



EXHIBITS NEWSLINE

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action? Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: NAMENewsline@gmail.com.

Finding Truth in the Surreal at Lezley Saar’s *Diorama Drama*

CRAFT CONTEMPORARY

Los Angeles, California

On a recent visit to L.A. with a museum colleague, I dropped into Craft Contemporary to see artist Lezley Saar’s recent work in a solo show titled *Diorama Drama*. We’d spent the morning across the street, diving deep into prehistory at the La Brea Tar Pits, so I was ready for a dose of beauty and whimsy. This exhibition delivered.

Inspired by natural history dioramas, Saar set out to create, “a space, emotion, and story that one can be sucked into and hopefully transported somewhere.” Unlike the displays at most museums, visitors could walk into these tableaux to closely examine each individual work (fig. 1).

The exhibition’s design was simple. Brightly painted walls and plinths with contrasting theatrical curtains suggested a script in which each character and object had a role and a purpose (fig. 2). Combined with the artist’s twists on traditional museum display techniques, the mood was somewhere between church and carnival; velvety Victorian nostalgia tipped into creepy objectification and exoticism.



Fig. 1. The artworks were described in a printed handout; their titles held just enough story to leave me intrigued and bewildered.



Fig. 2. Each group of work included large painted banners, collages, elaborately costumed mannequins, and small tabletop cabinets of wonder.

The succinct curatorial text noted that these dioramas, “illustrate (Saar’s) belief in finding the truth in the surreal and her agency as an artist and a biracial woman to construct her own reality.” She invited me, her viewer, to do the same. Were these characters from the past or the future? Were they guiding me to the truth or selling snake oil? I wonder how many of our visitors ask themselves similar questions as they stand before our historical or scientific displays (fig. 3).

This exhibition checked lots of boxes for me:

- It invited me to explore at my own pace and direction, to closely examine objects I found fascinating and to skip over others.
- The design created context without pulling my attention from the works on display.
- It made me look at familiar things in a new way.

I left delighted and energized.

Penny Jennings, Immediate Past President of NAME



Fig. 3.

Septime, a collector of breezes, hoarder of voices, and gatherer of olfactory ephemera, once changed her lover into a lake to protect him. 2019.

Revisiting the Past, Indigenizing the Future

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (AMNH)

New York, New York

As museum anthropologists, we were interested to visit the recently reopened Northwest Coast Hall, first created in 1899 by Franz Boas, who is often credited as the father of American anthropology. Our research often emphasizes the representation and narration of museum object collections; however, contemporary exhibition practice is also a vital field of study, particularly in imagining new dynamics between museums and communities. We were encouraged by how the exhibition confronts its past incarnation by addressing the realities of previous relationships while also modeling the relationships that still might develop among museums, anthropologists, and Indigenous Peoples. While the hall's location renders it a popular thoroughfare, its narrow shape represents a design challenge alongside a curatorial opportunity to reach a broader audience (fig. 1).

Large panels outlining AMNH's commitment to collaborations with First Nation communities, including co-curation, first caught our attention and alerted us to the shift in the museum's approach to community engagement for this exhibition (fig. 2). As we wound our way through the labyrinth of cases, we found distinct voices from each Nation emanating

Fig. 1. Overview of the new Northwest Coast Hall: Pacific Northwest Cultures exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History.



