

## “I WANT MORE, IN A NUTSHELL”

Anita DeSoto

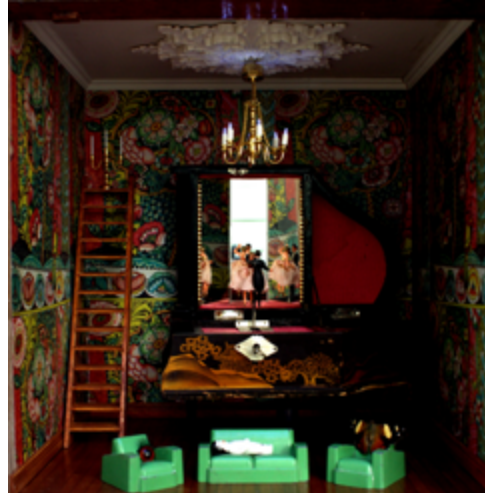


Figure 1. Anita DeSoto, *Light The Way* (2015), mixed media.

*Arriba Arriba!* was the exclamation I overheard from behind the neighbour's fence, along with a shrill whirring of the tongue, in Vallejo, California. This was a year ago.

It has taken me a full year to percolate my ideas and make my heartfelt response to that wonderful and challenging place. Although I painted there and exhibited, my new miniature 3D dioramas have been the most exciting outcome for me, and the most significant result of my artist's residency at New Pacific Studios in Vallejo.

Vallejo is a satellite city 40 minutes north of San Francisco by ferry. I feel so glad I did not google much about it before my partner, Gregory, and I went there, as we probably would not have gone. I had romantic pictures of a quaint little Mexican town: haciendas, dusty little roads, a hint of Frida Kahlo maybe ...



Figures 2 & 3. Anita DeSoto, *Detail, Three Love Stories Up* (2015), mixed media.



Figures 4 & 6. Anita DeSoto, *Detail, Three Love Stories Up* (2015), mixed media and *The Fertility Suite* (2015), mixed media.

Vallejo is populated largely by Mexicans, Afro-Americans and a Philippine community. These ethnic groups provided labour in the past for the US Navy's boat-building industry on Mare Island – described as a "potential historic place and contemporary arts precinct like Sydney's Cockatoo Island."

We were struck by Vallejo's gun culture, and shocked by its poverty.

While I began painting in my sunny outdoor studio in a garden full of squirrels and fruit, Gregory bought two bicycles from the 'Sallies,' saving our sanity immediately. As a result of Gregory's volunteer work at the recycled bike depot (much like Dunedin's Crooked Spoke), the Saint Vincent's Community Garden and the delivery of meals to homeless people, we quickly became known as the Kiwi Kids when we pulled up on our bikes, which was pretty cute being both 53 years old! We instantly felt embraced by this community with so much welcoming hospitality and felt glad to have found ourselves there among a rich culture of blues, ethnic food and warm friendly Californians.

My intention was to research Mexican *retablo* painting in Vallejo. In Latin America, *retablo* is a type of devotional painting, especially small-scale folk art using iconography derived from traditional Catholic Church art. *Retablos* were typically made to express gratitude to the Virgin Mary for saving an individual or a loved one from a near-fatal event or other difficult circumstance. The intention is one of thanksgiving and also to seek protection through depicting a specific event. *Retablos* may be deposited at a shrine as a votive offering, or alternatively kept at home. The most important part of the *retablo* is the representation of the miraculous event in question, which is why most artists use bright, vibrant colors to portray its overwhelming significance to those affected.

I enjoyed an inspiring visit to the studio of Mexican artist, Luis Daniel Gutierrez. Gutierrez talked to me about his belief in the spiritual power of his work, even though he was contemporising the tradition of the *retablo* by replacing saints with contemporary icons like Wonder Woman.

I became interested in how the visual image can be a tool for opening ourselves up to wellbeing, and so I practiced with a few paintings depicting the circumstance and the desired outcome. The *retablo* provides a surreal framework for creating a dream state that has always been a tool for me. This led me to embodying my ideas about desire, longing, love, nostalgia, the shrine, the miniature and the souvenir in these dioramas.

I think of these tableaux as an expansion of my surreal painting themes, but instead of loss and longing I am focused on wellbeing and manifesting dreams. The work is encapsulated in old domestic cupboards and was shown along with large-scale photographs of the miniature interiors and their inhabitants.

The exhibition "I Want more, in a Nutshell" was shown at the Artists Room, Dunedin, in August 2015.

New Zealand artist **Anita DeSoto** lives in Waitati, Dunedin, and has been exhibiting nationally and internationally for the last 13 years. She has a Master of Fine Arts and has been lecturing in drawing at the Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, since 2004. Located within the Neo-Romantic, DeSoto's paintings embody the recurring theme of perception coloured by desire, where nothing is quite what it might first seem.