

# NOT AS THEY SEEM

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

## LOOK-ALIKES: THE AMAZING WORLD OF JOAN STEINER

NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM,  
THROUGH MARCH 3

IN ORDER TO DEAL WITH THE ONslaught of images our culture purveys in movies, on Web pages, and in advertisements, we often tune out, barely noticing the objects all around us. Joan Steiner's delightful, obsessively detailed three-dimensional scenes made out of peanuts, ashtrays, mousetraps—the detritus of everyday life—invite visitors to wonder at the ingenious world of form.

Steiner, who works out of a studio in Hudson, is like Grandma Moses gone wild with a glue gun; her miniature dioramas transform charming visions of farms and general stores into feats of the imagination made out of repurposed cheese doodles, pretzels and spools of thread. *Kitchen* at first glance seems a sweet diorama of a kitchen with grandma rolling dough to bake in a cast-iron oven, but reveals surprising analogies of shape and color: The oven turns out to be a mailbox with a flashlight and purse disguised as the vent. Electrical-plate burners cook a paperweight pot, while grandson awaits cookies that are white pills, licking batter from a cotton swab spatula.

Steiner is best known for her *Look-Alikes* series of children's books, made from photos of her three-dimensional environments. On display at the New York State Museum are more than a dozen actual three-dimensional scenes accompanying several blown-up photographs of Steiner's picture-perfect America. We see general stores and leafy suburbs, as well as postcard scenes of foreign locales from her recent book, *Look-Alikes Around the World* (2007). Everything is as it should be, until you realize that the Great Wall of China is a zipper, and the Taj Mahal has real white onions as domes. Her knack for textures and colors enhances the surreal effect: wide-wale corduroy never looked so good as it does as rich, tilled farm earth,

and cinnamon sticks are the perfect logs.

The layers of detail are dizzying and far more engaging than the *Where's Waldo* and *I Spy* series, to which Steiner's books are compared. In a construction scene, a paint-tube plane flies above a mustard-bottle cement truck, and a portable-cassette-player crane uses a fishing lure to grab walnuts that look like rocks. In some scenes, Rockwellian people made of polymer clay appear, sporting clothing and hair made out of things like gloves and seashells. Many environments are uninhabited, as though an army of dwarves had left the scene of exhausting work to rest. Viewers feel compelled to identify the component parts of this playful world, and as we do, layers of material and conceptual analogies emerge. As one recognizes the cement mixer in *Construction Site* is a mustard bottle, one comprehends that the construction site itself was a work of laborious construction. There's a similar sense of meta-observation in *Christmas Windows*, as a viewer spies on Steiner's miniature shoppers who are themselves peering into decorated windows (*Look-Alikes Christmas*, 2003). This is, ultimately, art about the creation of art.

Steiner's world is a brain teaser, an exercise in observation, and just sheer fun. The

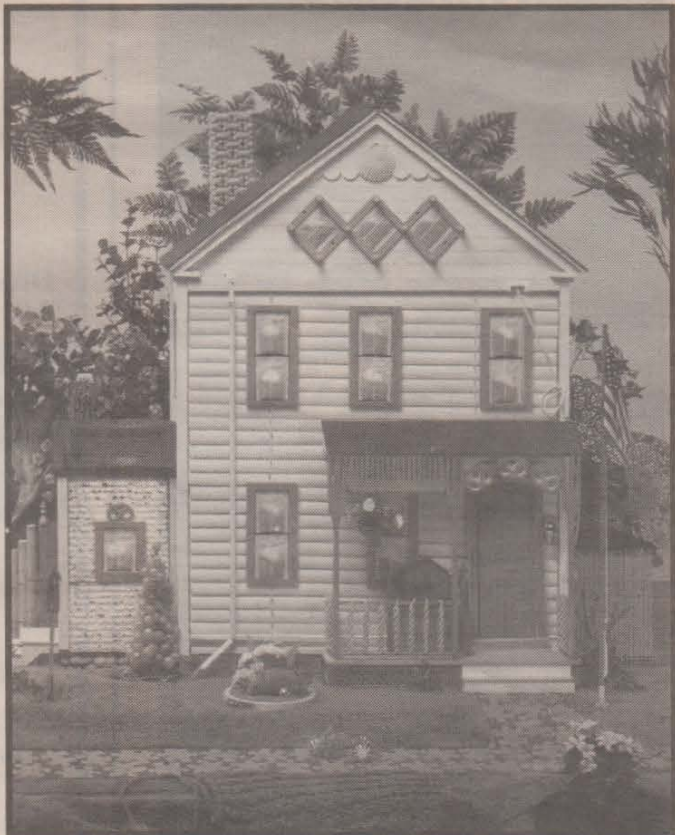
exhibition text engages children with questions such as: "How many things can you name that are circles?" A table is set up with the *Look-Alikes* books so that kids (and kid-like adults) can peruse. In a video, Steiner talks about her process and shows viewers how to construct a teddy-bear Christmas ornament out of peanuts. It's rare for an artist to share technique so freely—and it's not everyone who can impart the arcane wisdom that, while their color may fade, cheese doodles last forever.

The "fun for kids!" tone of the exhibition discourages a too-serious consideration of Steiner's artistry, but such a dismissal would be a mistake. Even though Steiner's materials can be found easily at any supermarket, each environment can take months. Self-taught, she started out in the late 1970s making wearable art, telling me in a phone interview that "I made one purse that looked like a pair of ice skates you slung over your shoulder; I made a hat that looked like a fishing boat," with a veil as a fishing net. Then she began doing three-dimensional illustration, and when *Games* magazine said they needed a puzzle, *Look-Alikes* were born. While Steiner doesn't credit any particular influences, she says, "I do have eureka moments. I was making dinner one night—lasagna—and I was thinking how pretty the noodles were and how they looked a lot like draperies." (Lasagna noodles appear as the drapes in *Parlor*, at the exhibition.) A lot of the time, though, she emphasizes, it's trial and error.

One could argue that these are works of folk art or outsider art. Like the quilts of Gee's Bend or the drawings of Martin Ramirez, Steiner's worlds are made with everyday materials, and her images speak of a cultural nostalgia.

One could also compare her to edgier artists such as Liza Lou, whose iconic life-sized *Kitchen* (1991-95) was crafted entirely out of tubular beads. However, where Liza Lou's work points out the iconicity of feminine domesticity, Steiner's scenes are lessons in how to see. Or as one teenage girl I overheard with her friends said, "Oh my God, this is the coolest thing ever, you guys!" I couldn't agree more.

Joan Steiner will be signing her books Feb. 22-23, from noon to 4 PM, for New York in Bloom weekend at the New York State Museum. Admission will be charged on these days.



Look very, very closely: Joan Steiner's *House*.