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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



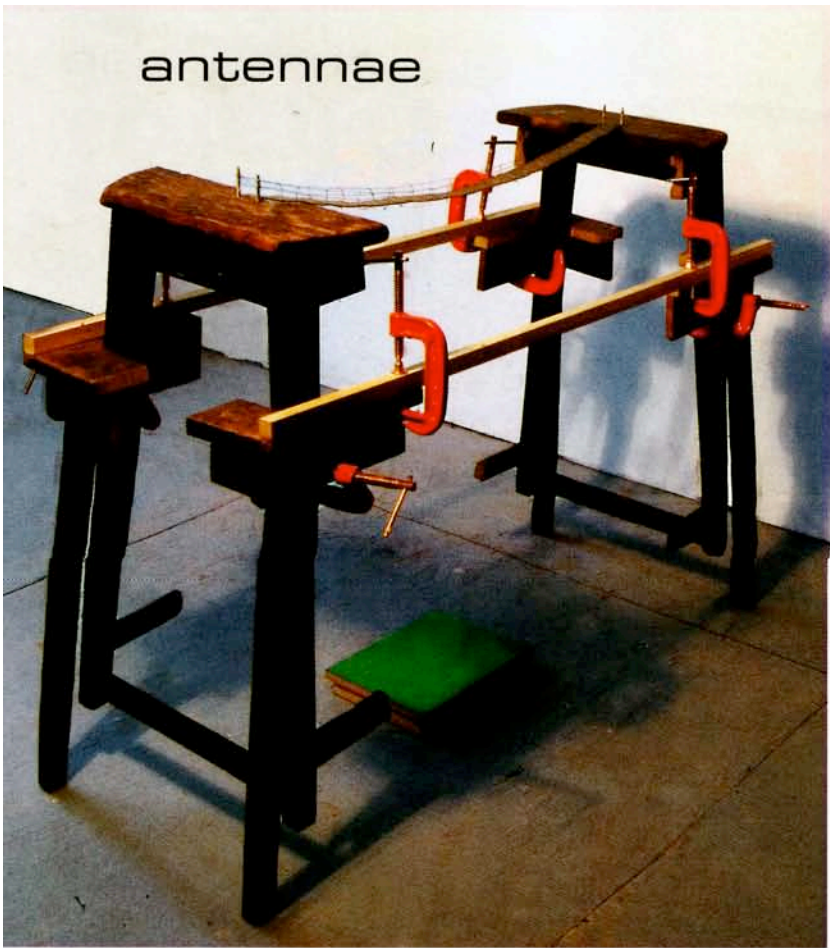
# TABLEAUX TOPS

Working with salvaged furniture, Michael Samuels has created a series of delightful diminutive installations – a refreshing change from the showy gigantism all the rage in contemporary art. But look closer at these lilliputian scenarios and a darker subtext begins to emerge, thinks Ossian Ward



In *Empire of Dirt* (2004), Samuels has created a mountain on a domestic scale. The overtones of heroism are counterbalanced by the everyday objects from which the piece is constructed

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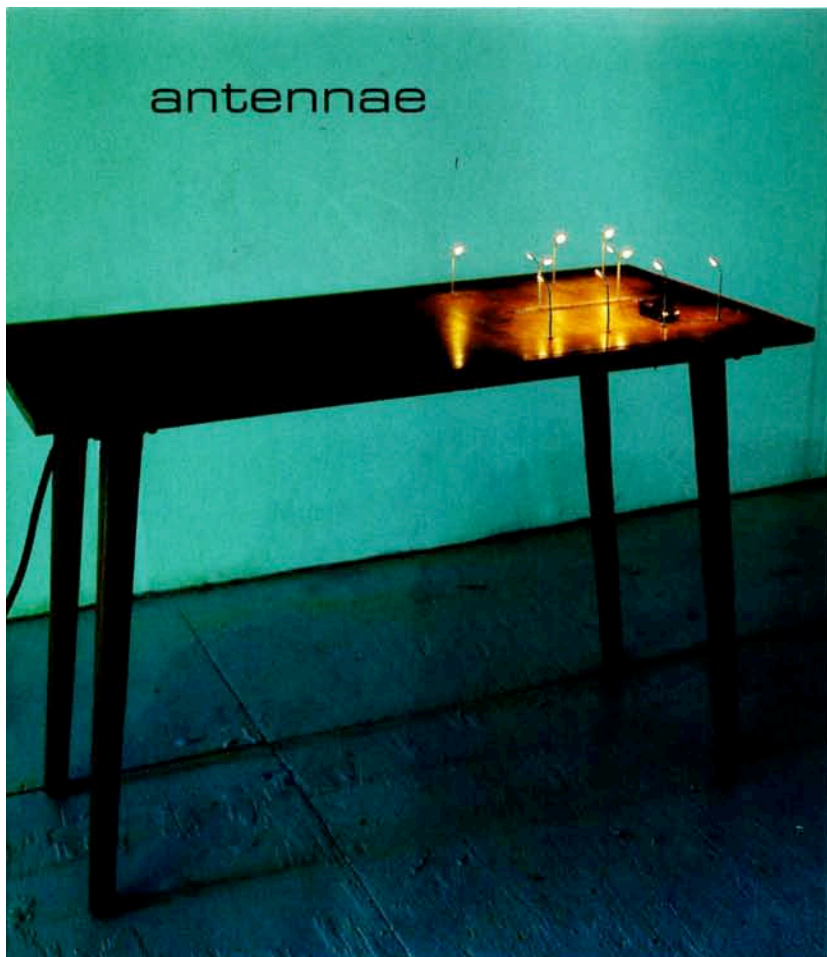
**WHAT AT FIRST** appears to be a stack of Ercol-style side tables is, on closer inspection, a rickety Mount Everest with dimly lit, miniature tents resting on each tabletop plateau and a step-ladder at base camp. The artist responsible for this installation (*Empire of Dirt*, 2004) and many other diminutive worlds is Michael Samuels, who leaves his scenes devoid of human presence because, he says, 'For me, that signifies that something has happened, or is about to happen.'

