

Two wooden diorama boxes are shown against a dark background. Each box is made of light-colored wood and features a large, circular brass lens on the front. The boxes are mounted on a wooden base with a metal frame that allows them to be tilted. The box on the left is tilted upwards, while the box on the right is tilted downwards.

Lawrence Weschler

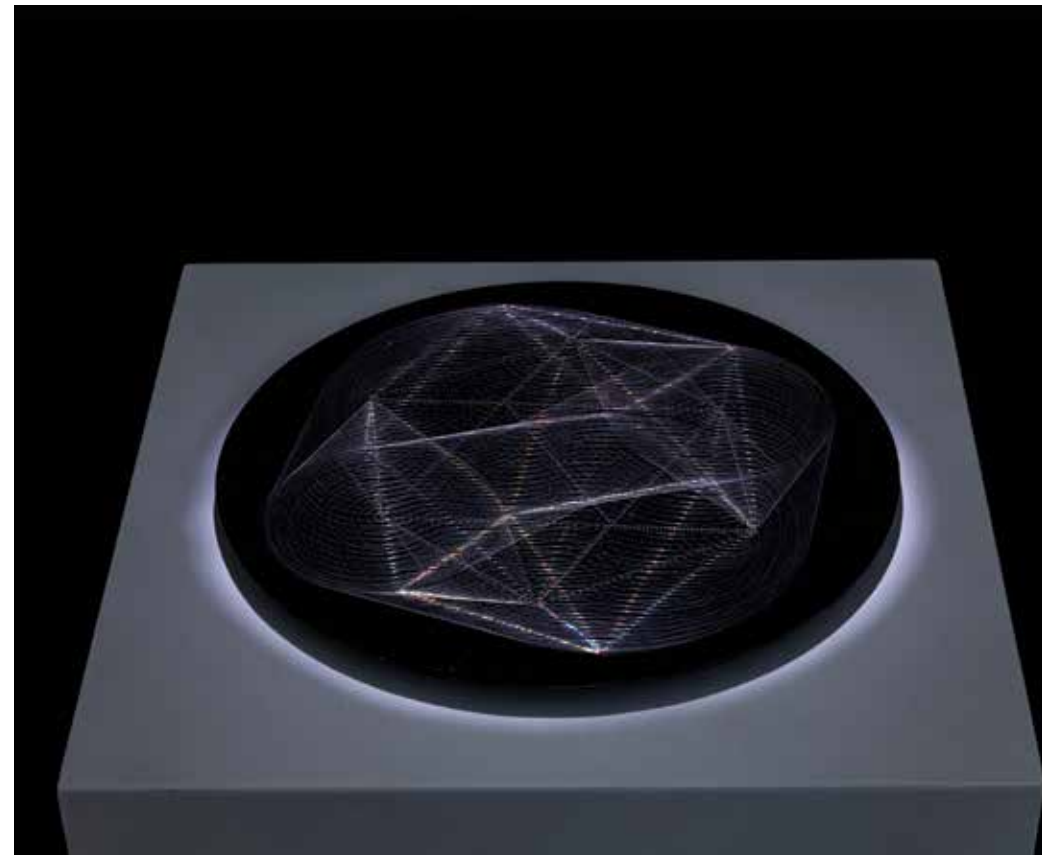
**TRISTAN DUKE (PART I):
THE MAGUS IN HIS YOUTH**

Tristan Duke. *Diorama Boxes*, 2004-2008
Wooden boxes with viewing lenses and miniature dioramas inside, 8 x 5.5 x 4.5 inches
All photos courtesy of Tristan Duke

You may have first encountered some of the gob-smackingly prestidigitaceous marvels of the young LA magus Tristan Duke at LACMA's current *3D Double Vision* show (those astonishing rotating aluminum platters off to the side in the first room after the entrance, where, thanks to the scratches he's somehow hand-etched into the platters, sequential Platonic solids seem to hover, ghostly translucent, pirouetting in midair above the turntables). Or by way of the recent Disney-released vinyl LPs of the music to "Star Wars" (above which wraithlike simulacra of the Death Star and the Millennium Falcon likewise seem to gyre). Or maybe it was by way of those mind-boggling in-folding and exfoliating handheld notched wooden contraptions (cubes transmogrifying into dodecahedrons in the flick of the wrist, for godssake). Or by way of several of his secret optical-trapdoor contributions at Culver City's endlessly confounding Museum of Jurassic Technology. Or as in my case, it might have been by way of the Liminal Camera, the shipping-container-sized pinhole-camera-obscura mounted atop a flatbed truck which he and his artistic collaborators in the Optics Division of downtown LA's Metabolic Studio have been dragging all around the country, documenting scenes of ecological devastation on wall-length sheets of photographic paper (and not infrequently developing the results in the very toxic muds left over, as in the Owens Valley, by all that blight).

