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An Enchanted Global Invasion
'Gazing Globes' by artist Paula Hayes comes to Madison Square Park
By Ralph Gardner



Who doesn't love snow globes? "That Lilliputian world," agreed the artist and landscape designer Paula Hayes.

"And, of course, the magical snow falling. Everything becomes coated with this beautiful material. Each part of snow is unique and crystalline."

Obviously, she gets it. So I was excited to hear about Ms. Hayes's new installation —"Gazing Globes"—in Madison Square Park. The exhibition, which consists of 18 illuminated, transparent polycarbonate spheres of different sizes and heights, opens Feb. 19 and runs through April 19.

But why only two months? Let's make it permanent. The problem with this world isn't that there are too many snow globes, but too few.

Though, strictly speaking, these are gazing globes—which Ms. Hayes informed me date to 13th-century Venice and reached the apex of their popularity in Victorian England—not snow globes.

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You can't shake them up and watch the pretty white stuff fall. Large, heavy and attached to fiberglass pedestals, they'd be a challenge to lift.

There's also the matter of their contents. Pretty much anything will be improved by placing it inside a crystal ball. But I've been conditioned since childhood to anticipate something Christmassy akin to a winter wonderland with Santa schussing between pine trees, his reindeer close behind.



Or maybe New York City in a blizzard.

This was anything but. Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the Madison Square Park Conservancy's Martin Friedman Senior Curator, described it as "post-apocalyptic."

The globes were filled with—what, I couldn't exactly say—but it drew associations less with Currier and Ives than Fukushima.

There were what appeared to be black shards and spare parts floating in some sort of toxic-looking broth.

"But she looks at these in a very positive way," the curator added, referring to the artist.

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Then again Ms. Hayes also writes science fiction, believes in extraterrestrials and cheerfully told me about the time she got buried in quicksand. “Up to my neck,” she recalled. “It was in the Hamptons.”

While there was an eerie beauty about the contents, I couldn’t quite visualize wanting to shrink to tiny size and join the objects inside—which is pretty much the litmus test for snow globes.

“It has parts from vintage radios,” the artist explained when I mistakenly identified one of the cylinders floating in the soup—the medium was actually pulverized CDs that sparkled with iridescence and that Ms. Rapaport describes as “fairy dust”—as a miniature Leaning Tower of Pisa.

“There’s also shredded rubber tire in there,” Ms. Hayes announced almost festively. “And a little on-off switch.”

I gently broached the idea of whether she might have been tempted to include something more recognizable or conventionally attractive. Maybe a model of the Flatiron Building across the street. I knew a souvenir shop around the corner that sold them.

Ms. Hayes, who is known for her terrariums, said that when the Madison Square Park Conservancy originally approached her it was with the thought that she’d do terrariums.

But the artist decided that would be redundant. “I thought, this is a park and the horticultural aspect is already beautifully cared for. It evolved to be the gazing globes.”

The artist was also seeing them for the first time, in situ, and was delighted with the results, especially the way they reflected the surrounding skyline.

“I like the way they’re communicating with the spire of the Empire State Building,” she said of a globe that was spouting stalagmites.

She described some of their contents as glacial and oceanic. And indeed they were. Some looked like they contained icebergs, if that vortex of debris—the Great Pacific Garbage Patch—had migrated to Antarctica.

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Utterly apart from my minor reservations about the contents, I was concerned about the gazing globes' safety. Perhaps because the sound system for that night's Kanye West concert, right next to the park on Broadway, was being tested and belching out disorienting noise.

But Ms. Hayes assured me the globes were virtually indestructible. "You can shoot it with a bullet," she said, though she admitted that she'd never tried. She compared the material to those dividers used to thwart robberies at liquor stores or delis.

I also raised the scenario—again perhaps prompted by the crowds already assembling for the Kanye West concert—of pranksters being tempted, by the park's recreational atmosphere, to try to remove the globes from their pedestals and use them as bowling or bocce balls.

Ms. Hayes also expressed no fear in that regard.

"I believe it will elicit more protectiveness in the public—"How can that be outside?" the artist observed.

As we spoke, the sky grew dark, the wind began to blow and large flakes of snow started to fall, swirling around the illuminated globes.

It was as if 18 miniature worlds had suddenly come to life. And it was actually quite lovely.