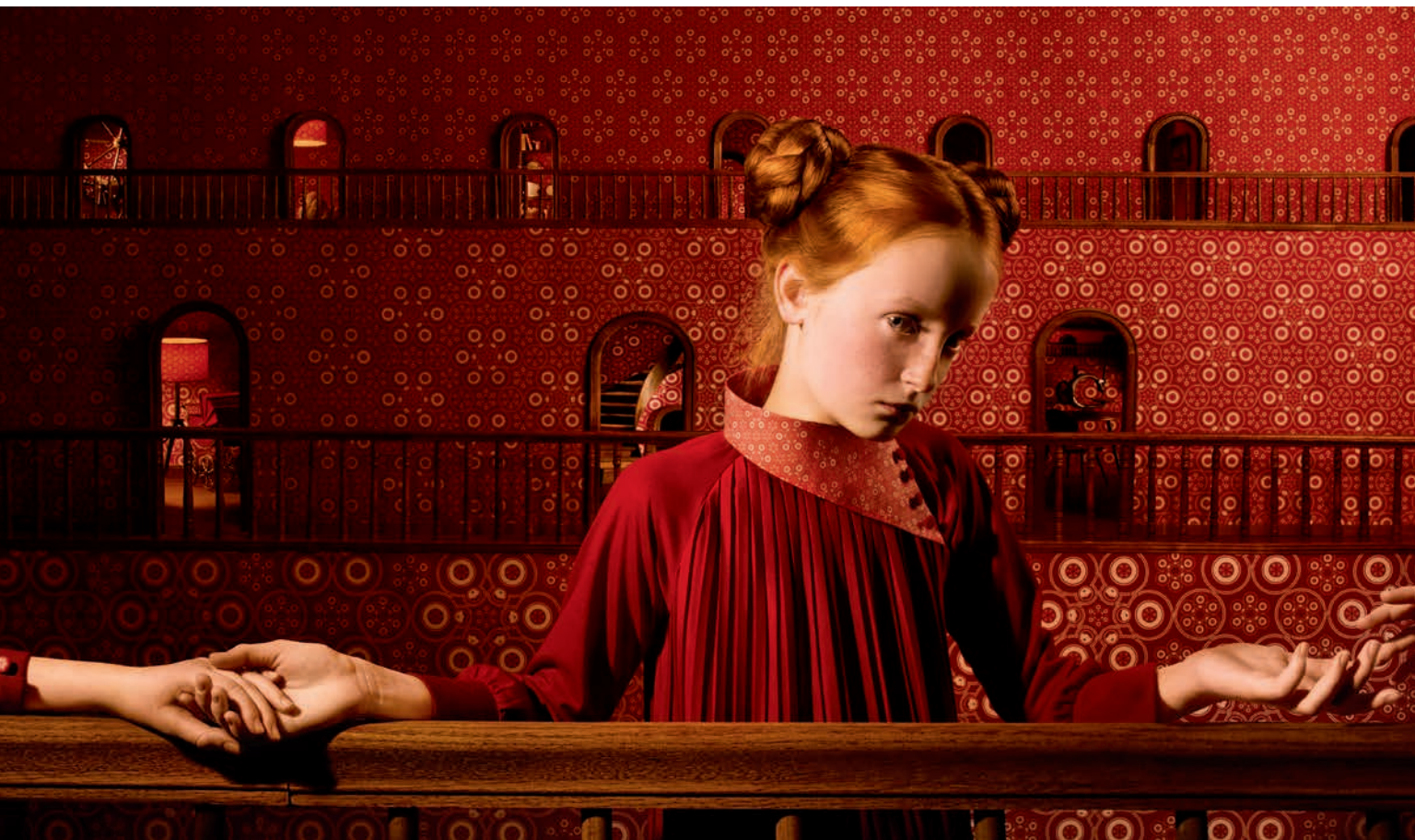


# LAETITIA SOULIER

## THE FRACTAL ARCHITECTURES



HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

## BETWEEN “BEING AND OUGHT”: Laetitia Soulier’s *Fractal Architectures*

John Stomberg, Virginia Rice Kelsey 1961s Director

Fractals abound in nature, unfold mathematically, and have inspired a new generation of computer-based image-makers who bridge science and art to create abstract patterns. Laetitia Soulier is not one of them. Though she is deeply engaged in the visual possibilities that fractals offer, her artistic practice asserts human creativity and handcraft in a universe most often understood digitally, and does so with naturalistic, if manufactured, environments. Her work embraces contradiction, complexity, and ambiguity in a manner both marvelous and mysterious. Soulier revels in the dichotomy between the careful logic she has established for her miniature interiors and the jarring effect of the dramatic scale shifts they reveal when photographed with human inhabitants.

*The Fractal Architectures*, the title of this exhibition, refers to a series of images the artist has created recently, in which the scale of the architecture on display is based on fractal patterning. Essentially, this means a pattern that can be repeated infinitely while always remaining essentially the same in all but size. The classic example of this is a triangle to which is added three smaller triangles that leave one equivalent vacant triangle. The process can be repeated for each of the smaller, empty triangles, recreating the larger pattern at a diminished scale. Theoretically, this process can go on forever. It is the design principal found in the spirals of a seashell, in the branching of a tree, and in the cosmos. Soulier uses fractals to define her carefully built environments, Lilliputian universes constructed of logic and imagination in equal parts, which she then populates with human models—often children.

She named each sub-series (*The Matryoshka Dolls* and *The Square Roots*) after the formula for

the fractal logic involved with that set of interiors. The “tell” is the wallpaper—each series has a pattern that visually represents the organizing principal involved. Matryoshka dolls are the wonderful Russian folk art toys where multiple figures of similar form nest inside one another. These are usually limited to five, six, or seven pieces that fit snugly inside the largest figure. Conceptually, they could keep growing and shrinking at the same ratio (in Soulier’s example, 1:2). This relationship is expressed in the red wallpaper that denotes the *Matryoshka Dolls* series. Similarly, the principal of a square root (1:16, 1:4, 1:2) defines the scale of the second group of images, and we can find that represented in the green pattern Soulier created for the *Square Roots* wallpaper.

