

Mary Ellen Carroll
Peter Coffin
John Duff
Allen Glatter
Haus-Rucker-Co
Erwin Heerich
Brian O'Connell
Al Taylor
Virginia Inés Vergara

MODEL THEORIES

Virginia Inés Vergara

Mara Hoberman and Virginia Inés Vergara: A Conversation

Mara Hoberman: The theme of this exhibition is “the model”—specifically how an artwork can function as a model in terms of Hodges’ understanding: “A device that measures out a quantity of a substance also imposes a form on the substance.” In the case of your photographs, the subjects—wildlife dioramas at New York City’s American Museum of Natural History—are themselves models of flora and fauna. I’d like to ask you some questions about how you see your artwork creating yet another—physical or conceptual—model; or, to use Hodges’s terms, how your creative process and the resulting final photographs ‘measure their substance’ and/or impose upon it a new form.

To create your *Glass-Scape* series you developed a complex configuration of layered cameras, each responsible for contributing different effects towards the final images. Could you describe the set-up you used to produce these photographs?

Virginia Inés Vergara: The set-up involves three different cameras, but there is no film in the first two cameras—they function as viewing devices. First, I set up a large-format (4 x 5 inch) camera on a tripod in front of the diorama. Then, I hold a Hasselblad camera in front of the viewfinder of the first camera so that I can see what “it” is seeing. The Hasselblad is positioned to take a picture of what the large-format camera is seeing—in other words it is once removed from the diorama, which immediately makes the scene itself appear more two-dimensional. The target feature of the Hasselblad viewfinder is visible at this stage. The crosshairs make me feel like a hunter, and I wanted that element to remain as part of the final photograph. I then add a third camera that “looks into” the Hasselblad’s viewfinder (located on top of the camera). This camera, a digital model, has a swivel screen that can be placed in the viewfinder of the

Hasselblad and which captures the final image.

The cameras I use have strong personal associations for me. I very much wanted to use the Hasselblad, but the film and processing were prohibitively expensive. Then I realized I could use this camera in another way—as a kind of lens. I was looking for a way to make photographs that had a new, strange look, and I hit upon the idea for the three-camera device. For the *Glass-Scape* series, I sought out places that were somehow “out of place.” The best example I found was at the Museum of Natural History, where a facsimile of, say, the African plains, exists in the middle of New York City.

MH: I find an interesting combination of kitsch and ‘high art’ in the final *Glass-Scape* images, which makes it possible to simultaneously appreciate the beauty of the scene and its absurdity. With this series, did you seek to expose the artificiality of the model or to subvert the conventions of the diorama as a means to create an alternate fantasy?

VIV: I would like to do both, but I am much more committed to creating an alternate fantasy, as you so well put it, and making the images my own. As someone who was born and raised in New York City and who has not spent a great deal of time in truly bucolic settings, I tend to link the scenes reproduced in the dioramas to my own experience of other artificial evocations of places. With the *Glass-Scapes*, I intend to draw attention to the artificiality of my photographs in relation to the “original” natural scene as well as to the ersatz quality of the dioramas. For instance, as I mentioned earlier, I allow the crosshairs that appear in the viewfinder of the Hasselblad to be recorded in the final image. The Hasselblad’s viewfinder might be read as a target, hinting at the omitted focal point of the diorama. The crosshairs also signal immediately that this is a photograph—an appropriated (if manipulated) image of an existing model. Also, conceptually speaking, the large-format camera allows me to delve

deeper into the complex duality—nature vs. art—that the dioramas embody. By playing with depth of field and focus, I can enhance the flatness of the image in a way that recalls Romantic landscape paintings.

MH: In addition to incorporating the crosshairs from the Hasselblad's viewfinder, what are some of the other ways in which you manipulate the photographs to, as you say, 'make the images your own?'

VIV: I omit all of the animals from my shots of the dioramas. Typically the animals are the main draw of a diorama, and I found that viewers in the museum seem to naturally gravitate toward the stuffed beasts as if they are psychologically hard-wired to connect with other living creatures. The taxidermy animals do, of course, retain real fur, feathers, hides, and horns, and are shown in action, enhancing the naturalism of the scene. So for my project, which emphasizes art (over nature), the animals are digitally removed. The main manipulation, however, has to do with compressing the scene portrayed in the diorama by visually combining the three-dimensional (sculpture) with the two-dimensional (painting).

MH: Have you used the three-camera instrument to document other types of scenes—natural or artificial?

VIV: At the same time that I was photographing the dioramas, I was also using my triple camera to take pictures of period rooms in the decorative arts wings of museums. I found these rooms to be like life-size dollhouses, devoid of inhabitants. In many ways they are very similar to the natural history dioramas. I plan to continue that project this summer at Schloss Charlottenburg, the 18th century baroque palace in Berlin.

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VIRGINIA INÉS VERGARA
Glass-Scape 12
2012
Archival C-print
6 x 8 in



VIRGINIA INÉS VERGARA
Glass-Scape IV
2012
Archival C-print
30 x 32 in