

"Sole Searching: Stepping into Authenticity with Sneaker Box Dioramas in the Era of Fake Realities": Personal to Political Exhibition

By Salma Siddique, Associate Professor of Psychoanalytic Anthropology in Human Development, Connecticut College

As I stand in the classroom, surrounded by a quiet intensity of students hunched over their shoeboxes, I am struck by the profound simplicity of this assignment. I am a visiting Associate Professor in Psychoanalytic Anthropology in Human Development and Social Psychology, watching worlds unfold in miniature. The air was thick, with a scent of glue and possibility. This diorama project, spanning developmental psychology, social psychology, and psychoanalytic anthropology courses, has become more than an interdisciplinary exercise. It is a window into the psyche, a three-dimensional representation of the complex interplay between personal narratives and societal forces. I pick up a discarded scrap of cardboard and turn it over. In this simple material, students find the building blocks of the universe. This reminds me of Lévi-Strauss's concept of bricolage - the art of creating meaning from whatever is at hand. These students were bricoleurs of the highest order, fashioning coherent narratives from the residue of their lived experiences.

A student's diorama catches my eye - a voting booth with a curtain pulled back-revealing a complex network of strings and pulleys. Each string connects to a different aspect of the voter's life: family, job, fear, and hope. It is a stark reminder of how personal experiences shape political choices and vice versa. In this election year, the metaphor feels poignant. As I move through the room, I am struck by how these dioramas embody Winnicott's concept of the transitional phenomena. These shoebox worlds exist in the liminal space between internal and external experiences. They're a bridge between the self and the other, the personal and the political. One diorama depicts a bedroom split down the middle - one-half meticulously ordered, the other controlled chaos of colour and texture. It is a visual representation of the conflict between societal expectations and individual expression, a theme I have explored countless times during therapy sessions. However, this concept takes on tangible and immediate qualities in this miniature form. I think about Vygotsky's theories on cultural mediation and how artistic tools at our disposal shape our understanding of the world. These dioramas are the highest-order cultural tools that allow students to externalise internal states to make the invisible visible. In doing so, they are not just representing their world; they are actively shaping it.

As the day progresses, I will reflect on the nature of authenticity in the digital age. In a world of virtual realities and AI-generated content, there is something profoundly grounded in these physical creations. They remind us of the power of touch, making and seeing our thoughts and feelings take tangible forms. I remember Siddique's observations of digital space as a new transitional phenomenon. In their physical form, these dioramas counter our increasingly digital lives. They allow for a

psychogeography of the mind, in which the spatial arrangement of objects becomes a map of the psyche.

I prepare to leave. I take one last look at the room. The dioramas are in various stages of completion: some are nearly finished, and others are still in the early stages of construction. However, each one is a universe unto itself, a testament to the power of imagination and the complexity of human experience. In the context of this project, plagiarism has a new meaning. It is not just academic misconduct; it is a form of psychological shoplifting, an attempt to appropriate another's intellectual and emotional labour. This framing underscores the profound personal nature of these creations and the importance of honouring each student's unique voice.

By cycling home through the Connecticut suburbs, past campaign signs, and manicured lawns, I think about the broader implications of this project. In a time of grand narratives and sweeping ideologies, these shoebox dioramas remind us of the importance of the small, personal, and handcrafted. They invited us to peer other lives, perspectives, and possibilities. I reach a shoebox filled with old photographs and memories of nightfall. As I arrange them, I realise that I engage in meaning-making, curating my ethnographic encounters with myself. In the dim light of my study, the world unfolds in miniature. For a moment, I hold infinity in the palms of my hands. This is a powerful reminder of why I chose this field: to explore the vast universes within each of us and help others navigate their internal landscapes. This project reinforced my belief in the power of creative expression as a tool for psychological exploration and social understanding. As we navigate an increasingly complex political landscape, these dioramas remind us of the human need to make sense of our world through tangible creative acts.

Ultimately, this is the most significant value for miniature worlds. They offer us a chance to see our world anew—to recognise the diorama-like quality of our lives, the careful curation of our experiences, and the constant negotiation between the worlds we imagine and inhabit. In doing so, they remind us of the profound interconnectedness between individual stories and collective narratives.

By Salma Siddique, Associate Professor of Psychoanalytic Anthropology in Human Development, Connecticut College

SSIDDIQUE@CONNCOLL.EDU

<https://www.conncoll.edu/directories/faculty-profiles/salma-siddique/>