Soulier starts her work by laboriously creating scale models of the scenes she imagines. Each piece of furniture, window, door, and small object that occupies her interiors is handmade. To create a series of photographs, she makes a separate model for each completed image—even when it represents the same scene. Each model accommodates a single vantage point, effectively functioning as a stage set that can be carefully lit from multiple directions. She reuses individual components within the interior, such as the furniture and decorations, but the walls and floors have to be rebuilt for each image. Soulier positions human models within the architectural space, at times stretched along or enveloped by an interior, at times identified only by a protruding foot or peeking face. She then takes multiple exposures of each tableau to allow for changes in how each section is viewed. These she unites in post-production using her computer. The seamless reality of the finished image is a testimony to

her skills with both hand and computer tools.

The three-dimensional architectural models in the exhibition were assembled after the photographs were completed. They capture the feel of the world Soulier creates photographically, and they reuse many of the objects made for her photographic sets, but they offer an alternative experience by extending the role of the imagination. With them we are able to project ourselves into the scenes, becoming immersed in the wonder of the world she has created. As open-ended as the photographs are, allowing for seemingly unending interpretive possibilities, they nevertheless freeze time. The models, on the other hand, encourage a participatory engagement that unfolds across time and space differently from their two-dimensional cousins. We move around them as objects and examine them from multiple vantage points. Ultimately, the models invite us to enjoy a very serious form of play.

When we enter a gallery of Soulier's work, the normal rules of reality are jettisoned, only to be replaced by a strict, if random, new logic of time and space. Disproportionate humans occupy a miniature world, like fairytale characters come to life. As she will tell you herself, it is no mistake that the children who appear in her work appear to be about eight years old. That is the time in children's development when they begin to learn science and start appreciating life as a complicated natural system, but they still retain enough of their youthful imagination to accept a more magical understanding of the world. This exhibition brings that precarious moment to life, featuring scenes, forged from a combination of poetry and mathematics, that teeter between fantasy and logic.

