Tableaux for the Future

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TABLEAUX FOR THE FUTURE

A Thesis Presented

By

SALLY CURCIO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

September 2022
Department of Art
Tableaux for the Future was created with the support of family, friends, colleagues and professors, and my committee.

Thanks so much to Dr. James M.M. Wilson III and to Anne LaPrade Seuthe for their amazing support with this project and in life. I am forever thankful and grateful.

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A loving thanks to my Mom and Dad for showing me I can go to the beat of my own drummer and for inspiring me to break down the symbolic order.

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And last but not least, thank you to my Thesis Committee Robin Mandel, Shona Macdonald, and Jeffery Kasper for giving me insights into my work and for guiding me with my thesis paper. I am forever grateful for their dedication.
ABSTRACT

TABLEAUX FOR THE FUTURE

SEPTEMBER 2022

SALLY CURCIO, B.F.A UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Robin Mandel, Shona Macdonald, Jeffery Kasper

My sculptural installations aim to elicit a sense of optimism and possibility through form, color, and mode of display. The work subverts the symbolic order by repurposing everyday forms and objects, allowing us to see the familiar as new, and thereby awakening us to what may be possible to formulate a better, more beautiful, more universally connected order.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In our current global moment of pandemic, war, and climate crisis, expressing notions of optimism may be considered radical. Yet, I believe that to think creatively about solutions to these and other large-scale problems, we must give ourselves permission to imagine possible worlds, worlds that explore new systems based on science and design. These imagined worlds can function as catalysts for action and change. In *Tableaux for the Future*, I strive to present imagined worlds that are integrated, organic, connected, symbiotic and inventive.

My sculptural installations aim to elicit a sense of optimism and possibility through form, color, and mode of display. The work subverts the symbolic order by repurposing everyday forms and objects, allowing us to see the familiar as new, and thereby awakening us to what may be possible to formulate a better, more beautiful, more universally connected order. The exhibition *Tableaux for the Future* provides four different tableaux titled *Factory/Science Lab, Miracle Mile, Space Station, and Megalopolis*. They inform one another yet have their own visual logic and themes that suggest the opportunity to create “possible worlds.”

The tableaux are installed on large white painted display surfaces, supported by sawhorses or pedestals. From a distance, they are experienced as a gestalt, resolving at first into scale model representations of habitable worlds. At closer range, their individual elements begin to be discernable at a 1:1 scale. Viewers can pick out objects similar to those they might have in their homes; cups, sponges, bottle caps, hair curlers,
as well as other more enigmatic found objects: small domes, chemistry glass, fabric, and even elements repurposed from my previous work.

The repurposing, re-contextualizing, and scale shifts of everyday objects in the work impact how the viewer sees and interprets the world. There is a perceived change in meaning of these objects that undermines the symbolic order to elicit a sense of play from the viewer. Everyday objects move beyond functional fixedness to be viewed as elements that construct new worlds.
CHAPTER 2
DESCRIPTION OF THESIS WORK

Factory/Science Lab

Fig. 1: Curcio, Sally. Factory/Science Lab. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.

The tableau Factory/Science Lab (53x80x32 inches) includes objects laid out as if in a scientific lab: grouped together based on a similarity of form that infers some logic; or stacked suggesting technological forms, industries, and buildings. The objects in this tableau consist primarily of clear materials of plastic and glass or in colors gray, black, white, taupe and silver. The coolness of the colors suggests realms of science, industry, lab work, and factories.
Fig. 2: Curcio, Sally. *Factory/Science Lab (Detail #1)*. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.

Fig. 3: Curcio, Sally. *Factory/Science Lab (Detail #2)*. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.
Miracle Mile (44x160x32 inches) is a long narrow tableau, taking its form from the major commercial strips on the outskirts of so many American cities. The colorful, playful forms in the tableau suggest an optimistic, futuristic world that is well-functioning and productive. Sculptural assemblages suggest buildings, rocket ships, transportation, islands, and industry. Some of the assemblages make use of painted, cast objects from previous work, mixed with other materials like glass spheres, curlers, erasers, and hairbrush bristles.
Fig. 5: Curcio, Sally. *Miracle Mile* (Detail #1). 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.

