

The New Weird: Artist Max Hooper Schneider's Miniature Worlds

A series of sculptures shown at Jenny's, Los Angeles, challenge traditional categories of art

In Max Hooper Schneider's solo show at Jenny's, 'Tryouts for the Human Race', 'sculptures' doesn't quite describe the candidates. Hooper Schneider has fashioned four table-top worlds on the pattern of familiar hobbies: a doll house, an HO-scale model train, and two fish tanks (one freshwater, one marine). Each is a diorama of total density, an intricate overload of stuff – and possesses some degree of inner animation, from living fish to the train's electric tracks. By humans and for humans, but not human themselves, these 'tryouts for the human race' feature beings that are so far excluded from that category, but test it all the same.

In *Genesis* (all works 2018), twin mounds of costume jewellery rise above the water on either end of the tank. That it is, in fact, a functioning aquarium is a testy achievement in itself; you can't slap together a healthy ecosystem in an hour. It's odd that something so 'decomposed' can seem malapportioned, but these two ungainly, conical deposits loosely suggest a pair of breasts, the way the Grand Tetons inspired horny French trappers. To cooler heads they may seem too tall, too symmetrical, spread too far apart to be comfortable, formally speaking. A school of orange fish dart around in their cleavage. The saltwater tank, *Lady Marlene*, appears tense and vibrant, however: similarly dominated by two mounds, this time of resin-coated off-white lingerie whose glossy straps defy gravity, stretching above the waterline. Below, the twin formations of lace and leather offer catacombs for a cohort of tiny striped fish, sea stars and tropical lobsters. There are also crabs, their waferish grey bodies encrusted, almost coquettishly, with bits of colourful sponge and other detritus – projecting an aura of garbage and decay.



All four of the show's pieces play between the inorganic and the organic. In two, compositions of ooze, slop and mulch are fitted to precisely machined tables. For *Utopia*, the table has several insects' worth of legs. Atop it lies a three-car train crusted in gory pink clay making a couple of fruitless loops through a landscape studded with the same pustules, nubs, thorns and glans – a wormy landscape the colour of lightly caramelized Pepto-Bismol. Then there is the doll house: *Mommy & Me* comprises a two-storey, char-black manse furnished to the last inch with hoarder décor. In the backyard, beside the crisped palm trees and a stack of tiny cinderblocks, stands a guillotine, red from use. In the bedroom, a doll has hanged itself, and every bit of space teems with an indescribable crush of glowing lamps, stray animals, winding roots and splinters of bones and wood. The train hides in its monochrome landscape, but the doll house is powerfully detailed and rewards the obsessive viewer. Indeed, the quality of all four works depends on how long one can keep discovering new features: in the case of *Marlene* and *Mommy & Me*, those rewards are difficult to exhaust.



Part of the pleasure of Hooper Schneider's work is that it can qualify as something other than art. The fish live, the train runs and the dollhouse moulders – and would do so with or without our attention. On the other hand, the little engine needs servicing, the fish need food; and, to be art in the end, each of the four works requires someone to look at it. The decorator crabs in the tank of white bras, however, decorate themselves. It is practical camouflage, but it is also crazy-looking, even artistic – especially since Hooper Schneider has relocated the crabs to a much whiter environment, where their acid camo doesn't serve. It is not these crabs, after all, that are worried. They're not the ones trying out. Instead, the anxiety is ours and Hooper Schneider's, since it's partly art that qualifies us as human.