Soulier's work extends and adds significantly to the history of creating tableaux in photography. This is a story that most likely began in the 1850s, when the Swedish photographer Oscar Gustave Rejlander (who, not surprisingly, be-

friendened Lewis Carroll after moving to England) used multiple negatives to sew together visual allegories with complex narratives.<sup>1</sup> Rejlander, like Soulier, used a combination of stagecraft and darkroom techniques to achieve an opulent visual repertory that pre-existed only in his imagination. While the specific tools have changed, this creative impulse remains.

In many ways, Soulier's work relates more closely to Rejlander's than to that of other contemporary artists photographing architectural models. Oliver Boberg, Thomas Demand, and James Casebere, for example, construct moody, ethereal, threatening, and banal scenes of uninhabited places that stand in marked contrast to the fantastical rooms Soulier creates. Others, such as Laurie Simmons or Miklos Gaál, populate their worlds with obvious, toy-like characters that knowingly assert a puppet-show reality. Like children at play, we suspend our disbelief in order to participate. In the context of photographers using architectural models, Soulier has found a space of her own, a place where existent people occupy a nonexistent world. Her scenes appear plausible until we recognize the slippage in scale made apparent by the figures that inhabit her photographs. And that is key. At first we accept her world without suspicion; then we experience a reality shift as we recognize the fiction of her constructions.

When engaging with Soulier's photographs, we can begin to question our own place and scale too. The concern becomes, as it did for Lewis Carroll's Alice, against what do we measure reality? Soulier, like Carroll, bends the laws of logic in defense of nonsense. In *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, the protagonist is continually faced with the seeming structure of formal logic to reinforce the mad world in which she finds herself.

Take, for example, the famous conversation between Alice and the Cheshire Cat:

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”<sup>2</sup>

You are mad because you are here and you are here because you are mad. It sounds logical, irrefutable even, but of course is exactly the kind of reasoning Carroll skewered with his book. Soulier, likewise, marshals the careful logic of fractals, but does so in support of a fantasy. In this her work has a distinct voice in contemporary art. Still, it would be a mistake to distance Soulier’s work too far from her intellectual and creative forebears. She operates within a conceptual structure examined by Sabine Dorscheid in her 2005 exhibition *post\_modellismus: Models in Art*.<sup>3</sup> Dorscheid coined the phrase *post\_modellismus* (“post\_modelism,” in English) with a knowing wink to post-modernism. Her term acknowledges that the creation of models for artistic purposes has a complicated history with modernism and, in turn, with modernism’s relationship to the ideal of authenticity. Models are inherently not the thing itself, but rather a way of referring to a thing—real or imagined. Writing in the *post\_modellismus* catalogue, Thomas Trummer describes the generation preceding Soulier’s as working in a world forever caught between “the irreconcilability of model and artwork, copy and original, past and future, being and ought.”<sup>4</sup> Trummer describes the model phenomenon as perpetually liminal—a model is always representing something past (established) or future (dreamed of)—a then or a there. Soulier bridges this gap. With the insertion of figures she creates a present—a now and a here, a “being” and an “ought.”

In her work, photography is once again called upon to attest to an event. That the event was staged hardly matters; or perhaps more accurately, the staging of the event forms the heart of the matter. Her photographs provide evidence of a hybrid reality increasingly present in our daily lives: truth as a combination of the virtual and the real. Conceptually, at the very least, this hybrid reality has growing acceptance as authentic experience. Soulier’s work operates within this developing realm, celebrating the collapse of existential dualities and relishing the expressive potential that has resulted.

Soulier’s photographs evoke a world rich in narrative possibility of the marvelous sort. Each work is an incomplete story—an open book with one page showing. Viewers are given the setting and a glimpse of the action, and the rest is up to the imagination. As we participate and engage, the works come to life and grow in unpredictable ways. This is the essential dichotomy Soulier evokes: within the totally logical construct of a fractal-derived universe, where all scale can be determined in relation to what is visible, Soulier kindles fanciful tales whose beginnings and endings viewers can only imagine.