Fig. 6: Curcio, Sally. *Miracle Mile* (Detail #2). 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.
Space Station, (69x80x32 inches) is arranged to be perfectly symmetrical. The objects are stacked high on glass tiers with a clear round glass vessel at the top, suggesting it is ready for takeoff. The objects in this tableau are primarily everyday, found, white items like second-hand serving bowls, ice trays, recycled gallon milk jugs, flowerpots and Styrofoam balls. These white elements are intermingled with clear and colored objects like blue plastic vases, pink plastic cups, pink medical supplies, glass globes, and chemistry glass.
Fig. 8: Curcio, Sally. *Space Station (Detail #1)*. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.

Fig. 9: Curcio, Sally. *Space Station (Detail #2)*. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.
Megalopolis

*Megalopolis* (43x80x32 inches) is the most densely clustered of the tableaux, suggesting that this futuristic world is thickly populated and bristling with the activity of its economy, transportation, and ecology. The work has a series of painted wooden blocks that are clustered and stacked around colorful plaster forms that resemble towers and buildings; beaded seascapes and landscapes; glass round vessels; and recycled plastic egg crates paired with yellow Legos in building formations. The density and richness of materials gives a vision of the future as a populated, interconnected, diverse, functioning Supercity.
Fig. 11: Curcio, Sally, *Megalopolis (Detail #1)*. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.

Fig. 12: Curcio, Sally, *Megalopolis (Detail #2)*. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.
CHAPTER 3
FANTASY WORLDS AND MINIATURES

The tableaux also build on forms from the past for their associative powers. The visual language of round forms and round glass vessels points to a retro-futuristic aesthetic of bubble homes and flying vehicles. These forms are linked to a time when we had a positive and optimistic view of the future that was promised through science and invention during the 1950s -1970s (Brannigan). The tableaux recover this message of optimism through the associations with these retro-futuristic forms. Such forms are seen in the animated television show *The Jetsons* that I watched as a child; the Jetson technology made life easier with many creative inventions, new ways of communicating, space travel, flying cars, instant cooked meals, a pet robot, new kinds of machines and robots to clean the house.

The world of *The Jetsons* inspired my creating worlds, cities, and environments. The miniature format let me take on such a complex set of subjects. Miniatures are created in almost every part of the world  (Davy and Dixon 1). Children and adults alike find miniatures enchanting and have a desire to play with them and rearrange them. In my work, I am specifically interested in how the miniature can evoke a sense of play and control, present the gestalt of an aerial view, and elicit fantasy.

*Tableaux for the Future* consists of miniature cities that give one a feeling of agency, similar to a child engaging with toys and daydreaming of an alternate time and place. One imagines that the objects appear smaller because they are at a distance from
the scene allowing for the players to see themselves as giants. This gives one a sense of control about a vision of the future (Lanks).

Miniature artist Thomas Doyle explains his own satisfaction with small things. "The creation of small worlds gives us the illusion of control. In a world that grows ever faster and more chaotic, in a world in which we are bombarded with imagery, artworks in small scales allow us a place of retreat, where time has stopped," Doyle said (Zoldan).

My work invites the viewer to have these similar feelings and fantasies. The tableaux present city formations that suggest active scenes that also provide a feeling of calm and possibilities.

Miniatures are intentional human creations. As Stewart notes: “There are no miniatures in nature; the miniature is a cultural product, the product of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to the physical world” (Stewart 55). As noted by Belinda Lanks of the Wall Street Journal, miniatures provide a particular viewing experience: “Miniaturization allows us to examine something in its entirety and believe that we can understand it all at once” (Lanks).

My engagement with miniatures can be traced to the following seminal experiences. As a child I would spend hours playing with the miniature furniture and objects in the large wooden dollhouse my parents gave me for Christmas one year. I was delighted and amazed when one day my mother was making a pie and she took the dough and created a tiny lattice design and placed it in a round metal soda bottle cap. The ridges of the cap looked like the ridges of piecrust and the lattice design mimicked the human scale pie. We also had Red Rose tea in our pantry. The octagonal shaped teabag
tag had a rose printed on it. I remember the moment when my mother removed the tags from their strings and placed them around the kitchen table in my dollhouse. They were suddenly transformed, like magic, into little plates. I was amazed how commonplace objects could lose functional fixedness yet remain within the symbolic order. My work draws from these early discoveries in terms of perception, scale shifts, and repurposing of everyday objects and the form and related concepts of the miniature.