Whatever the occasion, and even if you had not yet heard his name, you too might have found yourself wondering, as I certainly did, *WTF, WTH is this guy!?*

Tristan Duke
Icosahedron (intersecting plate), 2014
Hand drawn hologram on metal plate
with rotating turntable, 10 x 10 inches.
Photography by Joshua White/
JWPictures.com



Tristan Duke, Composite image of the artist's ad-hoc laser holography lab in the Museum of Jurassic Technology's bathroom, 2010.
Courtesy of the artist.



So it turns out, as I recently discovered on a visit to his tiny private studio squirreled away in a cubbyhole workspace in the bowels of the Jurassic, that Tristan Duke — he prefers that I refer to him as simply Tristan — is a joshingly boyish (open-faced, close cropped yet still unkempt brown beard) 37-year-old gentleman, given to long-sleeved pearl-buttoned cowboy shirts and black Dickies workpants which might well put you in mind of Woody from the “Toy Story” series, or maybe it’s just the gleaming aw-shucks conviviality the two seem to share.

Tristan was born (1981) and raised in the college town of Urbana Champaign, Illinois, “an island in the cornfields,” as he likes to say. His parents landed there in headlong flight from their shared stereotypical suburban upbringings in Park Forest, Illinois (the site as it happens of the dismal 1950s sociological study, *The Organization Man*). Though even back there his family had its curlicue aspects. His mother’s father, for example, was a seemingly conventional “Mad Men” type, though on the wacky side of the spectrum, being one of the advertising illustrators who worked on such seminal icons of the era as Toucan Sam from Fruit Loops and Frosted Flakes’ Tony the Tiger. Tristan’s mother’s brother fled home for the circus (not entirely to their parents’ distress), eventually befriending Roger Brown and other stalwarts of Chicago’s Hairy Who art scene, then becoming a noted *trompe l’oeil* painter. Tristan’s mother — herself something of a proto-Buddhist — became a specialist in Chinese art and presently came to constitute the entirety of the Education Department of the Krannert Art Museum on the campus of the University of Illinois there in Urbana. Tristan’s highly educated father got an MA in ceramics, but really wanted to be a painter, albeit an intensely private one, with a hermetic visual language and highly ambivalent attitudes toward the art market (he never had gallery representation and made his living as a handyman/carpenter/contractor).

Tristan’s own upbringing was enveloped in something of a Bohemian vibe; his parents were so poor that for a while early on they took up residence in the university’s Japan House where they were both studying the Japanese Tea Ceremony (“So my own first steps,” notes Tristan, “literally came across tatami mats”). In later years the family would move from one time-worn, hundred-year-old house to the next, his father fixing them up, selling them, and everyone moving on. A family friend and neighbor turned out to be Chungliang Al Huang, the storied close advisor to both Alan Watts and Joseph Campbell; another of his mother’s friends was Cecilia Vicuña, the eminent Pinochet-era Chilean émigré poet and performance artist. Hardly a conventional upbringing.



Tristan Duke
Hologram Box, 2012
Laser hologram in folding display
box, 3.5 x 7.5 x 4 inches.
Photography by Tristan Duke

Yet for all of that, Tristan’s childhood was also steeped in standard heartland American tropes: a large tribe of cousins living close at hand, diving into each other’s houses and running around in nature. “Our parents just turned us loose, we’d be riding our bikes into the cornfields, building forts, catching turtles, and the like—we and our friends pretty much had the run of the town.”

Though Tristan proved a consistently above average student and enjoyed science (particularly those classes that allowed him to indulge his Rube Goldberg side) and math classes (the latter that is, until geometry gave way to algebra —“For me, I had to see it, or even better build it or draw it, to understand it”). If truth be told, he hated school in Urbana, from beginning to end (“*Why*,” he’d demand, “*do I have to keep wasting my time on all this crap?*”), and from day one seemed to resist its social striations and demands. All the way back in preschool he’d staged a semester-long war with a teacher who had his charges draw, then would transcribe their dictated explanations of what they had made at the bottom of the drawings. “Tristan does not have anything to say about this drawing” was the caption beneath every single one of his.

