

## Dream Bubble: Olivia Erlanger Laura Brown

Olivia Erlanger has been taking up various forms, filling and then unraveling them like conspiracies. For *Split-level Paradise*, her recent exhibition at Bel Ami, Los Angeles (2020), she nominated a series of snow globes as a potential and possessive form of space—in her words, “a movie director’s dream, constructed from every angle.”

Around the same time that Erlanger’s exhibition opened, I had the unexpected fortune of watching the Alexander Payne movie *Downsizing* (2017). Deep in snowy Norway, a scientist formulates the possibility of miniaturizing living things—first a rat, then humans—as a solution to the global ecological crisis. The invention is publicly unveiled on a Las Vegas convention stage, from which dozens of five-inch-tall people smile and wave. Their combined waste fills half of a sagging garbage bag, displayed alongside them.

Ten years later, the sales pitch has transformed into a lifestyle dream. Tiny colonies with names like Leisureland offer a life of endless recreation in giant mansions (relatively speaking). Once you decide to physically shrink, your equivalent wealth shall inversely expand by a factor of around eighty. This mini land is insulated by an ever-present ceiling of netting—a security feature preventing inhabitants from being catastrophically pierced by regular-size mosquitos. Almost a sci-fi drama, although more of a comedy, it is all fantastically mundane. In *Split-level Paradise*, each large plastic dome functions something similar to the *Truman Show* like mosquito-net ceiling, pressing an awareness of inside and outside as you gaze into them. There are three works in total, varying by subtle house-paint hue. In each, an architectural model of a split-level home floats on a thin, tilted surface. A large hole appears in this plane—a sinkhole? A loss? A portal? Above and below, artificial snow rests in silent banks.

In Erlanger’s recent collaborative project with Mexican architect Luis Ortega Govea, *Garage* (2018), which took the form of a book published by MIT Press and a documentary film, the garage became the central architectural element. Symbolizing a nostalgia for suburban entrepreneurship, as in the mythical origins of Apple, we find the garage to be an invention in itself. Erlanger also began thinking about the car that lives in and leaves it, delivering the moving world through a curved glass windscreen. With *Ida* (2018), she installed a number of protruding mermaid tails inside a Los Angeles laundromat, surrounded by the pulsating faces of washing machines. Now, in *Split-level Paradise*, the snow globe encloses the entire family home, including its garage, car, and front-load washer. We can imagine further possible screens inside of it, like the doors of a shower or a microwave oven.

Down one side of each modeled house the paint appears darker, as if to suggest a certain orientation and time of day. Erlanger cast into her memory of her childhood home to construct these split-level structures. Like the apparitions inside a snow globe in a film—Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941) being paradigmatic—this childhood memory functions as a form of nostalgia, which itself revolves as a construction of movies and television. Erlanger’s attempt roughly parallels Mike Kelley’s *Educational Complex* (1995), wherein Kelley recalled and

combined the layouts of his suburban schools, approaching the gaps in his memory as representations of trauma. Erlanger also finds precedent in Julie Becker’s extensively sketched and modeled *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993-1996), through which the artist sought a transformative process of identification with fictional spaces and people. With *Split-level Paradise* Erlanger reaches into the alternative dimensions of pop-cultural reality stored in one’s own mind. The snow globe turns into a crystal ball.

In a conversation with her mother, Erlanger realized that her memory was invented: the family home never had a second floor. Absent of people, latent movement underpins these works. Under snow and lichen, a road stretches a surreal map from edge to edge. Beneath the blue house, *Soft Kiss* (2020), a second hole appears, finally opening up a full circulation. Erlanger’s sculptures become much like movies in themselves, continually constructing the direction of memory as we peer into them mesmerized, waiting.



57 Olivia Erlanger, *Mr. Held's Class*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salvesson

58 59 Olivia Erlanger, *Split-level Paradise* installation view at Bel Ami, Los Angeles, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salvesson

