
TOURING *UTOPIA*
AUGUST 3 – NOVEMBER 3, 2019

This touring packet emphasizes experiential inquiry-based learning by asking questions to help visitors think about the exhibition. Expertise on every work is not necessary.

WITH VISITORS

DEFINE: In 1516, Sir Thomas More coined ‘utopia’, a word used to describe a perfect imaginary world (The British Library). Utopia also means an “ideal society”.

ASK: **What would your own version of Utopia be like?** (pair share or small groups)
Which aspects of your surroundings would need to change in order to achieve Utopia? (pair share or small groups)

INFORM:

This exhibition was conceived by Denver-based artist Becky Wareing Steele who is influenced by the Southwest landscape and sustainable living, especially Earthship Biotecture in Taos, New Mexico. As stated in the wall text:

DIRECT toward wall text: “*Utopia: A New Society for All* is a physical virtual reality. This project is a piece of socially engaged art that exists in two forms. As a physical object, it is the 1:160 scale diorama installation behind you. As virtual reality, it is a new society created by a group of real people from around the world.”

- Every figure in the diorama is a miniature representation of a real-life person.
- Anyone can apply to have themselves represented in Utopia.
- All members of Utopia agree to assist in the creation of a new society that is open to all regardless of age, creed, race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, disability, or national origin.

DIRECT: Examine the central diorama as well as supplemental works like the Earthship blueprints and the flag. Imagine what it would actually be like to live in this Utopia. Think about what your day to day life would be like if you lived there—and consider which Earthship you would choose to live in and why. (have them look and pair share as they look)

ASK and have group discuss out loud together?

- **What might the experience of living in Utopia be like? What do you see that makes you say that?**
- **What challenges might you face living in this community?**

INFORM: Consider the artist's intention in making this work

DIRECT to wall text: "The country felt more divided than ever. And the escapism provided by social media and modern online life could often feel more alienating than unifying. Wareing Steele, a Denver-based artist who specializes in small scale sculpture, turned to art to bring people together."

Utopia citizens meet in person in the Denver-area or they meet virtually over Skype.

Wareing Steele is interested in

- how people try to satisfy their need for **community**
- and how virtual realities such as the internet may not do so effectively.
- Utopia was created so that people could meet each other and have real-life interactions based around an idealized reality.

ASK:

- **If you were a citizen of Utopia, what would you contribute?** (pair share or group discuss).
- **How is Utopia similar to other online, virtual reality, or social media based communities? What new ideas and experiences does it inspire?**

DIRECT visitors to where the sign up is located to apply to be a member of Utopia

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

If visitors are interested in becoming citizens of Utopia, they can use iPads in the gallery to complete and submit the required form.

Following is some additional information about the process of becoming a citizen:

- To become a citizen of Utopia, you begin by filling out a short application online and submitting a photo of your face to Wareing Steele.
- You will then undergo a process of "miniaturization" in which the artist creates a 1:160 miniature version of you.
- The artist then creates an Earthship for your miniature self to live in. Earthships are a type of sustainable home that minimizes reliance on fossil fuels by regulating their own temperatures, collecting rainwater, and growing edible plants. (More information on Earthships can be found in the additional reading.)

Once you're a citizen of Utopia:

- You can participate in occasional votes to assist in shaping and growing Utopia. People can attend meetings in person in Denver or participate in the discussion online.
- You agree to assist in the creation of a new society that is open to all regardless of age, creed, race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, disability, or national origin

RECOMMENDED FOR VTS

This is not a good exhibit for VTS as the gallery is exploratory in itself.

EXHIBITION TEXT

INTRODUCTION

Utopia: A New Society for All is a socially engaged art project founded in 2017, a turbulent time for many. The 2016 presidential election had exposed rifts in our communities, leaving the country feeling politically and ideologically divided. Climate change took on greater urgency as more devastating severe weather events revealed what the future might hold. And the tools that many of us use to feel ore connected to others, like social media, proved both socially isolating and vulnerable to damaging outside interference. In such an uncertain social and political landscape, the need to build real community took on a new importance for Denver-based artist Becky Wareing Steele.

Wareing Steele, who specializes in small-scale sculpture, turned to art to bring people together. She founded *Utopia: A New Society for All*, a socially engaged art project that exists in two forms; a physical *and* virtual reality. As a physical object, it is the 1:160 scale diorama installation behind you. As virtual reality, it is a new community created by a group of real people from around the world – who are each represented as hand-painted figures in the diorama installation.

Utopia falls under the category of socially engaged practice, a type of art making where the process of collaboration, participation, and interaction is as much a part of the artwork as the art object itself. The art of *Utopia* isn't just the diorama installation. It also includes the conversations and relationships formed among the citizens of *Utopia* as they grapple with the questions that define society. What does it mean to build community? What are the possibilities of social, cultural, and political life? How can we build a better world?

Blair Huff
Curatorial Assistant

Where do people live?

The houses in Utopia are called Earthships, a style of passive solar dwellings pioneered by architect Michael Reynolds in the 1970's. This style of architecture uses local or recycled materials to create environmentally sustainable homes that produce water, electricity, and food for its occupants' use. For example, carefully placed windows regulate heat by letting in sunlight, while thick walls act as insulation.

What do the numbers mean?

You can use the numbers next to each label on this table (like #1) to find the structure on the *Map of Utopia* hanging on the wall. Each building in *Utopia* is labeled with a number on the map.

