

Alison Elizabeth Taylor





Boom & Bust

and the psychological states they inspire and provoke.”² In her view of the American Southwest where she grew up, tract homes and big box chain stores anchor “insta-communities,” altering rural areas by gentrifying vestigial “frontiers” where off-the-gridders seek refuge from societal norms and expectations. Although Taylor’s narratives mine the physical ramifications of the transformation of desert and remote rural areas into suburbia, it is the individuals who do not fit into the homogenous structures of comfort and consistency that populate the artist’s imagination and art.

Born in Selma, Alabama, in 1974, Taylor grew up in Las Vegas, Nevada, one of the most explosive markets for new housing in recent years and a steroidal example of the historical boom and bust cycle of western towns. She received a BFA in painting at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA, in 2001, before completing her graduate work at Columbia University, New York, in 2005.

In the 1990s Taylor explored the narrative potential of integrating vinyl, wood-grain patterned contact paper into her drawings for its associations with the cheap, the faux, and the transient. However, it was the decorative program of the *intarsia* lined, humanist *studiolo*, or study, from the ducal palace

Above and below right: **Room**, 2007–2008
(interior and exterior views)
Wood veneer, pyrography, shellac
96 x 120 x 96 inches
Collection of Peter Tillou

Cover: **Study for Folie à Deux**, 2008 (detail)
Wood veneer, shellac
25 x 22 inches
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery,
New York, NY

Life in the “fin-de-binge”¹ era of the late 1990s and early 2000s has been a wild ride with the explosion of decadence as norm and the stunning recession of 2008 brought on, in part, by the collapse of trusted financial institutions. Mirroring the larger culture, artists during this period responded to the often confusing, rapidly evolving socio-cultural and economic landscape by creating new paradigms for their art practices—some were profound, some not, many were culled from the detritus of lived lives; and others, like Alison Elizabeth Taylor, imbued their art with a disquieting exactitude of intent.

As an artist coming of age in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Taylor’s marquetry-cum-paintings are a synthesis of tour de force technique and narratives bound together by themes of escape, isolation, and passion. Taylor is deeply concerned with creating highly legible images that deal with “concepts of territory, development, and progress—





Bombay Beach, 2008
Wood veneer, shellac
96 x 58 inches
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery,
New York, NY

of Federico da Montefeltro (1422–1482) in Gubbio, Italy—now conserved and reconstructed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—that inspired her to learn wood inlay techniques during her graduate work. *Intarsia*, or marquetry, is made by piecing together small bits of wood and affixing them to a substrate to form a flat, pictorial surface.³ In addition to displaying virtuoso inlay technique, such *studiolos* were also grand works intended to reinforce the position of the patron by demonstrating both intellectual prowess and the ability to afford such a highly labor intensive medium to decorate what was a secular, private space.

While Taylor also uses pyrography as a drawing medium (burning images into wood with a heated point) to convey further detail about her subjects, it is her use of the high-end medium of wood inlay in the same “painterly” manner of fifteenth-century Italian artisans that ultimately sets up an exquisite tension in these works. Describing her choice of medium, the artist states that:

Part of the appeal of wood inlay is its erratic flights to the high- and low-ends of the spectrum. This hierarchical schizophrenia of artistic value makes one consider how such distinctions are determined.

Before turning to a discussion of Taylor’s magnificent *Room*—a figureless *trompe l’oeil* (French for “fool the eye”) architectural portrait of an unknown inhabitant based on the Gubbio Studiolo—a discussion of the eight other works in the exhibition provide an illuminating look into her recurring themes. The first group of works, *Bombay Beach*, 2008, *Slab City*, 2007, and *Chainlink*, 2008, are set in the stark desert of southern California’s Salton Sea; and each describes a ramification of a very specific boom/bust scenario. The second group—*Study for Folie à Deux*, 2008 (cover), *Era of Argus*, 2007, *Wonder Valley*, 2008, *Study for Hank*, 2007, and *Paradise Gates*, 2009—inhabit a kind of nowhere land whose disparate narratives are linked by mutual passions, issues of survival, and a desire to live outside of the mainstream.