What he did love from the very start, though, was *drawing*. His spiral notebooks became festooned over with doodles and diagrams, often at the expense of almost anything else. He’d spend hours at home, in the company of friends, scrawling away across big sheets of paper. He also became obsessed with glue guns; his father brought home randomly shaped pieces of scrapwood from his jobs that Tristan would contrive into ever more elaborate structures. Despite this relentless drive to express his visions, Tristan did not much like art classes. He hoovered up techniques — perspective, Photoshop and the like — but rejected all the intellectual snobbery and the hierarchy of teacher’s acolytes, actively resisting being drafted into the clique of “art stars” as the teacher dubbed them.

There were about 300 students in Tristan’s Urbana High graduating class, though he was not one of them. The year before, administrators noticed he’d simply stopped attending school – he would do the homework, pass the tests, but was never there. So they expelled him into a special school for gang members and drop outs, where he endured a fairly harrowing semester (though they did let him read whatever he wanted, and he read everything: Salinger, Baldwin, Snyder and Trungpa). He went on to the local community

college to finish his last semester's units, and received a full scholarship to the University of Illinois, only to drop out after one week; college, it seemed, was just not going to be his thing.

"Had I grown up with any other family," Tristan once told me, "I'd likely have become a scientist — given the kinds of things I was drawn to — though with the family I had, I was pretty much stamped from the start." Stamped, that is, to take the other road. So he dropped out of college and spent the next several years bumping about in Urbana, "working in coffee houses, hanging around with the other fuck-ups, trying to figure stuff out." What stuff? "Well, life and things." Things, especially: he'd wake up in the middle of the night, his mind aflame with ideas, with contraptions he just had to try out — his "insomnia machines," as his mother took to characterizing them. For example, he "borrowed" one of his father's yardsticks, the kind that used to come with a veritable farmer's almanac of tables on the back side (the number of ounces in a pound and pounds in a ton, centimeters in an inch, inches in a foot, yards in a kilometer, acres in a hectare, the speed of a horse, a car, electricity...light). Tristan proceeded to slice, facet and hinge the yardstick into a stack of roughly 2-centimeter-square-stubs for which he contrived a series of overlapping, folding, connecting joints such that the resultant approximately wallet-sized, pristinely engineered gadget — his Non-Euclidean Ruler, as he'd taken to calling it — could turn and flip in his hand, displaying one select info segment followed by the next, over and over, opening wide and closing shut, in a deft eternal rotation. "And see," he now pointed out, as he showed it to me, "here comes the table with the hectares and then here"— turn, turn, turn —"the one with the speed of light: all the sorts of figures you might one day find yourself needing out there on the farm." Artful, elegant, and downright mesmerizing.

Not that he didn't remain deeply ambivalent about art, or at any rate about the art world: he was after all his father's son, deeply torn about monetizing his creations, or subjecting them to the typical art gallery horse races and betting salons. If anything, he wanted to fend off all such commercial considerations and simply focus purely on the give and play of creative, insomniac inquiry, always willing to jerry-rig other ways of making a living.

After his parents divorced, his mother moved out to Los Angeles to head up the education department at the Hammer. Which is, in turn, what brought him to LA a few years later, in 2002, and into an auditorium at



Tristan Duke, *Hair Chair*, 2005. Photomicrograph of microminiature chair made from single strands of human hair and glue. Courtesy of the artist.

UCLA where David Wilson happened to be lecturing on the history of the micro-miniature.

David Wilson was the founder of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, and if you don't know about that diminutive giant of a fellow and the tiny epic museum that he and his cohort have been conjuring into existence off Venice Boulevard in Culver City, you should drop everything and head over there right now, or at least take a moment to look them up.

While the audience that evening in the UCLA auditorium was becoming ever more confounded and confused by the little man's peroration, as it somehow tumbled straight through an initially straightforward survey of masters of micro-miniature calligraphy, painting and sculpture, on into the marvels of Soviet rocketry set against swelling chords of Purcell's the "Aria of the Cold Genius," from his King Arthur opera, and moving well beyond that—for Wilson's flights of fancy not infrequently entail a certain amount of, shall we say, *slippage*—Tristan for his own part was growing ever more thoroughly engrossed and entrapped.

