

ARTFORUM

500 WORDS

Joianne Bittle

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Left: **Joianne Bittle**, *Preserving Mass Extinction*, 2010, mixed media in cargo trailer, 96 x 71 x 72". Right: **Joianne Bittle**, *Preserving Mass Extinction* (detail), 2010.

Joianne Bittle is a painter who lives and works in Long Island City, New York. Here she discusses her first "Portable Landscape," a diorama she made for a recent exhibition at Eugene Binder Gallery in Marfa, Texas. The piece has traveled to New York for her solo show "No Man's Land" at Chumer and Chumer, which opens on March 24.

PRESERVING MASS EXTINCTION is the first diorama installation that I consider my own work. I've made dioramas for the Natural History Museum and in commercial settings for years. But I like to think of this one as the first in a series of "Portable Landscapes."

The scene is the Permian Basin, millions of years ago, before the dinosaurs. The creatures are all soft-bodied mollusks, which are surrounded by these amazing fossils—I have a bunch in the studio that I collected in the desert. The end of the Permian period was marked by the largest mass extinction that the world has ever known. Something like 98 percent of species became extinct. There are some species that did continue: They grew legs and moved on land and adapted. Scorpions came from trilobites; they left the sea at one point and, as things dried up, they held on.

About a year ago when I first thought about doing this project, I had just finished a big commercial diorama that I was able to direct on my own. At the time, I had been showing work in Marfa and loved the landscape and the geology there. Almost no one understands the history of the environment down in that area. If you know that the whole region was under water during the Paleozoic Era and then you see the landscape today, the hills and the quality of the earth make a lot more sense. My original intent was to make the connection for people who are in the area, whether they are looking at art or not. So I decided to go back in time and create this underwater scene.

Physically, the diorama is in a trailer with wheels. Everyone has a trailer in Texas. People are always dragging stuff around to town in them. I think the one in the piece is a tack trailer, for supplies, as I don't think you could actually fit a horse in there. It has a kind of spaceship look to it that I really like.

The new series of paintings I'm working on is of moon men. Astronauts are cowboys in space, pioneers in a new environment. These astronauts come after a series of jackrabbits that are also part of the show. Now I am reading all these books about NASA and all the failures of the space program and things like the portable life support suits. It's all part of a very extended timeline that connects these moments of uncertainty, of not knowing what comes next.

— As told to Megan Heuer