

Art in America

The Art of the Diorama: Roxy Paine's Security Theater

Brooklyn-based sculptor Roxy Paine sipped a cup of tea as he welcomed the press to his new exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea this morning. "I'm sick now, and I got sick when I opened a show of similar work at Kavi Gupta a year ago," he said, referring to his Chicago gallery. "That tends to happen when it's a really all-consuming project."

Indeed, though it comprises only five works, all sculpted from maple wood, the artist has been in production at his Queens studio on "Denuded Lens" (through Oct. 18) ever since his Chicago outing. The show's whopping, 26-foot-wide centerpiece, *Checkpoint* (2014), a diorama depicting an airport security station, must have accounted for a sizable portion of that year. The artist himself couldn't say how many separate pieces make up the work, which offers a compelling vision of the site of much of today's so-called "security theater."

"It's about the power the government has over its citizens," Paine, 47, told *A.i.A.*, "and in turn the power terrorists have over all of us. One failed shoe bomber and millions of people have to take off their shoes before they board a plane." Though complete with stacked bins for laptops, wallets, phones, etc., metal detectors and furniture, the piece lacks any figures. "I'm much more interested in emptiness and implied human presence," Paine said.

Checkpoint compresses the depth of the area depicted, which the artist estimated at 70-something feet, into just 18 feet. Creating a convincing impression of so much space required a false perspective that distorts the objects' shapes. "That was necessary for the compression of the space," Paine said, "but

was also conceptually intertwined with the subject, since the security checkpoint subjects humans to such distortions." Paine admitted that he hadn't tried to convince the TSA to let him measure and document an actual security facility. "Having a wife and kids gives you an excuse to secretly shoot some pictures," he added with a smile.

The diorama is the artist's third. The 2013-14 Gupta show, staged to coincide with the Expo Chicago fair, included two smaller, though almost life-size, pieces. One portrays a control room for an unspecified facility—perhaps a power plant—with panels sporting rows of buttons, dials and switches. The other represents a fast-food counter, with its cash registers, napkin and straw dispensers, and the area behind it, including stacked drinking cups and soda fountains. "Denuded Lens" is his first exhibition with Boesky since signing on with the gallery last year; he's also still represented by Gupta.

Like *Checkpoint*, the smaller works in the Boesky show are informed by life experience as well as loftier ideas. *Intrusion* is a life-size pinball machine whose playing surface, where we would normally see bumpers and flippers, is replaced with a reproduction of a 40-foot-high formation of granite that the artist found in Massachusetts and painstakingly documented with a process including 3-D scans. "So the piece is about two scales of time," Paine explained, "the geologic and the much more transient time span of a pinball game." While he played a lot of pinball as a kid, he said, he'd fallen out of practice, and a friend handily beat him when he recently tried his luck at a Brooklyn bar. And if you play on his altered surface, he promised, "You are going to lose."

Several works in the show could be described as mechanical mash-ups. It's intentionally unclear what any of them might do; one is titled *Machine of Indeterminacy*.

Speech Impediment jams together a chainsaw and a bullhorn, both deafeningly loud devices; the soft-spoken but perfectly eloquent artist confessed frustration with his own verbal skills. The work sits on a maple pedestal that, for Paine, is an essential part of the work. "I do not want this sitting on someone's coffee table," he said.

Meeting with the press, the artist wore a pair of hip, retro-styled black glasses from Brooklyn Spectacles. Like the sculptures in his new show, the frames are made of wood.



Roxy Paine,
Checkpoint, 2014,
maple, aluminum,
fluorescent light bulbs,
acrylic prismatic light
diffusers, 14 feet by
26 feet 11 inches by
18 feet 7½ inches.
Courtesy the artist and
Marianne Boesky
Gallery, New York. ©
Roxy Paine. Photo
Jason Wyche.