## NOTES

1. For more on Rejlander, see David Elliott, ed., *Oscar Gustave Rejlander, 1813(?)–1875* (Stockholm: Modern Museum / Royal Photographic Society, Sweden, 1998).
2. Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865; repr., Chicago: VolumeOne Publishing, 1998): 90.
3. Sabine Dorscheid, *post\_modellismus: Models in Art* (Vienna: Kringinger Projekte, 2005).
4. Thomas Trummer, “Artworks Based on Models,” in Dorscheid, *post\_modellismus*, 25.



## PLATES 1

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*The Matryoshka Dolls 1 and 2, from the series titled The Fractal Architectures, 2011, C-prints.*



*The Matryoshka Dolls 3*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2012, C-print.





*The Matryoshka Dolls Sculpture, 2015, mixed media.*



*Interior detail of The Matryoshka Dolls Sculpture.*



*Self-Portrait*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2016, C-print.



## AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

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**John Stomberg:** Could you please discuss the importance of straight photography to your ideas? You could achieve somewhat similar results in your photography through Photoshop and 3D software. Clearly not the same, but certainly easier to execute. Still you choose to start with images of actual models.

**Laetitia Soulier:** Every element in each photograph is handmade, from the architectural model to the furniture. I do not use 3D modeling to create any part of the final photographic image. I do, however, use Maya and AutoCAD to draft the architecture and the furniture prior to construction. I also use Adobe Illustrator to create the design of the wallpaper that covers the photographic set. After photographing the set, I use Photoshop to post-produce the images. In my process, digital technique and craft are completely intertwined. My work plays with the idea of photographic images as constructs. Photography transforms our perception of the world around us. Through photography, we project a vision as much as we record reality. I create from that zone of indiscernibility, where ideas and physical reality meet.

**JS:** Why is the material reality of the model crucial? What do you do with your set design after the photograph is taken?

**LS:** While digital media became available and prominent for my generation, my practice integrates traditional craft and high-tech processes. The physicality and labor of the construction of the set is like a ritual—like the making of a mandala. It's a very slow and layered craft.

Every piece is carefully put in place like grain of sand after grain of sand, and after being photographed, the set design is taken apart so only the photograph remains.

**JS:** Is the act of making the models a significant part of the process for you or is it all about the resulting images?

**LS:** The making of the model and the resulting image are both equally important. My approach to photography is closer to painting or cinematography; just as the filmmaker builds their movie set or the painter composes their still life before painting it, the construction of the architectural model is part of my photographic process.

**JS:** Please discuss your interest in fractals.

**LS:** I find some interesting connections between fractals and photography. Fractals repeat a figure at different scales, from very small to very large. They connect microcosm and macrocosm. Photography also plays with scale; something quite small in reality can appear really large in a photograph and vice versa, depending on the lens, vantage point, and printing scale. I use fractals in my photographs as a way to reflect on the photographic medium and on the concepts through which we perceive our environment.

**JS:** In the worlds you create, we become—slowly—aware that everything that seems real is actually constructed. Does that metaphor have a wider significance for you? If so, could you discuss it?

**LS:** My work plays with the idea that photographic images are constructs. These multi-scale architectural models are visual mazes or visual paradoxes. They are kaleidoscopic environments that disrupt our perspective and question our perception of reality. I want viewers to look at my photographs and wonder what they are looking at and how it was made. Through the combination of two- and three-dimensional mediums, and the multiple shifts in scale and perspective, I seek to challenge and expand our subjective experience of reality.

**JS:** Each of your series has a dominant color associated with it: green in one case, and red in the other. Can you discuss how and why you arrived at using such prominent color themes?

**LS:** In the *Matryoshka Dolls* series the rooms are warm and circular like a womb. This series explores the circular and feminine archetype. Nested dolls can be found in various places around the world, in Russia, China, or Japan; it's a very cross-cultural symbol of filiation and generation. Inside the architecture, the red walls undulate following the outlines of the dolls. In the belly of the matryoshka there is a double-helix staircase shaped as a strand of DNA. The red color of the series refers to bloodlines and the animal realm.