Slab City, 2007
Marquetry, shellac
47 x 77 inches
Collection of Howard Simon



Chainlink, 2008
Wood veneer, shellac
34 x 46 inches
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery,
New York, NY

Initially hailed as the “new Los Angeles” and the “Riviera of California,” the Salton Sea, like Death Valley, is located below sea level. Known geologically as the Salton Sink, this inland area near Niland, California, alternated as a fresh water lake and dry desert basin for over three million years. The most recent replenishment of the Sea in 1905 was the result of rainfall, snowmelt, and an accidental flooding of the Colorado River into the Salton Sink. The area became a tourist attraction in the 1920s; and given the Sea’s lack of outflow and the high salinity of its inflow, algae and bacterial blooms

caused by agricultural runoff increased exponentially as the twentieth century progressed. Although birds still use the Sea on migratory routes, and *Tilapia* is the only fish that can survive there, the toxic brew took a toll on residents and the tourism industry; by the 1970s many homes and businesses were abandoned.

Taylor’s *Bombay Beach*, 2008, refers to a community located on the east shore of the Salton Sea. The latest census figures report that there are approximately 366 people, mostly retirees, living in what remains of Bombay Beach. In the eight-foot tall, wood inlay, *Bombay Beach*, a deserted motel is visible to the left of the central, apostle-like figure, and an upended chair can be seen on the right. Naked and wrapped in a blanket, the figure’s face is somewhat impassive although there is a hint of aggression in the man’s furrowed eyebrows. According to the artist, squatters have been drawn to Bombay Beach to reclaim abandoned properties; and they tend to meet trespassers with hostility in this semi-abandoned public space, which, in a sense, has become private again.

Slab City refers to a community near Bombay Beach that exists on the decommissioned WWII base, Marine Barracks Camp Dunbar. During the winter months, campers and mobile homes line



End of Argus, 2007
Wood veneer, pyrography, shellac
47 x 70 inches
Collection of Tom and Charlotte Newby



Left: **Wonder Valley**, 2008
Wood veneer, shellac
47 x 70 inches
Collection of Jeff and Leslie Fischer

Below: **Paradise Gates**, 2009
Wood veneer, shellac
47 x 70 inches
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery,
New York, NY

the concrete slabs and paved surfaces of what were once barracks and roads, although a group of mostly retirees and solar advocates called “Slabbers” live there year round. In Taylor’s version of the same name, two hands reach up from the dark area on the right, perhaps referencing the death of the Salton Sea (or are the hands rising from the sea?); and the two men in the center are in the process of taking off their clothes, either to cool down or to join (or save?) the person in the murk. Fighter planes from a nearby airforce base are seen overhead; and in a bit of visual humor, the image of Devil’s Tower in Wyoming—a sacred place for American Indians and a utopian image in this dysphoric place—decorates the camper van in the upper left.

The last piece in this group, *Chainlink*, focuses on an entrepreneur’s concept of respite, a pool, abandoned and cut off by a chainlink fence. No figures are necessary here, and Taylor states that the ubiquitous pool in desert community developments symbolizes our innate desire to transform rather than adapt to the environment. Interestingly, the sky in *Chainlink* is veneer cut from a piece of Brazilian Rosewood called “survivor,” because it comes from a log that survived clear burning in the Brazilian rainforest. Charred streaks in the sky evoke storm clouds.

Turning to the next group of pieces, *Folie à Deux* summarizes the shared theme of this group, as *folie à deux* translates as “a madness shared by two” and refers to a psychiatric syndrome in which a psychosis is transmitted between two or more people. Taylor sees such shared, almost contagious passions as a

call to action, albeit embedded with inherent contradictions as suggested in *Era of Argus*, where an ex-Marine tenderly feeds a peacock. Taking its title from the myth of Argus, a guardian with a hundred eyes, *Era of Argus* asks hard questions about how soldiers trained to protect their country adapt, or don’t, when they re-enter society. In *Wonder Valley*, two women sit in front of a geodesic dome and are either under surveillance or being protected by the man in the truck. According to the artist, the freedom and remoteness of the desert and remote rural areas attracts utopian separatists from many walks of life—Christians, Mormons, new age practitioners, and survivalists—all bound together by common needs; water, security, and preserving open spaces in order to safeguard their way of life.

