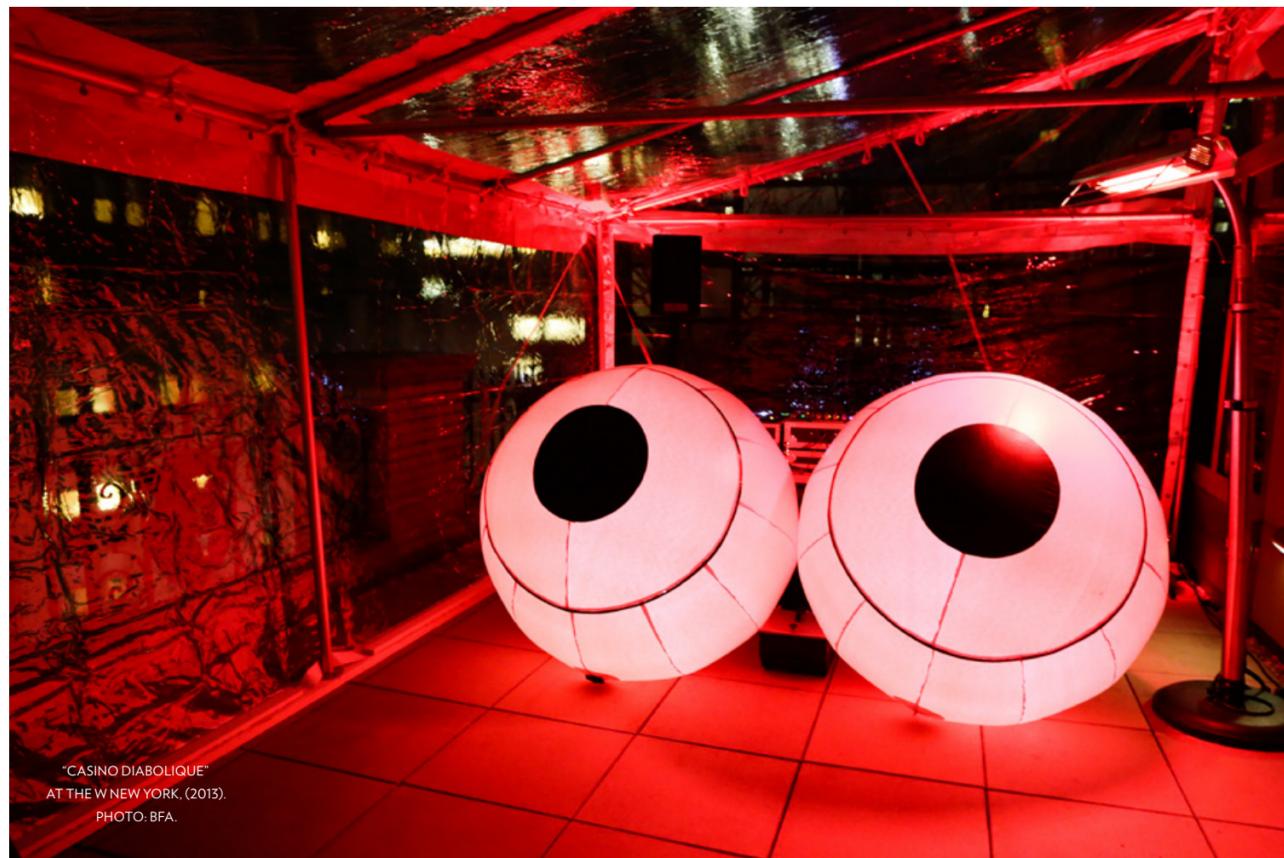


# DESI SANTIAGO

THE ARTIST HIJACKS THE W NEW YORK, AND IT'S BEAUTIFUL

WRITTEN by Andrew Stark



"CASINO DIABOLIQUE"  
AT THE W NEW YORK, (2013).  
PHOTO: BFA.

Imagine you've just arrived at the W New York. It's the middle of November and the cold is biting. There's a dusting of snow, the city monochromatic as a precisionist painting. As you step into the lobby and shrug off the freeze, you're reminded of the Jack London paperbacks you read as a kid, some poor musher squatting around a fire before dropping to one knee, collapsing and ebbing into the earth. Upon check-in, the staff tells you of an event happening at the hotel, upstairs in the Extreme WOW suites. It's a "multisensory casino and cocktail experience," they say, including games like The Zodiac Wheel, The Pendulum, Black Jack, and a Tarot Card Reader. You're intrigued, of course. When they explain—winkingly—that your luck determines the fate and outcome of your stay at the hotel, you buy some chips and head upstairs.

This is Casino Diabolique, the latest fantastical brainchild of renowned visual artist Desi Santiago. "It was one of those whims that happened," he says, modestly. But the work that must go into each of Santiago's whims—from painting an entire building black to transform Miami's Lords Hotel into "this kind of demonic dog/cat creature," to designing elaborate runway sets evocative of an Orwellian fever dream for fashion

giants like Patrik Ervell and Y-3—is unthinkable. "I just do what feels right and instinctual," he says. "I think of myself as a medium in the fact that I let things come through. I create a body of work that feels right to me." And it's easy to imagine the artist's body of work as an actual working body, something with reach and personality, with its own set of faculties.