The tableaux employ the method of miniaturization in order to let us dream new realities that break from the life we are living (Thibodeaux). Susan Stewart, Professor of English at Temple University, writes, “The miniature does not attach itself to lived historical time.” The miniature lives in a metaphorical world. “The reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its “use value” transformed into the infinite time of reverie” (Stewart 65).

My work with miniatures began in earnest in 2008 with a series of works titled, *Bubble Sculptures*. This work would ultimately lead to the creation of *Tableaux for the Future*. 
This series consists of miniature worlds made from thousands of brilliantly colored glass beads, as well as small found objects housed under transparent domes. Ranging in size from 6x12x12 inches to 1x2x4 feet and are exhibited on pedestals, they are inspired by the enchantment and nostalgia of snow globes and childhood memories of imagined worlds. The works depict imagined places; legendary or mythological places like Sherwood Forest or Atlantis; and actual locales like Jackie Onassis’ Reservoir in New York City. The transparent bubbles encasing these fantastic worlds suggest their fragility and a need for protection. They speak to self-containment and the ephemeral.
Though they are both miniatures, *Tableaux for the Future* differ from these earlier works in that they are not sealed off from the viewer, making them more approachable and accessible, implying the scenarios depicted are robust and thriving. The tableaux are not scaled down to the degree of the *Bubble Sculptures*. Most of the objects are human-scale, everyday objects familiar in daily life. The tableaux also differ in that they veer away from the nostalgia associated with the content and format of snow globes. Instead, they are imagined worlds whose nostalgia is associated with the visual language of the retro-futuristic aesthetic.
CHAPTER 4

FUNCTIONAL FIXEDNESS AND MODULARITY

The Bubble Sculptures were inspired in part by an early childhood memory of leaning across a swing, arms outstretched, and flying high imagining I was miles above the ground. From those heights, I felt a sense of vertigo as I would envisage pebbles turning into cities and puddles into lakes beneath me. In this act of play I was simulating an aerial view of a world below.

With the tableaux, I want to engage the viewer with a similar perceptual experience, wherein their imagination is stimulated in such a way that the objects appear as a city or a world. The viewer can oscillate between seeing the object’s formal qualities and seeing the gestalt, and then return to the object with renewed understanding and awareness.

Fig. 14: Curcio, Sally. Covid Photography: Untitled. 2020, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.
For example, the tofu container has a ridge design that has the function of draining out the liquid from the container. When plaster forms are cast from the tofu container and these forms are stacked together, they resemble a city building in the tableau. Therefore, when the viewer is cooking in their kitchen and they encounter the tofu container again, they may see it in a new light. The novelty of these overlooked qualities become richer with allusive/imaginative potential. This way of working with and understanding objects has its origins in two important prior projects: Covid Photography and Prototype for Play.

The Covid pandemic arrived in spring 2020 and I started working off-campus in isolation at my studio in Florence, Massachusetts. I assembled and glued together plastic food recycling containers and found objects from the bins in my studio. I then photographed the assemblages and found the work quickly moved in a new direction: the photographs of the sculptures became works of art themselves, and I shifted from gluing objects together to assembling them into works that could be taken apart after being photographed. I then created new works from the same elements and photographed the work again. I discovered that my art could be modular, and that the scale of the food recycling containers and found materials -- prickly pink curlers and yellow fuzzy tennis balls -- revealed formal qualities in everyday objects. Their shapes, colors, and textures could be appreciated and seen abstractly when assembled and juxtaposed to create compositions in sculptural works of art.

For the creation of Prototype for Play I continued to use plastic recycling containers, however this time I used them as molds to cast plaster forms that I later manipulated. I worked from a series of different memories I had of colors and forms:
block shapes, 50s turquoise green, 70s olive green, 80s cheese puffs and Cheetos orange, Legos, cities, sunlight on objects, combined with an abiding love for the simplicity of forms in Giorgio Morandi’s paintings (Bandera 130).