Study for Hank and *Paradise Gates* speak eloquently to the ambiguity and possibilities of liminal thresholds and spaces; those sometimes uncomfortable spaces where social norms just do

(essay continues on page 6)



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Selma, Alabama, Alison Elizabeth Taylor grew up in Las Vegas, NV, and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She received a BFA from the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA, in 2001, and an MFA from Columbia University, New York, NY. In addition to her solo exhibition at The College of Wooster Art Museum, she had two solo exhibitions, in 2006 and 2008, respectively, at the James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai, China, and Ambach and Rice Gallery, Seattle, WA, both in 2009; Track 16 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 2007; New Image Art Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 2006; Exit Art, New York, NY, and 96 Gillespie, London, England, both in 2005.

In addition to a Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation Space Program award in 2006, Taylor was nominated for and received a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship in 2009 to conduct research on historical and cross-cultural inlay processes in Smithsonian collections.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All dimensions are h x w inches

1. **Study for Hank**, 2007
Wood veneer, shellac; 25 x 33
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
2. **Slab City**, 2007
Wood veneer, shellac; 47 X 77
Collection of Howard Simon
3. **Era of Argus**, 2007
Wood veneer, pyrography, shellac; 47 x 70
Collection of Tom and Charlotte Newby
4. **Room**, 2007–2008
Wood veneer, pyrography, lacquer; 96 x 120 x 96
Collection of Peter Tillou
5. **Chainlink**, 2008
Wood veneer, shellac; 34 x 46
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
6. **Bombay Beach**, 2008
Wood veneer, pyrography, shellac; 96 x 58
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
7. **Study for Folie à Deux**, 2008
Wood veneer, shellac; 25 x 22
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
8. **Wonder Valley**, 2007–2008
Wood veneer, shellac; 47 x 70
Collection of Jeff and Leslie Fischer
9. **Paradise Gates**, 2009
Wood veneer, shellac; 47 x 70
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY

Photography: Christopher Burke and Jason Mandella,
Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is a moment in viewing Alison Elizabeth Taylor's work when—after marveling over the beautiful materials and the wood inlay details—the narrative starts to sink in and you find that you don't look away even though the story portrayed is less than comfortable. Artists play an important role in society, and it is their creation of moments like these that remind us just how crucial they are to a healthy society.

In addition to thanking Ali Taylor for her passion and vision as an artist, I would like to thank the James Cohan Gallery for their support of this exhibition. Elyse Goldberg, Director, James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY, was instrumental in producing this project, as were the James Cohan Gallery staff: Laurie Harrison, Alisa Ochoa, Michael Goodson, and Christopher Rawson. We also thank the lenders to the exhibition for generously sharing their works with the public: Jeff and Leslie Fischer, Tom and Charlotte Newby, Howard Simon, and Peter Tillou.

At Wooster, Doug McGlumphy, museum preparator, conceived the exhibition design and executed the beautiful installation; Joyce Fuell, museum administrative coordinator, superbly handled the many exhibition details, from budgets to proofreading; and in the Publications Department, Roger Collier and Robin Welty once again produced a beautiful exhibition brochure on an unusually tight schedule.

Support for this exhibition was provided by The Burton D. Morgan Foundation, Hudson, OH, and a generous bequest from Muriel Mulac Kozlow, a member of the Class of 1948.

To all of the above I extend my warmest appreciation and gratitude.

Kitty McManus Zurko
Director and Curator



Study for Hank, 2007
Wood veneer, shellac; 25 x 33 inches
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY

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August 25–October 11, 2009
Sussel Gallery and the Burton D. Morgan Gallery

The College of Wooster Art Museum
Ebert Art Center

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not apply. *Study for Hank* comes from an experience the artist had in the desert near Joshua Tree, California, when a man on a bicycle suddenly appeared as she was walking on a desolate road. As Taylor states, "In these situations sometimes acknowledgment is welcome, and other times a direct look (even in greeting) is taken as a challenge." The less-than-friendly look of *Hank* speaks volumes about psychological thresholds. Similarly, in *Paradise Gates*, two hooded figures sit in an abandoned area, a liminal space between claimed and unclaimed spaces. Their faces are partially hidden as if to hide their identity; and gray, tomblike forms flank them on either side, creating a subliminal portal or gate. Intentionally or not, the gate motif suggests the limbo that exists in such non-spaces where ambiguity reigns and *communitas*, or unstructured communities, such as those depicted in *Bombay Beach* or *Slab City*, coalesce.⁴

All of these works "reveal the hidden histories of everyday lives," according to Taylor, by richly and lovingly describing in wood inlay some aspect of culturally peripheral societies. And while they may all be considered endangered species in certain respects, it is within the constructed space of *Room* where Taylor's theses most pointedly take form.

