

**PAMELA PHATSIMO SUNSTRUM
DIORAMA**

11th January 2019 – 8th March 2019
Private View: Thursday 10th January 2019, 6-8pm

“I think of the figures in my work as time travelling, fantastical, alternate selves. The landscapes they traverse are simultaneously futuristic and prehistoric. As such, Time, History, Space, Place and Self-Hood – whether actual or invented – are all significant narrative and conceptual concerns”.

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, 2018

Tiwani Contemporary is pleased to announce *Diorama*, an exhibition of new work by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum – the first solo presentation of paintings by the artist. Grounded in drawing, Sunstrum’s multimedia practice also encompasses installation, animation and performance.

For this new body of work, Sunstrum explored early 20th-century studio portraits featuring people of colour posing against contrived and hand-painted landscape backdrops. She researched a diverse range of archive material focusing especially on the work of Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge, the first official photographer of the Royal Court of Benin City, in present-day Nigeria. In the early 40s, he established a studio and produced over the course of his 60-year career an unprecedented visual history of Benin royalty and society. In these images, Alonge’s subjects present themselves with agency and in a liberating and self-affirming manner - a stark and radical counterpoint to colonial representations of Black and African people at the time.

Developing her own ideas around self-mythology, illusionism and fantasy, Sunstrum constructed her own diorama as a starting point for her new series of paintings. Featuring romantic landscapes, potted plants, rococo style furniture and a checkerboard floor, in reference to European Renaissance paintings and the iconic flooring of Alonge’s studio - the model she constructed is both real and imagined. It brings together seemingly disconnected periods and styles and helps to expand on themes of timelessness and placelessness.

Today, the diorama is better known as a situational exhibition method used in natural history museums, recreating three-dimensional scene frozen in time and space, and purporting to illustrate a manifest form of cultural ‘otherness’. Engaging in performances which involved dressing up in period costumes referring to stories, real or imagined, of colonial conquests and European explorers’ fascination for the new world, Sunstrum posed in the diorama and invited others to join in too. The photographs created during these sessions provided a rich departure point for several of the paintings in this exhibition.

In these paintings, Sunstrum often depicts mysterious, faceless figures, whose delicately outlined bodies merge with one another and the landscape which surrounds them, evoking notions of connectedness, togetherness and hybridity. Sunstrum, who nurtures an ongoing interest in science-fiction and advanced theories in science, frequently plays with space and

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scale, depicting together on a single plane, figures which, according to the normative rules of perspective drawing, should belong to separate perspectival dimensions. The result is an unsettling play with perception, opening up radical ways to represent, and see through place, movement and time, and suggesting the possibility of time travelling and the existence of alternate dimensions. If indeed, the Greek etymology of diorama means “to see through”, the device also stands as a screen onto which a world of fantasy and fiction merges with the display of knowledge and science. Sunstrum dismantles the diorama’s strategies of illusionism, opens it up to her critical line of inquiry on the power of representation and the visual legacy of colonialism.

Several works in this exhibition were originally commissioned and produced by Artspace, San Antonio, Texas.