Before any tales of climbing accidents spring to mind it is on to the next mini diorama, this time of an idyllic castaway island surrounded by sparkling green-and-blue water, convincingly portrayed by a delicious-looking slab of resin. What he intended as an ironic look at the isolation of the classic desert island has, Samuels says, often been misinterpreted as an image of blissful holidaymaking. 'It was meant to trigger a destination that would be paradise for a couple of weeks but then become a hellish place.' Indeed, one rocky outcrop worthy of a James Bond villain conceals numerous skull motifs carefully carved into the fibreglass.

Although Samuels is a keen traveller, he admits that all this escapism might be connected with some childhood trauma experienced after moving from his birthplace of Liverpool to be brought up in Perth, Western Australia. 'I couldn't wait to leave,' he explains, amid scathing attacks on his former home down under. 'It was not so much a time warp as feeling distant from the rest of the world.' His latest series of works shuns the manicured lawns of squeaky-clean Australian suburbia and responds instead to his experiences over the past 20 years spent living in London and, latterly, becoming an artist. 'I like the seedy underbelly of life. I want to see that vibrancy, the rubbish on the streets and the markets – anything a bit rough around the edges.'

Samuels's first urban landscape, *Bad Moon* (2003), consists of a tiny, lone car parked under a phosphorescent yellow crowd of streetlamps, all of which was mounted on top of an old 1970s wooden table – suggesting the scene of a murder, a suicide or of some soon-to-be-realised crime. Other tabletop pieces such as *Buried* (2004) are more mundane but much funnier, depicting the forlorn site of abandoned roadworks surrounded by hazard lights or perhaps a few lilliputian dustbin bags arranged carefully round the circular stain of a coffee mug, which Samuels purposefully looks for on the salvaged bits of furniture. 'I find it cathartic to leave the cut marks, labels and fingerprints on them – they have to have history,' he says. ▷

Top left: the fragile rope bridge in *Crossing* (2006) is redolent of countless adventure stories. Top right: apparently abandoned in the top of an old drop-leaf table (complete with coffee-mug stains), the roadworks in *Buried* (2004, detail) have a slightly unsettling air



To some, these Tom Thumb-sized mattresses and black sacks may recall the work of YBAs Sarah Lucas and Gavin Turk. But this kind of inspiration is all round the artist's studio, on the litter-strewn streets of Hackney, east London's current mecca for young galleries and, it seems, for those, like Samuels, in need of some 'edginess' – not to mention cheap rent. The area's frequent house-clearance sales are also useful for seeking out his specific furniture requirements, avoiding the high prices asked for practically any 1960s and 1970s detritus in the many trendy shops round Hoxton and Shoreditch.

'For me, these furniture pieces are like drawing,' says Samuels. Certainly they can be made faster than the seascapes, which take about two months to construct courtesy of the eight or more layers of boiling-hot resin that must be poured, one by one, into the table-shaped moulds.

There is something uncanny and delightful about leaning over a landscape on a table, but the format was initially practical rather than evocative: 'It seemed to me a sensible way to present a small idea.' This insistence on intimacy is refreshing in an art world increasingly fuelled by the macho gigantism of much contemporary art and monumental public sculpture, but nevertheless has the faint whiff of Hornby train sets, gluey Airfix models, pots of enamel paint and grass verges made from green sponge. To counter this association, almost everything is handmade (though the streetlights are bought from model shops) and even a toy caravan on Samuels's workbench is deemed too big – too much like a toy.

'I don't want to be known as a craftsman,' Samuels interjects, on the subject of fashioning fiddly shopping trolleys from wire, 'or go down the Ron Mueck road of being technically great but with something lacking.' It is perhaps no surprise to learn that Mueck – creator of super-real figures scaled up or down, like Saatchi's former prize piece, *Dead Dad* – is also from Australia. In another barely disguised barb, which could apply to a whole generation of contemporary artists, he says, 'I don't want to have assistants either, I really do like making things – but also I like distressing them.' And perhaps, to a lesser degree, he likes distressing his audience as well ■

*Michael Samuels is showing at Rokeby, 37 Store St, London WC1 (020 7168 9942; rokebygallery.com), 11 Oct-14 Nov, and as part of 'Repatriating the Ark' at the Museum of Garden History, Lambeth Palace Rd, London SE1 (020 7401 8865) until 29 Oct*

Top left: *Bad Moon* (2003) was Samuels's first urban landscape; the streetlamps come from a model shop. Top right: the grandiose title of *Monument* (2006) is undercut both by the size of the work and the objects depicted – rubbish bags and a mattress