Throughout *Room's* "decorative program," much of which takes its cue from the Gubbio Studiolo's decorative program, updated iconography abounds. A Vietnam-era, US Army helmet with a playing card, the ace of spades (an anti-peace symbol during Vietnam) in the helmet cord references Federico da Montefeltro's Order of the Ermine and Order of the Garter military insignia; American Indian dolls attired in ceremonial regalia stand-in for the Renaissance version of Gods and heroes; and the workbench and tools speak to self-sufficiency and manual labor in lieu of Federico's intellectual pursuits.

In essence, both the Gubbio Studio and *Room* deconstruct their owners lives through what are essentially two-dimensional *Wundercabinets*, although it is the owner and occupant who are being classified. The artist, however, takes the idea of cataloging her endangered specimen a step further by directing that activity toward the viewer through the inclusion of four faux windows in her *mise-en-scène*. On the right side of the entry are two “views” of virgin desert and to the left is a large window of tract homes. The fourth window at the rear of *Room* looks out of the sleeping space onto a fat palm tree.

Once oriented to the space and the objects on the walls, it doesn't take long to realize that the faux “windows”—present in the Gubbio Studiolo as real working windows⁵—are mirror-like in Taylor's version in that they ask us to also catalogue our own actions, histories, and responsibilities. The virgin environment and tract-homes depicted on either side of *Room* converge on this alternative non-place, shining a laser-like focus on the question of global survival and the continuation of business as usual.

In the final analysis, Taylor's technically seductive *Room* pointedly reminds us that we too are complicit in the shared passions that have led to the extended, global boom of the last two decades and its reciprocal bust.

Kitty McManus Zurko
Director and Curator
The College of Wooster
Art Museum

Notes

1. Jerry Saltz, *New Yorker Magazine*, (July 13, 2009). Art critic Jerry Saltz's wordplay, where he used fin-de-binge instead of fin de siècle, appeared in his review of the James Ensor exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. In his concluding paragraph Saltz wrote, “Now that we're in our own fin-de-binge moment of starting over, stepping out, digging deep, and working hard, he [Ensor] is a necessary artist for other artists to see. Ensor clearly tells us that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies.”
2. Alison Elizabeth Taylor, written correspondence received June 24, 2009, and interview with the author, Brooklyn, New York, July 6, 2009.
3. Richard Muhlberger, *American Folk Marquetry* (New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1998), 17-24. The earliest known examples of wood inlay and marquetry are decorated boxes and furniture depicted in Ancient Egyptian wall paintings. Although Roman examples of marquetry are not known, Roman writers mentioned highly prized wood veneers as coverings for furniture. However, it was the discovery of perspective during the Renaissance when marquetry began to resemble painting in wood, and painters often supplied wood workers with *intarsia* designs.
4. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1967), 93. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep posited the theory of *rites de passage* as having three phases; separation, the margin or limen, and aggregation or re-entry. This theory was the basis of Victor Turner's expanded study in the 1960s where he described liminality or the “interstructural situation” as “the basic model of society . . . that of a structure of positions.” Turner postulated that it is the liminal period of transitions, or the margins, where the true structure of a society is visible, and described liminality as a limbo or ambiguous place characterized by humility, seclusion, tests, sexual ambiguity, and *communitas*, or an unstructured community where all members are equal.
5. Olga Raggio, *The Gubbio Studiolo and Its Conservation* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999). Although the Gubbio Studiolo does not contain any depictions of a *tromp l'oeil* “window,” other *studiolos*, such as the one in the ducal palace at Urbino, includes images depicting idyllic landscapes as seen through a window.



Opposite page: **Room**, 2007–2008
(interior view)
Wood veneer, pyrography, shellac
96 x 120 x 96 inches
Collection of Peter Tillou

Above: **Room**, 2007–2008
(four details)