For one thing, Wilson was summoning forth long suspended (suppressed?) memories of a time, ten years earlier, when Tristan's mother had invited a micro-carver named Chen Zhongsen over from Fuzhou in Southern China for a special showing of his drop-jaw astonishing achievements. These included poems calligraphed across a single strand of hair and long sequences of ornate Chinese ideograms etched onto a single grain of rice, all culminating in a live demonstration where the master proceeded to cover over a miniscule, certifiably blank pebble with all manner of microscopic carved inscriptions, deploying no magnifying equipment whatsoever and, for that matter, doing so *with his eyes closed!*

Inspired by the UCLA talk, Tristan resolved to visit with Wilson at his museum the very next day and was completely bowled over. Here was an artist who had somehow cracked the mystery of how to stay true to one's art and vocation while steering clear of the perversities of market pressures. Well clear at that – and to this very day (no one can figure out how he keeps the place running.) Wandering through the museum's labyrinthine halls, with their myriad trapdoor mysteries, Tristan grew increasingly impressed by the democratic quality of Wilson's sly deceptions, the way he was constantly playing with his guest's perceptions and yet letting them see how he was doing so. For example, in the space given over to Athanasius Kircher, the way Wilson and his team were regularly deploying Pepper's Ghosts to sublimely haunting effects.

Tristan and Wilson subsequently convened in the still-under-construction tearoom upstairs and spoke for hours: a regular mind meld. At one point Tristan pulled out his "Non-Euclidean Ruler," and began putting it through its paces (suddenly, he noticed, as if for the first time, how in one of its rotations, the name of the owner of the yardstick's sponsoring lumberyard surfaced in big letters, DAVID W) . . . it was just one of those kinds of meetings, everything just seeming meant to be, culminating with Tristan's plea to Wilson, "What can I do? Just tell me what you need, I'll do anything." Which is how Tristan came to fashion, for starters, the mold, featuring the Museum's primordial totemic visage, "Mr. J," for eventual use in a run of chocolate bars — yes, chocolate bars — for the museum shop. As the years passed and Tristan started traveling back and forth between Urbana and LA, he took to designing other magnificent, quirky objects for the Museum Shop and for that matter becoming sporadically involved in installations within the museum itself.

Back in Urbana, though, the lure of the miniature began to take hold. Tristan would wake up in the middle of the night, possessed by visions. In his spare hours, he began crafting miniature scenes, meticulous dioramas not much bigger than the final joint in your pinkie. "I was making these things *because I simply had to,*" Tristan recalled, "their manufacture infused with all the angst and pressure of that time in a person's life, with all the urgency of my trying to make sense of the world." Tiny foreshortened hallways, teeny room-scapes (another of the advantages of this sort of work being that it didn't require much by way of studio space, as he really didn't have any). In one instance, he inserted a Pepper's Ghost of his girlfriend at the time in a long red ball gown, hovering translucent in the middle distance of a tapering hallway; in another he contrived the effect of a television hidden behind an intervening wall, its flickering light playing upon an abandoned chair visible through an open doorway. How had he done that? By taking the surprise audio mechanism from a cat food box which sang "Meow, meow" and rewiring the thing's circuitry so that instead it sent staccato electrical pulses to a tiny LED bulb hidden off to the side of the pinkie-nub sized room.

One challenge, however, became how to display the results. A building across from the coffee house where he was working got condemned and wandering its emptied halls, Tristan began extracting the peephole eyepieces from out of the doomed apartment entry doors. Back home, at his midnight desk, he would fashion exquisite blond wood boxes, slotting in his carved miniature dioramas, meticulously adjusting the lighting effects, closing up the box and then inserting the peephole scopes with their fish-eye lenses that, enforcing spooky depths of field, rendered the objects simply magical. As the work evolved, the boxes somehow began to resemble baby birds, their boxy bodies atop elegantly curved, intricate brass legs, with the beaks formed by those re-purposed door peep-scopes now seeming to tilt up expectantly, invitingly, toward any passing viewer ("Feed me!" Feed me with your attention.)