The green color in the *Square Roots* series refers to plant life. In some places, the geometric patterns of the wallpaper blend with the ivy climbing up the walls. I am very interested in morphogenesis and the growth patterns of plants. Inside *Square Roots*, the vegetation is outgrowing the model and breaking through the hardwood floors. I started the *Square Roots* project after traveling to the Amazon jungle and spending time with the Shipibo people. Their relationship to plants was very inspiring for this project.

**JS:** There are many references to childhood and imagination in your work. Ironically, children often pretend to be adults, and the idea of a dollhouse exemplifies this phenomenon. Can you describe your interest in play and its relationship to being grown up? Also, does this relate to the idea of creativity for you?

**LS:** I often work with child subjects, though not exclusively. Children are physically and psychologically going through a growth process, which contains a metaphorical significance for my work. The *Fractal Architectures* series mirrors the children's morphogenesis and transformational process, as the rooms and objects appear in different scales following a fractal logic. Children unfold within these spaces, which are at once representative of their toys, their homes, their childhood, their adulthood, the space between their past and their future.

**JS:** Is your work a very serious form of play on some level?

**LS:** My work is inspired by children's play. Construction games and pattern making help us understand spatial relations between singular elements and a greater whole. Through these forms of creative play we get a sense of our place as individuals in relation to larger cosmic harmonies. Child development answers in miniature our collective unraveling from an individualist view to systemic thinking. In a sense, all art is a serious form of play through which we create new maps and ways of being.

*This interview was conducted via email in June 2016.*

## PLATES 2

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*The Square Roots 1*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2013, C-print.





*The Square Roots 2 and 3, from the series titled The Fractal Architectures, 2014, C-prints.*



*The Square Roots Wall Installation*, 2015, mixed media.





Interior detail of *The Square Roots Wall Installation*.



## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

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All works by Laetitia Soulier, born 1978 in Bordeaux, France.

*The Matryoshka Dolls 1*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2011, C-print, 40 x 80 inches.

*The Matryoshka Dolls 2*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2011, C-print, 40 x 80 inches.

*The Matryoshka Dolls 3*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2012, C-print, 40 x 80 inches.

*The Matryoshka Dolls Sculpture*, 2015, mixed media, 48 x 72 x 34 inches.

*Self-Portrait*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2016, C-print, 40 x 80 inches.

*The Square Roots 1*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2013, C-print, 40 x 80 inches.

*The Square Roots 2*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2014, C-print, 40 x 80 inches.

*The Square Roots 3*, from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2014, C-print, 40 x 80 inches.

*The Square Roots Wall Installation*, 2015, mixed media, 51 x 39.5 x 39.5 inches.

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### THE FRACTAL ARCHITECTURES

The exhibition *Laetitia Soulier: The Fractal Architectures*,  
on view at Hood Downtown September 16–December 11, 2016,  
was organized by the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth,  
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Cover: Laetitia Soulier, *The Matryoshka Dolls 2*,  
from the series titled *The Fractal Architectures*, 2011, C-print.

### **About Hood Downtown**

During the interval of our construction and reinstallation, Hood Downtown will present an ambitious series of exhibitions featuring contemporary artists from around the world. Like the Hood Museum of Art, Hood Downtown is free and open to the public.

### **Upcoming Exhibition**

*Bahar Behbahani: Let the Garden Eram Flourish*  
January 5–March 12, 2017

### **Fall 2016 Hours**

Wednesday–Saturday, 11:00a.m.–9:00p.m.  
Sunday, 1:00p.m.–5:00p.m.  
Closed Monday and Tuesday

### **Directions and Parking**

Hood Downtown is located at 53 Main Street, Hanover, NH. Metered public parking is available in front of Hood Downtown on Main Street, and behind the exhibition space in a public lot between Allen and Maple Streets. An all-day public parking garage is located at 7 Lebanon Street.