

Craft Contemporary

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Lezley Saar: Diorama Drama

October 2, 2022 - January 8, 2023



Left: Lezley Saar, *Nesida is a hit-or-miss mindreader. Sometimes tears trickle from her ears when she is overwhelmed by the inner feelings of others.*, 2019. Acrylic on fabric, embellishments, curtain rod, 64 x 53 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Walter Maciel Gallery.

Right: Lezley Saar, *The Clairvoyant*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, mixed media within carved out book, 16 x 11 x 2.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

“As a young child, I was always so fascinated by the large dioramas of animals in their wild habitat at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles where my father worked. Come to pass, I found myself creating dioramas in the form of altered books and actual small dioramas in glass cases. The idea of creating a space, emotion, and story that one can be sucked into and hopefully transported somewhere has forever been my goal.” - Lezley Saar

Los Angeles – In Lezley Saar’s solo exhibition, *Diorama Drama*, the renowned artist transforms Craft Contemporary’s gallery into a series of large-scale dioramas. Saar will elaborately stage her own painted tapestries, totem sculptures, collages, altered books, and other mixed media works to construct fantastical tableaux in which visitors can immerse themselves. This exhibition is the first time Saar has presented her work in this way and builds on the artist’s evolving interest in staging, character development, and costume design. To create her dioramas, Saar draws from numerous bodies of work developed over the last 25 years, with several new pieces made specifically for the exhibition.

Throughout her career, Saar has created highly narrative, figurative works composed of multiple visual and textural layers. In *Diorama Drama*, Saar teases apart these various layers and recomposes them in the physical space of the gallery, where the distinction between the illusional and tangible disintegrates. Saar’s painted banners, such as *Nesida is a hit-or-miss mindreader. Sometimes tears trickle from her ears when she is overwhelmed by the inner feelings of others* and *Ozile the clairvoyant stuck within a ring-pass-not, attempts to communicate with souls from the netherworld* (both 2019), and her framed collages create a multi-faceted backdrop for Saar’s totem sculptures. These life-sized figures, including *Reuel is a shaman and spiritual healer.....a living personification of the head-on collision of Catholic and African religions* (2019), become actors in Saar’s stagings, interacting with her two-dimensional works to create new, compounded stories. *The Clairvoyant* (2022) along with other altered books and Saar’s early miniature dioramas float throughout these composed environments. These smaller pieces depict their own scenes through a combination of painted backdrops, photographs, and sculptural elements. They serve as visual bridges between Saar’s larger wall works and figures and amplify the complexity of Saar’s storytelling by creating worlds within worlds.

In this exhibition, Saar takes on the roles of maker and collector, reimagining the potential of her own artwork through these lush, large-scale dioramas. By choosing to present her work in this way, Saar further complicates her ongoing use of Victorian Era modes of display and aesthetics, such as dioramas and cabinets of wonder. These devices were used by European societies to exoticize, reduce, and easily categorize colonized cultures and their artifacts. Saar converts the confined structure of the diorama into a space of expansiveness. She questions the colonial legacy embedded in social constructs around race, gender, sexuality, and religion – depicting characters and places born outside of dominant Western culture. Saar’s figures cannot be categorized and live in her other-worldly landscapes, transcending all earthly confines. Saar’s dioramas illustrate her belief in finding truth in the surreal and her agency as an artist and multiracial woman to construct her own reality.

Unlike the natural history dioramas that inspired Saar as a child, there is no glass separating her various tableaux from the viewer. These are not static scenes locked in a case. In *Diorama Drama*, visitors are welcome to enter and intimately explore Saar's various settings. Just as Saar has reimagined her work through these dioramas, she offers visitors a site to experience, reinterpret, and build their own worlds within the larger universes Saar has created.

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Los Angeles-based artist Lezley Saar (she/her) studied at L'Institut Francais de Photographie in Paris, France, and San Francisco State University before receiving her BA from California State University, Northridge in 1978. Saar's mixed media works include paintings, drawings, banners, altered books, photography, collages, dioramas, and installations. Her various series *The Atheneum*, *Anomalies*, *Mulatto Nation*, *Tooth Hut*, *Autists' Fables*, *Madwoman in the Attic*, *Monad*, *Gender Renaissance*, *A Conjuring of Conjurers*, and *Black Garden* deal with notions of identity, race, gender, beauty, mysticism, sanity, and normalcy. Saar has exhibited nationally and internationally with solo exhibitions at numerous institutions including the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; Kravets Wehby Gallery, New York; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO; and Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH. Her group exhibitions include presentations at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX; Sommerset House, London, England; and the Fifth Bialal de la Habana, Cuba. Saar is included in museum collections, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Studio Museum in Harlem; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; Ackland Art Museum; Crocker Art Museum; California African American Museum; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Hessel Museum of Art; Hood Museum of Art; and Santa Barbara Museum of Art. She is currently represented by Walter Maciel Gallery in Los Angeles and Various Small Fires in Asia.

PROGRAMS in conjunction with *Lezley Saar: Diorama Drama*

For a full list of exhibition programs, visit <https://www.craftcontemporary.org/programs/>

Exhibition Opening Reception

Sat, Oct 1 | 6:00–9:00 pm | in-person, courtyard and galleries

\$12 | members free

Join us as we celebrate the opening of our new exhibitions *Lezley Saar: Diorama Drama*; *Luis Flores: Because of You, In Spite of You*; and *Tactics of Erasure and Rewriting Histories*. Guests enjoy first access to the galleries, complimentary beverages, and live DJ music.

Artists in Conversation: Lezley Saar & Gronk

Sat, Nov 19 | 12:00–1:30 pm | in-person, indoors | free

Artists Lezley Saar and Gronk will be in for a public gallery conversation moderated by Senior Exhibitions Curator Holly Jerger. Learn more about Lezley's current exhibition, *Diorama Drama*, and the conceptual overlaps in theatricality, performative space, and the construction of imaginary worlds that these two legendary artists share.

Maker Night: Fiber and Fabric Banners with Dellis Frank

Thurs, Jan 5 | 6:00-8:00 pm | in-person, outdoors

\$12 | members free | materials and drinks included

We invite you to an evening of fabric collaging, sewing, and painting with artist Dellis Frank! Participants will draw inspiration from our current exhibition by artist Lezley Saar and create their own fabric banner or wall hanging.

CREDITS:

Lezley Saar: Diorama Drama has been organized by Holly Jerger, Craft Contemporary Senior Exhibitions Curator. This exhibition is supported in part by the Pasadena Art Alliance and Walter Maciel Gallery. Additional support is provided by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture.

Located on Los Angeles' historic Miracle Mile since 1965, Craft Contemporary reveals the potential of craft to educate, captivate, provoke, and empower. With a focus on contemporary art made from craft media and processes, Craft Contemporary presents dynamic exhibitions by established and emerging artists and designers who are often underrepresented in larger art institutions. Through a robust roster of regular programs and events, Craft Contemporary offers creative opportunities for the public to participate in hands-on workshops led by professional artists. Craft Contemporary cultivates an environment for people in Los Angeles to deepen their relationship to art, creativity, and one another. For more information, visit www.craftcontemporary.org.

LOCATION: 5814 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90036

ADMISSION: FREE every Sunday

REGULARLY: \$9 for adults; \$7 for students, teachers, seniors; free for Craft Contemporary members

HOURS: Tuesday - Sunday, 11:00 AM to 5:00 PM (starting October 2, 2023)