After creating *Prototype for Play*, I noticed the simplified block shapes were dreamlike in that they offered the paradox of a movable still life, where new configurations of the same objects triggered a flood of varied associations. I saw families, kitchens, sunlight, neighborhoods, specialty foods, bakeries, diners, production, and industry within stacked cities. I imagine the viewer perceiving the work as edible delicacies behind glass; the triangle shapes recall sliced cake and wedges of cheese. Wayne Thiebaud’s dessert paintings came to mind inferring Pop Art associations. The changeability in the photographic series and *Prototype for Play* triggered a sense of play and loosened up my creative process to explore.

Fig. 15: Curcio, Sally. *Prototype for Play*. 2020, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.
In the article “Learning Through Play, Playing Through Art”, artist, art historian, curator and educator Adam Zucker, writes:

Contemporary art effectively embraces the element of play. Artists seek out creative strategies to address aesthetic and conceptual issues in order to create engaging and entertaining works of art. While making art is a serious undertaking, any artist will tell you that if it becomes too serious, they’re not having fun anymore. Unless you’re painting by numbers, all art making combines a playful engagement with materials and subject matter. (Zucker)

While creating Prototype for Play I had the realization that playing with blocks as a child is analogous to the experiences and creative processes in my art. There is a sense of freedom and imagination with directed attention, exploration, observation, and reflection. I create worlds by stacking elements, building towers that use pattern, symmetry, and balance. This can be a solo experience, or as in Prototype for Play, I share a sense of creativity, imagination and play with the viewer.

Play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith proposes several theories of play. The ‘imaginary’ describes “the interior mental processes of people as they explore the possibilities of life. To play is to see the world hypothetically—to dream and fantasize about what could be” (Henrick 175). Play is also generative. “The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct,” the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung wrote in Psychological Types, 1921 (Stapley-Brown, Sansom and Hickley). There is a sense of play in creating something new when assembling the work
in the tableaux, and there is a sense of play in viewing the work as the objects lose their functional fixedness and represent something novel. For example, a painted plaster long pointed cylinder shape with four rectangular erasers spaced evenly leaning against the base, with a shuttlecock on top, change the function and identification of the objects to represent a toy-like sculptural rocket ship.

I find an unexpected sense of play in the work of Sue Williams (b. 1954), an American artist who explores gender, the body, and themes such as objectification and domestic violence through a cartoonish abstract style of painting. Some of her imagery is explicit, but as stated on the UCLA Hammer Museum’s website “toward the end of the 1990s, Williams shifted to a more abstract, lyrical style and allover treatment of the canvas yet retained an incisive critique of political and social relations” (Erickson).

I am struck by the elusive yet sexually suggestive imagery in *Black and White and Red All Over*, 1998. Her approach makes me aware of how my brain is functioning, constantly trying to make sense of the forms and identify the shapes. The ambiguous quality of her visual language triggers my imagination to call upon many associations and reminds me of the looseness of identifying objects that takes place when letting go of the symbolic order in creative play.

I wanted to adopt Williams’ approach to *Prototype for Play* to elicit this type of brain functioning when viewing my work. I did this by making the everyday forms I was casting, like plastic cups and tofu containers, less recognizable by pairing them down and disguising them. As the works in *Tableaux for the Future* now include some of those same elements, they too have this element of elusiveness that calls for generative associations.
For the tableaux, I was inspired by the carefully constructed, visually active sculptural installation *Sandbox* (10’x12’x10”) by American artist Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) in collaboration with Joan Banach (b. 1948). It is comprised of natural elements that Bontecou had collected over the years of her career.

