. Rather than being displayed in a straightforward and unambiguous way in a gallery or museum setting, they are often separated from viewers by a framing device, such as a vitrine, a box, or other clear zone of demarcation. This distancing effect, rather like looking at something through the wrong end of a telescope, intensifies a work’s emotional charge, whether it’s of wonder, political or social edification, or of fear, revulsion, entropy, or dystopia. (Think of Damien Hirst’s glassed-in and formaldehyde-soaked animals.)

The curators of “Dioramas,” currently on view at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, have given this art-world phenomenon a broadened social and historical context. The earlier pieces they selected range from 18th-century Catholic devotional waxworks to scientifically accurate 20th-century animal dioramas (pioneered by Carl Akeley at the Museum of Natural History in New York). However, in between are the first works actually called *dioramas*—semitransparent 19th-century romantic landscape paintings lit from behind with a program of changing lights, conveying the effect of motion. Invented by Louis Daguerre, it’s a kind of public proto-cinema that continues today in the work of the visionary collector, antiquarian, and showman

Jean-Paul Favand, founder of the Musée des Arts Forains in Paris. The 19th century (and early 20th), with its sorting and cataloging passions, coupled with its tendency toward sentimentality and self-satisfaction, produced habitat-group taxidermy displays (typified by the vitrines of the English firm Rowland Ward, which took the trophies collected by big game hunters and safari-goers and set them into dramatic and often violent tableaux); as well as goofy peaceable-kingdom assemblages of stuffed predators and prey cuddling up together; condescending colonialist ethnographic set-ups, and visual presentations of serious anthropological research, including the costumes and artifacts of domestic folk and peasant cultures under siege from the modern world.



Jean Paul Favand, *Naguère Daguerre 3*, 2015, 19th-century painted canvas, luminous installation, and scenography, installation view, in “Dioramas,” 2017, Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

AURÉLIEN MOLE/COURTESY THE ARTIST/MUSÉE DES ARTS FORAINS, PARIS

The older work in the exhibition sets the stage for modern interpretations. Perhaps not surprisingly, Surrealism had a particular affinity for the inherent weirdness and theatricality of the “life-like” but essentially unnatural display, as seen in works such as Joseph Cornell’s lovely and haunting *Owl Box* (1945–46). However, most of the contemporary examples share an updated Surrealist sensibility. Hiroshi Sugimoto, for example, takes moody black-and-white photographs of museum dioramas, but eliminates any references to their cases, giving us groupings of condors, sea lions, or gorillas that at first seem plausible as nature photography but which, upon closer examination, feel somehow very wrong. Even when the diorama’s frame is disrupted, undermining the illusion, as in Richard Barnes’s photographs of dioramas under repair or maintenance, the effect is decidedly unnerving. What does one make of a stocky balding man in jeans and a white T-shirt working an industrial vacuum cleaner in a snowy landscape and standing virtually eye-to-eye with a huge buffalo—human and beast looking at similarly real and stuffed? And that’s the relatively upbeat material.



Mark Dion, *Paris Streetscape*, 2017, installation view, in “Dioramas,” 2017, Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

AURÉLIEN MOLE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE IN SITU – FABIENNE LECLERC, PARIS

As might be expected, the dystopian is scarcely given short shrift. Mark Dion’s presentation of feral animals scavenging early morning Parisian garbage cans, Isa Genzken’s miniature diabolic wasteland, *Empire Vampire III* (2004), or Fiona Tan’s toy-train ecological nightmare, *I to 87* (2014) give us a compressed and convincing vision of a world gone awry.

This scholarly and imaginative exhibition, four years in the making, is thorough and endlessly engaging. It puts a great deal of contemporary work into unexpected but ultimately persuasive contexts. The appeal of spectacle, the unreal real, and the bizarrely didactic seems to be always with us, and today’s art is no stranger to it.

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