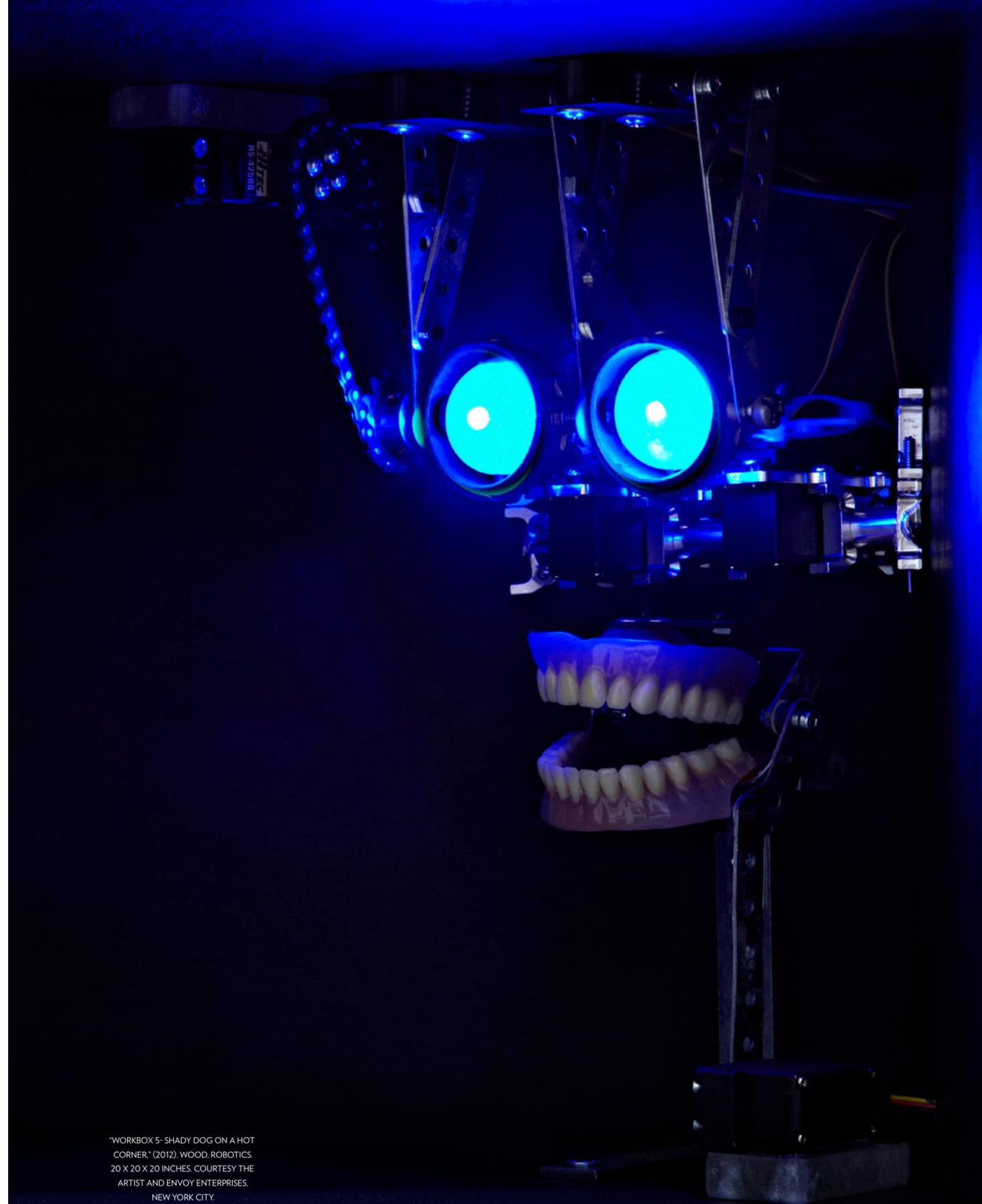
Casino Diabolique, "an art experience in the guise of a casino," serves as a metaphor for the risk-return spectrum involved in New York City lifestyle. "All the outcomes, from people's wins or losses, affect the space, the lighting." But it could also serve as a metaphor for all of our workaday gambles, the zodiacal dance diagram we constantly follow, the fact that eating this muffin instead of that strudel could prevent—or precipitate—future cosmological ruin.

"My work is inherent to me, my process, and wherever I show is where it needs to be," Santiago says, and the W New York, it turns out, is the perfect gallery space. "Everything is sensory—the fashion collaboration [wardrobe curated by Hood By Air], the music [soundtrack composed by Azari & III], and I'm creating a special fragrance for the space [with Tomas Delucia of The Sense Society]."

Desi Santiago—who is 6'4" and bearded and

looks more like a pro hockey player than a visual artist—goes on to say: "The kind of work that I've been interested in creating is a collaboration with the public. It's relational. They activate the work. The work is the vessel for people to generate its energy."

Fame can be a death mask for some, their identity displaced or manipulated behind the twist and wrench of celebrity. But there exists no apparent separation between Desi Santiago the artist and Desi Santiago the man. "This is all I ever knew I was going to be," he says. As a child, he invented an imaginary world for himself and his friends called "The Story," an apparitional trapdoor through which anything was possible. Today, "The Story" has become a real and tactile place. Santiago has joined a number of other innovative artists and fashion designers in creating the stunning and dynamic onstage narrative for Madonna's MDNA World Tour; he designed whimsical mannequin heads out of things like disco balls and flashing ambulance lights for the Louis Vuitton-Marc Jacobs exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris; and he transformed the Met's Alexander McQueen Retrospective into an otherworldly dreamscape. This is "The Story," and we've all become a part of it.



"WORKBOX 5- SHADY DOG ON A HOT CORNER," (2012). WOOD, ROBOTICS. 20 X 20 X 20 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ENVOY ENTERPRISES. NEW YORK CITY.