The elements depict desiccated plant forms and other biomorphic shapes, combined with elements that suggest a mysterious technological world of organic life and cyborgs. *Sandbox* and the tableaux are similar in that they both suggest possible future worlds; however, Bontecou’s installation is the antithesis of the tableaux. While Bontecou’s works suggest the fear of nuclear war, death, and a questionable technological existence, my tableaux metaphorically suggest a future full of functioning lively cities with bright colors, interconnectedness, and optimism. Bontecou’s approach to borrowing from her oeuvre to create her large installation introduced me to the idea that I could assemble various elements from my previous works, with inspirational objects, to make for complexity in the tableaux.
My tableaux environments also have an affinity with the work by Lubna Chowdhary, a British artist, born from Indian parents in Tanzania in 1964. In 2017, Chowdhary exhibited Metropolis, consisting of over 1,000 miniature clay sculptures (about 5-10 cm tall) arranged randomly and spaced out in a long path on the floor in the Asian and European Ceramics Gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Mutual Art). Of Metropolis, Chowdhary states, “It’s a piece that explores hybrid languages of making and hybrid cultures,” she explains, “and traverses different times, histories and geographies” (Simons).
There are similarities between Chowdhary’s work and the tableaux. The layout of *Metropolis* and the variety of shapes informs the format for the long tableaux, *Miracle Mile* with a base 32 x 160 inches. Both projects suggest cityscapes, technology, and toy-like forms (Simons).

The tableaux also relate to work by Bodys Isek Kingelez (1948-2015) an African artist whose work imagines utopian worlds. Kingelez’s work and the tableaux are similar in that they are created from a range of everyday materials that include commercial packaging, plastic, and bottle caps. There is also a shared optimism about the future.
Kingelez states, “Without a model, you are nowhere. A nation that can’t make models is a nation that doesn’t understand things, a nation that doesn’t live.” His city models suggest a utopian vision of the future he has for his country, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. His works are “extreme maquettes” for a possible vision for rehabilitative optimistic city planning and functioning societies. He says his work asks us to imagine a “better, more peaceful world” (MoMA).

The tableaux are inspired by Kingelez’s conviction that maquettes can be a means to express a vision for an optimistic future. Like Kingelez’s work, the tableaux are carefully constructed with colors and shapes that suggest thriving, functioning societies. They also adopt the possibility of being “extreme maquettes” for a more peaceful and integrated world.
The gestalt of the tableaux, constructed from diverse materials and everyday objects, engage the viewer to see things in their lives in a new context. This way of seeing stimulates the loosening of functional fixedness, changes the perceived value and meaning of everyday objects, and therefore breaks down the relentless grip of the symbolic order. This undoing awakens fantasy and imagination and frees one from seeing the world in a fixed, habitual or oppressive way.

I wish for my work to question: What are we satisfied with? How can we creatively seek new directions and answers? How can we transform the present into a more beneficial and optimistic future? My intention is that the work not only engages these questions, but also stimulates visionary thinking about how the world can be re-invented.

_Tableaux for the Future_ lay forth an optimistic view that presents worlds that are colorful, integrated, and well-functioning organic wholes, worlds that reveal unexpected dynamic adjacencies. Made with a broad range of everyday materials, the work suggests we have the resourcefulness and resources at hand to build our future world. It is how we utilize what is right in front of us, and how we engage and collaborate with others that is core to envisioning our future. We can learn and borrow from the past to allow ourselves to dream and to create the future we desire.
APPENDICES

A. TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The exhibition *Tableaux for the Future* provides four different tableaux titled *Factory/Science Lab, Miracle Mile, Space Station,* and *Megalopolis.* They inform one another yet have their own visual logic and themes that suggest the opportunity to create “possible worlds.” The tableaux consist of everyday objects that the viewers can identify as those they might find in their homes; cups, sponges, bottle caps, hair curlers, as well as other more enigmatic found objects: small domes, chemistry glass, fabric, and even elements repurposed from my previous work.
B. FLOOR PLAN

Student Union Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Amherst
C. GALLERY EXHIBITION IMAGE

Fig. 20: Curcio, Sally. *Tableaux for the Future-Gallery Exhibition Image*. 2022, Collection of the Artist, Massachusetts.
## D. IMAGE IDENTIFICATION

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Fig. 18: Chowdhary, Lubna. *Metropolis*, Clay sculptures, 1991. 
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Fig. 19: Kingelez, Bodys Isek. *Kimbembele Ihunga*, 51 3/16 × 72 13/16 × 125 in., Mixed media, 1994. MoMA. moma.org/collection/works/222150  

Fig. 20: Curcio, Sally. *Tableaux for the Future – Gallery Exhibition Image*, Mixed media, 2022. Collection of the Artist, MA.
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