

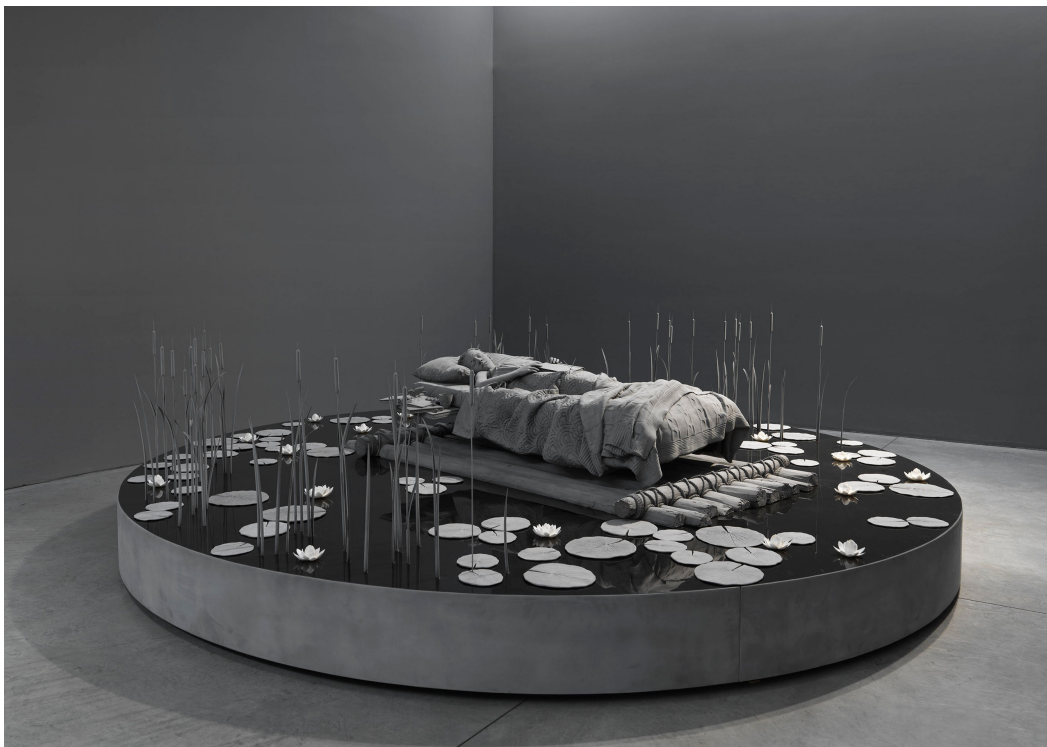
# sculpture

## **Hans Op de Beeck**

By Elaine A. King  
August 20, 2019

For more than 20 years, the Belgian artist Hans Op de Beeck has been building a multifaceted body of work in numerous mediums, including small watercolors, sculptures that vary from miniature models to room-size installations, films, digital animations, drawings, paintings, and photographs. His work is subtle and open-ended, filled with visual uncertainties that pose questions about the meaning of life and grapple with the multilayered complexities of today's society.

A peculiar silence permeated his haunting recent exhibition, enticing visitors to pause and reflect. Op de Beeck's enchanting noir world, rendered in monochromatic grays, evoked something of the Northern Romantic tradition with its melancholy sublime. Though Op de Beeck is known for his immersive environments, this show contained only one large installation, accompanied by a series of smaller-scale sculptures, a film, and an assortment of watercolors. Each work evinced an eerie liminality, existing between the real and the illusory, the present and the future.



Staging Silence (3), the third and final installment in a series of films, seems to follow Antonin Artaud's definition of the theater as being "not only psychological but also plastic and physical." It leads viewers on a mysterious journey through a sequence of Spartan, dream-like scenes set in imaginary land and cityscapes—strange, almost surreal environments unhurriedly erected and disintegrated by unidentified framing hands. Though there is something familiar in each fabrication, it remains uncertain just what one sees in the mysteriously layered interactions among humanity, nature, and time. For Op de Beeck, "The Staging Silence films serve as an opportunity to examine the humanization of open spaces and our instinctual drive to obtain meaning in and from our physical environments and in the structures of our lives."

The uncanny quality of the show stemmed from the exacting observation that Op de Beeck applies to his matte-gray human figures and their interior settings, which appear as if frozen in time. The large construction *My bed a raft, the room the sea, and then I laughed some gloom in me* (2019) gives one the sense of peering into a room where a little girl sleeps on a floating bed among lily pads floating in a circular pond that doubles as a pedestal. A peaceful melancholy pervades this dream-like setting, implying a sense of death and a fear of the nocturnal unknown.

A miniature wall piece, *The Library* (2019), recalls Op de Beeck's intricately vast installation *The Collector's House* (2016). An exquisite work of rigorous craftsmanship and infinite detail, *The Library* rewards close observation with multiple layers of stacks filled with tiny books, library ladders, and wonderful balconies. His most recent sculptures—magnificently detailed, miniature domestic interiors reminiscent of dollhouses—include *The Apartment*, *The Manor House*, and *The Backyard*. Displayed on traditional camera tripods, these boxes opening onto familiar views of everyday settings invite viewers to engage in an intimate voyeurism. Collectively they resemble stage sets waiting for the actors to appear. Who lives here? What are they like? Op de Beeck's constructions, devoid of people, resemble the black and white photographs in Walker Evans's celebrated book *Message from the Interior* (1966), which depict people without their presence and imply the passage of time.

Op de Beeck understands the realm of mystery and provides viewers with only a certain amount of familiarity. For him, visual ambiguity is significant, as are vague clues that linger in the shadows. This unsettling sensibility, which he maintains throughout his work, intrigues and seduces, conjuring an allure that yields moments of introspection, silence, and surprise.