"I used to love watching visitors as they'd lean down to peer in," Tristan said. "Eventually, in 2005, I mounted a little show of the pieces at the Angel's Gate Cultural Center down in San Pedro. Because of the nature of the lenses, the experience had to be essentially private: only one person at a time. And it wasn't necessarily entirely clear what you were gazing at — there was a dreaminess to the effect, and people's responses were often deeply subjective, projecting as much into the scene as they were drawing out from it.



Tristan Duke
Diorama Box 2, 2004
Mixed media and mirrored
projection (pepper's ghost).
Courtesy of the artist.

“For me, meanwhile, across those endless nights of making things, I came to realize that my primary interest was becoming perception itself: the optics, the lenses, the focal lengths — all pointed to something deeper. I was becoming fascinated by the way perception feeds into the experience of meaning. The way the Alchemists of old used to conceive of the camera obscura as a model of the mind itself; I was captivated by the marvel of how we come to experience anything at all across that thin membrane — mind — that perhaps is only just seemingly separating self and world.”

And it was thus that Tristan now determined that he wanted to pursue a more advanced education after all. It came down to a choice between CalArts, with its exceptionally well endowed, elite interdisciplinary arts focus, or the Naropa University, a conspicuously less well endowed liberal arts college founded in 1974 in Boulder, Colorado, when the Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa invited Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, John Cage and other similarly minded beat and avant-garde types to help innovate new ecumenical (though Buddhist centered) ways of teaching and knowing. In the end, Tristan chose Naropa, because it offered a wider and more eclectic way, he felt, of pursuing questions of perception and meaning — besides he had never wanted to be simply an artist.

At Naropa (from 2005 through 2010), he began by tapping back into his family roots, and indeed his own primordial memories, launching into an extended study of *chanoyu* — the way of the Japanese tea ceremony. In keeping with his more recent concerns, Tristan focused on the phenomenological aspects of *chanoyu*, including, and perhaps surprisingly for such a visual soul as his, its experience as a soundscape. These studies culminated in an exquisitely modulated short essay on “The Acoustics of Tea,” which started out by citing a poem by Sen Sotan, a 17th-century grand tea master (“If asked the nature of chanoyu / say it’s the sound / of windblown pines / in a painting”), concluding four delicately observed (or should one say “heard”?) pages later, with Tristan’s observation: “The acoustic landscape of tea is beautiful and subtle, offering a complex interplay between silence and non-silence, intention and non-intention. The silence of tea is a pregnant one, from which laughter is liable to burst at any moment. It is the silence between the heartbeats. Here in the tearoom we may happen to hear the sound of one hand clapping.”

Such attention to attentiveness spread over to another early focus of Tristan’s time at Naropa as he now followed his miniature diorama passion clean over into the micro-miniature. Once again studying the processes of his childhood hero, the master Chen Zhongsen, as well as engaging several other micro-miniature practitioners, contemporary and ancient, Tristan began to recognize in the micro miniature passion another form of contemplative practice.

A long paper he subsequently compiled on this body of research culminated with an account of his own first attempt at a micro-miniature sculpture (ridiculously gross and crude though it was going to be when compared to the work of the masters he had been surveying, but still): a chair he hoped to fashion out of strands of hair from one of his tea ceremony teachers, using no magnification and limiting himself to only a needle and a razor. It took him three attempts, each representing hours upon hours of focused concentration. The first time, just as he was turning to the attachment of the final leg of the chair (an exceptionally delicate moment in the process), a slight flicker of frustration flashed across his mind, instantaneously transmitting itself to the tips of his fingers. Though his hands shuddered barely a 32nd of an inch, he figures, the sculpture looked like it had been run over by a truck. The next day he started afresh, this time keeping his attention completely focused, pausing to regain his composure between each operation, succeeding at great length in affixing that final chair leg, at which point he let out a deep sigh of satisfaction, blowing the entire work clean away in the hurricane of his outbreath. The next day, a third attempt, steady, steady, steady, and only after he’d safely stowed the completed chair under an upturned teacup did he let out a full exhalation. At which point he felt the sudden desire to be out and about, under the bright sun and the vast Colorado sky, jogging up a winding mountain road. “Breathing deeply,” he concluded, “my arms swinging freely, and with my heart pounding, I was suddenly struck by an expansiveness unlike anything I had ever experienced. I felt so tiny, and yet gigantic all at the same time. As my feet pounded against the mountain path, I was repeating the mantra, *I am the point of a very fine needle.*”

Coming in Fabrik, “Tristan Duke (Part II): The Magus in His Prime”