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# The otherworldliness of Gary Sczerbaniewicz

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Gary Sczerbaniewicz's artworks engage viewers beyond the gaze. They must be entered. That holds true just as much for the periscopic machines now installed at the Castellani Art Museum (CAM) as it did for the artist's 2014 labyrinth at Big Orbit Gallery, which viewers had to roll through on their backs.

No one will be surprised at the CAM show's title, *High Strangeness*, especially when it becomes clear that many of the references embedded in the small tableaux are common in the world of ufology (the study of unidentified flying objects). Indeed, the term "high strangeness" itself refers to UFO reports that go beyond a simple anomaly—like unexplained lights in the sky—to cases of detailed craft sightings, interactions with crafts or their occupants, or even alien abduction. This is not to say that Sczerbaniewicz believes in UFOs or that the show is about UFOs. Rather, ufology is one of the examples of severe displacement from the familiar that the artist invokes to create the atmosphere he needs. He wants to take away the distance between viewer and artwork, plunging the viewer in a world that's probably a bit uncomfortable (but also sort of fun).

Upon entering the CAM's Tops Gallery, the immersion begins immediately with a strong scent of burning and tar. The gallery contains eight black viewers, each equipped with binocular eyepieces that allow you to look inside at an exquisitely detailed—and somewhat creepy—vignette. Each scene seems, to some degree, plucked from the byways of pseudoscience and conspiracy theory, as curator Michael Beam's introduction terms this content.

You'll see a vignette devoted to Philip J. Corso, a US army officer who wrote *The Day After Roswell* with William J. Birne, in which he says a covert government operation collected and concealed off-planet technology after the Roswell crash of 1947. In the book, Corso also claims the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), or "Star Wars," was meant to achieve the destructive capacity of electronic guidance systems in incoming enemy warheads, as well as the disabling of enemy spacecraft, including those of extraterrestrial origin.

The "Star Wars" initiative is another common reference in Sczerbaniewicz's work. There are also tableaux devoted to Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* and the 1975 Travis Walton alien abduction case—Walton vanished for five days; they were spent, according to him, inside an alien spacecraft.

Production values are meticulous throughout the installation. The carefully abraded and charred viewers appear as though they have been recovered from some sort of disaster, but they also have distinctive architectural details and are handsome sculptures in their own rights. The interior vignettes contain equally painstakingly rendered elements (no doll house crap here), including faded wallpaper and handcrafted—yet simple—furnishings and moldings. But it is the entire experience that makes this work so well, from the first step into a darkened, fragrant gallery to the last look through the eyepiece of the last viewer. Although the installation contains eight separate objects, the artist has successfully melded these elements into one multifaceted experience. It's an experience you do not want to miss.

Gary Sczerbaniewicz: *High Strangeness is on view at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University through May 3. Call 286-8200 or visit [castellaniartmuseum.org](http://castellaniartmuseum.org) for hours and other information.*

**Elizabeth Licata is editor of *Spree*.**