

THIS IS HOW NEW YORK WORKS

CAPITAL BETA

At P.P.O.W Gallery, duo Martin and Munoz create delightfully dark snow scenes in miniature

By Grace-Yvette Gemmell

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While the prospect of heavy snow seems to dwindle here in New York with each passing day, down in Chelsea at [PPOW Gallery](#) there's a 100 percent chance of the stuff thanks to the exquisite and macabre snow globes of artists [Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz](#).

Martin and Muñoz, who have been working together since 1994, are perhaps best known for their "[Travellers](#)" series, incredibly intricate miniature scenes set in snow globes (and then photographed and blown up), which they have been producing since 2001. The series was recently published in book form accompanying a story by [Jonathan Lethem](#). The impressive new exhibition of the collaborative duo's work, titled [Night Falls](#), includes a series of large-scale C-print photographs of wintry panoramas as well as a selection of snow globes.

The artists typically construct their tiny tableaux by either amending readymade elements—figures, houses, trees, snowdrifts—or crafting their own from clay, then arranging them in custom-built snow globes or in larger arrangements, like most of those represented in [Night Falls](#). The miniatures are then photographed, like tiny sets, and lighting elements, falling snow, and other details are finally added digitally. The snow globe as a cultural object is nostalgia itself, with scenes of wintry cliché that never change and where it's always White Christmas. In the guise of a sentimental, sugar-coated terrain these landscapes disorient in their narratives of alienation and very dark humor.



With all the work that goes into creating these scenes, it's actually the tiniest parts, the figures engaged in all manner of odd, if not downright malevolent activities, that make them so uncanny. These figures have the generic, inoffensive look of any other stock figures who populate snow globes, train sets, and other

toys, but it's what they do that distinguishes them and gives this work its moody power.

In one piece in [Night Falls](#), titled [The Movers](#), and pictured above, two men carry a long rug, with a suspiciously person-shaped bulge in its center, as a woman scampers through the trees nearby, observing them. In another, a woman yanks the reins of a team of cattle pulling a truck loaded with

refuse and with a man perched in back holding a rifle. Clearly not all is right in these worlds.
rt refuse and with a man perched in back holding a rifle. Clearly not all is right in these worlds,
running in opposition to our assumptions about what images of wintry climes evoke.



"All of our works share certain characteristics," said Martin in an email interview. "For one thing, winter is a permanent condition. That holds true for our work going back many years. Anyone from a higher latitude, say Helsinki or above, knows well the implications of that: crepuscular middays and interminable nights." So it is that, far from the idylls of painters like [Maxfield Parrish](#) or [Grandma Moses](#), for Martin and Munoz, permanent winter provides the circumstance for the unusual, the bizarre, the terrible.

o of day also provides a tonal setting for these miniature narratives, as darkness and illumination are at play, and those tiny figures gaze into the night, and their discoveries are always tinged with fear.

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p "Night Falls functions as both verb and noun," Martin said. "Nature has been redefined. More to the
a point, it has regained the upper hand and put sentient life in its place, or at least, on the defensive, and is struggling to cope. The setting has become the pre-eminent puppet master."

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L In *The Search* and *A Wandering*
h *Light* (both above) figures seem
ir haphazardly, or even futilely, placed
se in such snowy landscapes. In one, a
e search party looks under the skirts of
sk evergreens with flashlights for
u something left undisclosed or
w undetermined, while in the other a
tr woman inspects the interior of a tree
fr trunk in pursuit of the light emanating
sc from within it. The characters hover
d somewhere between genuine
determination and knowing



hopelessness. Futility is the most frequently recurring theme in this show.

In other works the narratives stretch to connect to one another, but leave plenty of room for doubt. A toddler is held between a woman, his mother we presume, and a large bird in *Nature's Child I*, pictured above, as a child looks on from a nearby house. But is the bird snatching or delivering the baby? In *Nature's Child II*, a toddler (perhaps the same one, though it's impossible to know) is carried high through the night sky in the clutches of a large bird as a man (his father, perhaps) watches from below, and again, it's unclear if he's being taken or returned, or what the outcome might be?



“The roles that adults play in these scenes are important clues to understanding the children’s part,” said Martin. “Sometimes they are adversarial ... the unexplained alienation of children and adults is another facet of nature reconfigured.”

Impending doom looms, but never strikes or settles, leaving us in a kind of narrative limbo. Martin mentioned Joachim Patinir, Bosch, Henry Darger, Charles Adams, and Bruegel, as well as the German Romantics and the Hudson River School, as his influences, yet the work struck me as more akin to the enigmatic drawings of children’s book author and illustrator Chris Van Allsburg—in particular his [*Mysteries of Harris Burdock*](#)—the nebulous scenes are forever frozen in the potential of carrying out the baleful consequences they suggest.

In *Captured I*, for instance, a priest and a nun escort a group of prisoner children into a walled city. In a reversal, *Captured II* (right) has a tribe of menacing children with machine guns and grimaces pulling a fat priest by a noose around his neck towards what we can only conclude is his final prayer. It's unclear, though, despite the titles, which scene comes first, which is the cause and which the effect. When I asked Martin about this open-ended quality to the works he offered that he and Muñoz don't want to "delimit the suggestive potential of these images by explaining them or giving gratuitous exposition for a narrative that we prefer to keep in a state of permanent potential. There is more to this and we are having fun developing it."

When asked whether any new pieces were in the works, Martin offered a coy teaser. He explained that the "intimations of a curious alliance between the children and the birds," at play in the current show, will likely resurface with more force in future pieces.

"This is an ongoing and developing series of which this exhibition is only an installment. The adults will have their allies too."