Becky Wareing Steele

American (born 1983)

Shawna Doering

American (born 1983)

Flag of Utopia

2019

Fiber

Notice the repetition of circles in the flag. Shawna Doering, who is both a fiber artist and a citizen of *Utopia*, and Wareing Steele, surveyed the citizens of *Utopia* to identify a symbol that could best represent this community: a circle. Circles represent unity; a connection to the planet, the sun, and the moon; and the circular nature of this self-sustaining society. Look to the diorama installation behind you to locate more circular forms.

Becky Wareing Steele

American (born 1983)

Nathan Hall

American (born 1982)

Utopia National Anthem

2019

Ink on paper, audio file

Nathan Hall, a composer and Utopian, called on the citizens of *Utopia* to help create the society's anthem. It was important to the citizens that the anthem focus more on the future than the past and that the music was easy enough for all to sing.

Please Touch! (only for the supplemental model in the left corner of the gallery – DO NOT TOUCH THE MAIN DIORAMA)

While we ask you not to touch elsewhere in the museum, the artist made this specific model for you to touch. Gently touch this model to explore the sizes, textures, and materials that Wareing Steele uses in her work.

OTHER WALL TEXT

#1 Community Green House

What grows in Utopia?

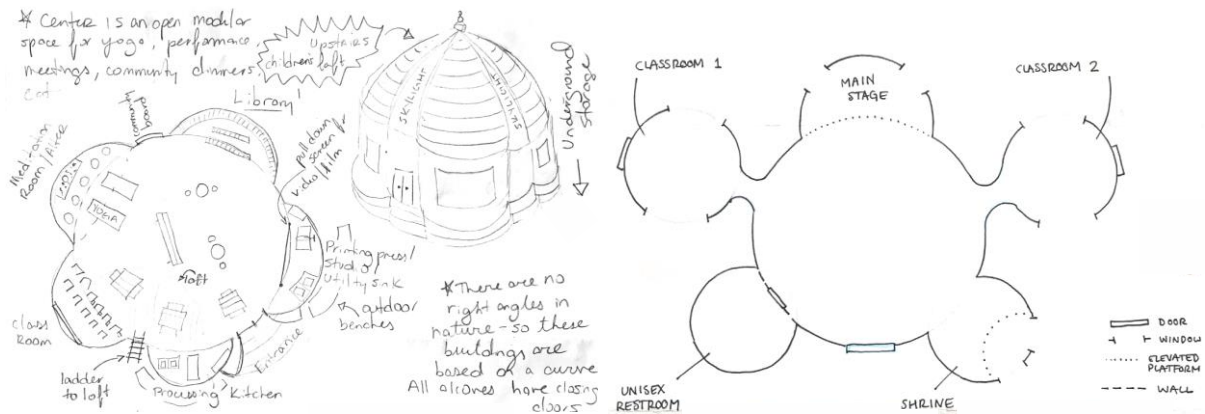
In addition to their individual gardens, citizens decided what to grow in the community green house (#1) by vote:

- Black Beans
- Garbanzo Beans
- Peas
- Quinoa
- Melons
- Tomatoes
- Lettuce
- Sweet Peppers
- Broccoli
- Potatoes
- Sweet Potatoes
- Beets
- Onion
- Garlic
- Melons

Peek inside the geodesic dome greenhouse. Can you see the plants inside?

#54 Community Center

Utopia citizens' votes shaped the final design of the community center. Here are two examples from their ballots:



GALLERY GUIDE TEXT: **Pick up a copy in the gallery**

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Becky Wareing Steele is an artist living and working in Denver, Colorado specializing in small scale sculpture. Her work deals with the commonalities that exist in our shared experiences through the examination of scale and environment. Through her sculptural and photographic

work with 1:160 scale figures she explores the impact of scale and how it effects our perception of the world around us. This impact can also be found in the way we perceive ourselves in our environment.

In more recent series she has developed narrative components to accompany the works, allowing the viewer to connect with the piece on a deeper level. Using settings familiar and accessible to everyone is a key component of her work. Through this process she is able to alter the way people view everyday situations, seemingly mundane at times, and invite the viewer to think about their place in the environment by altering the scale.

Her newest artistic exploration, Utopia: a new society for all, is a society that exists in concept as well as in physical form as diorama based installation art. This is an experiment in both artistic practice as well as civics and communal living. The modern world and its push for a virtual reality to escape everyday life is working against our instinctive need as humans for community. This project aims to give people an escape from reality while still connecting with people in real life situations.

Wareing Steele holds a BA in Art History from Colorado State University with a focus on Inuit Art.

<https://beckywareingsteele.com/utopia>

RELATED EVENTS

Member Tour:

Saturday, August 3, 12pm

All members of the Fine Arts Center are welcome to join us for our Monthly Member Tour, held on the 1st Saturday of each month at 12 noon. Each tour (lasting approximately 1 hour) will feature a different topic, so feel free to come back often and continue learning about the FAC.

Something Else: Artist Talk

Friday, September 27, 5:30pm

Join artist Becky Wareing Steele for a conversation centered on community as it relates to her ongoing exploration of the concept of a Utopia. *Utopia: A New Society for All* brings virtual reality into the real world, looking into what it takes to build a successful society as diorama based installation art. Wareing Steele will discuss what brought her into her role as Founder and Facilitator of Utopia and how she's continued to build a sense of community with citizens around the world through this community-based project.

