

featured in video-recorded roundtable discussions, one for each group, with the two curators, assistant curator Su Wei, and several others. In this exhibition, these recorded conversations were presented along with photographs and other documents. These discussions, recording the curators' attempt to capture what they call a "spirit of self-practice" in art today, explore how each group in "Little Movements" maintains a sustained sense of self-questioning and reflexivity that allows it to exist in a self-sufficient enclave.

The curators seem concerned primarily with how new value systems can be established independently of existing power structures and, ultimately, how self-reflexive practice can engender new creative directions. Yet working within existing power structures wouldn't disqualify these varied art practitioners from being seen as autonomous or critical. And though it includes artists' groups ranging from Beijing's HomeShop to Copenhagen Free University, the exhibition does not purport to be an all-encompassing examination of collectives today. In fact, Lu and Liu reject the notion of linear history altogether, as well as any pretense of objective methodological investigation; as the curators informally stated, the artists involved here are simply some of those they have come in contact with through their travels. But such a naked subjectivity, as it gains momentum and inevitably snowballs toward self-institutionalization, seems to come with its own trappings of power. How will "Little Movements" maintain the continuous critical self-inquiry and reflexivity that it esteems?



Although a museum show on the Chinese mainland (as opposed to Hong Kong) necessarily eschews overt politics, the curators seem to have subversive goals, searching for alternatives to existing art-world power structures or historical narratives, yet they are awkwardly aware of the pitfalls of establishing anything in its place. "The Anxiety of Self-Definition," one of the four broad categories of "Little Movements," encapsulates the ambiguity surrounding the exhibition itself, a work in progress, one that resists classification. (The other categories are "Individual Systems," "Away from the Crowds: Unexpected Encounters," and "What Is Knowledge.") The exhibition at OCT was more like a tool kit than organized research, charting a loose theoretical framework that informs art practice, but is defined only through outside references. This collection of movements seems poised to legitimize certain practices, or to give way to something else entirely.

—Lee Ambrozy

## BUENOS AIRES

### Sebastián Gordín

RUTH BENZACAR GALERÍA DE ARTE

When Sebastián Gordín began constructing miniature stage sets in the late 1980s, his friends nicknamed him "the bricklayer." Twenty years

later, in one of those intellectual upgrades that sometimes occur in the art world, the writer Graciela Speranza defined him as a postindustrial *homo faber*. Yet Gordín had continued building in the same vein: mini buildings, mini cinemas, mini stage sets made of wood, Plexiglas, and the like. In these setups, the fantastic was ever present: here a futuristic laboratory in which little men could be seen working at computers, there a bunch of children running out of a house aflame, elsewhere a nocturnal landscape in which pale heads bobbed out of dark waters. Gordín's repertory of images drew from popular culture with an inclination toward the somber: Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, a child's fantasy that is often dark and violent, and Edward Gorey's drawings of the 1960s, combining melancholy with an innocent happiness, were particular inspirations. His buildings, which recall the modernist aesthetic of movies such as *Playtime* (1967) by Jacques Tati, are often dreamlike, with a beauty that has a blankly nightmarish quality, which creates the perfect background against which to stage a minimalist comedy. As with its precursors, what characterized Gordín's work was the saccharine sweetness of the macabre. But Gordín's works deny narration. His scenes are frozen; what will follow them uncertain.

Several years ago, Gordín added a new technique to his repertoire, with works in marquetry, the ancient technique of applying thin pieces of wood to form a design—constructing an image in its most literal sense. In several 2007 pieces using the medium, glass boxes contained invented medieval tapestries or fictitious old-master paintings made from thin veneers. His most recent show used marquetry, in part to create beautiful, sultry landscapes. Their informalized trees are gothic and there is something Japanese in the spatial flattening and panoramic view. It's as if Gordín were painting with wood. In *Amanece en las trincheras* (Dawn Breaks at the Trenches), 2011, two sullen dog-soldiers smoke in their ditch. The tension between the calm red meadows made of rosewood and the foreboding dark cloud made out of the tropical hardwood ziricote evokes a state of anxiety. This is not the enclosed garden of fifteenth-century paintings. Gordín's new landscapes are permeated by melancholy but also by a homeopathic dose of hope: All the wars in the world will not destroy the human spirit, they seem to whisper.

Confronting the marquetry pieces stood four glass boxes, worlds that remain forever removed from the actual possibility of play. Inside these boxes, museums and libraries collapse: Paintings are crushed against the floor, shelves and the books they once held have been smashed to pieces. Without explanation, the temples of culture tumble. If they can be saved, it will be only by the skin of our teeth, as Thornton Wilder's 1942 play of that name suggested: "I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger." This idea of humanity in a constant state of catastrophe hovers over Gordín, but he creates works that grin at us, with sympathy and understanding. That his songs of innocence should have turned into storm-shattered songs of experience may well seem inevitable.

—María Gainza

Sebastián Gordín, *Amanece en las trincheras* (Dawn Breaks at the Trenches), 2011, diptych, wood, resin, each panel 13 x 33 1/8".

