



Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Liming," 2020; installation view, Art Gallery of Alberta (photo by AGA)

Curtis Talwst Santiago

Exhibition of miniature dioramas turns up the Caribbean party heat.

by Fish Griwkowsky

November 30, 2020 5:00 PM

The plan was to turn a room at the Art Gallery of Alberta into a proper party space, bouncing with fused music and dancing – and, likely, a lot of laughter, too. Curtis Talwst Santiago's show, which runs through Feb. 14, is called *Liming* after all – a Trinidadian term that means coming together to socialize, verb form "to lime."

And this upbeat theme flows through the entire room, from Santiago's increasingly well-known dioramas under glass to the happily loud calypso music by Mighty Sparrow blasting out of the sound system.

With a mirror ball spinning in semi-darkness above a full-scale linoleum dance floor, the room's miniature art is placed off toward the back wall on plinths that give the place a 1970s' stereo

13
Shares



Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Party Can't Done," 2020, diorama, 3.5" x 3" x 3" (installation detail of "Curtis Talwst Santiago: Liming" at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, 2020; courtesy the artist; photo by AGA)

Santiago, currently "decentralized" in Germany, was hoping to activate the dance floor in the RBC New Works Gallery with actual people to echo and expand the basement parties found in his little scenes, and maybe even get his old Edmonton dance-rock band Hi-Phoniqs back together.

But, if ever there was a year when the theme was "wet blanket," it's pandemic-infected 2020: crusher of plans, squisher of dreams. And so, this new bummer reality is, at the very least, delaying any sense of continuity to the present from the hazily remembered way-back parties recreated in these little Polly Pockets displays.



Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Dat DJ Real Nice Yes?," 2020, diorama, 1.6" x 1.8" x 2.4" (installation detail of "Curtis Talwst Santiago: Liming" at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, 2020; courtesy the artist; photo by AGA)

Each of the scenes inside Santiago's jewel-box dioramas takes us back to the artist's shag-carpet, velvet-painting childhood in the Edmonton satellite of Sherwood Park. As a place it might look like one continuous strip-mall parking lot, but culture could be found in those basement parties where, as the artist has noted, everyone had an uncle who was the sort of party DJ that Santiago so beautifully recreates here in model-railroad HO scale, right down to the individual records stacked in a plastic milk crate.

Seriously, it's wonderful work, right up there with the imaginary worlds of Alberta's David Hoffos and the miniature murder scenes of Washington artist Abigail Goldman, an investigator for the public defender in Bellingham.

You don't see the full breadth of Santiago's larger oeuvre in this show, but he has become a sort of multi-stop time traveller through history with similar, but wider-ranging works about Black cultural origins, including his [installation](#) for the 2019 Toronto Biennial.



Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Lovers Rock," 2020, diorama, 1.8" x 2" x 2.8" (installation detail of "Curtis Talwst Santiago: Liming" at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, 2020; courtesy the artist; photo by AGA)

In a [video](#) posted on the gallery's website, intended as a prelude to *Liming*, Santiago expands his mixed-media work into full-on performance, inhabiting a red-faced, beaded-armoured, imagined ancestor named Sir Dingolay, a character inspired by a Moorish knight he became obsessed with in an anonymous 16th-century Flemish painting, *Chafariz d'El-Rey*, which he thinks was painted by a Black artist.

We don't see Sir Dingolay in the show – but his temporal mission fits *Liming*, as does Santiago's statement on YouTube about his recent show at The Drawing Center in New York: "Joy is such a part of my family. This really feels like a tribute to my parents and all the things that they have done so we could be here, and all the ancestors whose shoulders I stand on.

"I don't want to just only imagine their trauma; I want to think of how they celebrated."



Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Gu Nu Gu," 2020, diorama, 2" x 1.4" x 1.7" (installation detail of "Curtis Talwst Santiago: Liming" at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, 2020; courtesy the artist; photo by AGA)

This includes, of course, dancing, which the writing on the gallery wall mentions specifically: "This exhibition cherishes and revels in human connections. It looks at the artist's past for inspiration but asks how physical connections can be taken into a new future and offers new ways to share experiences. So dance, dance like your childhood self, and dance for your future self."

And so, the clues are before us: tiny people dancing in miniature on a dance floor with the same patterns as the one placed in the gallery.

While I'm there, a woman enters the room and asks her husband, his nose poking out over his pandemic mask, "Are we supposed to walk on the dance floor?"

I turn to her and, without thinking, say, "No, you're supposed to dance." And, indeed, she does, twisting a little Chubby Checker into the dark. ■

Curtis Talwst Santiago: Liming at the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton from Oct. 24, 2020 to Feb. 14, 2021.

PS: Worried you missed something? See [previous Galleries West stories here](#) or sign up for

13
Shares

Since you're here...

...we're asking readers like you to support quality writing about Western Canada's art and artists during these uncertain times. Galleries West tells timely stories with accessible yet informed writing by arts journalists and other arts professionals. Our magazine is open to all, regardless of what they can afford to pay. Every reader contribution, however big or small, is valuable. **Support Galleries West. It only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support Galleries West, Donate Now

Art Gallery of Alberta

2 Winston Churchill Square, Edmonton, Alberta T5J 2C1

PHONE **780-422-6223**

EMAIL **info@youraga.ca**

WEBSITE [Visit Website](#)

HOURS Tues to Thurs noon - 6 pm; Thurs till 8 pm; Fri to Sun 11 am - 5 pm; Tues 'Pay what you May' admission



[1 December 2020 issue](#)

[Curtis Talwst Santiago](#)

[Art Gallery of Alberta](#)

**Fish Griwkowsky**

Fish Griwkowsky is a prize-winning filmmaker, stereoscopic photographer, weekly-published cartoonist and award-winning journalist for his work at the Edmonton Journal. He recently co-commissioned a six-storey Okuda San Miguel mural in Edmonton.

November 30, 2020 5:00 PM

MAGAZINE NEWS FIND IT DONATE

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Writers](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Submit Your Event](#)

Copyright © 1999 - 2020 T2 Media Inc. All rights reserved.

Built with Metro Publisher™

13
Shares