

JACCI DEN HARTOG

NATURE  
RULES

Carmine Iannaccone

WE ARE LIVING in the organic backlash. Modified by an air of scientific authority, its code words flourish all around us: biodynamic farming, holistic medicine, environmentalism, macrobiotic cooking, and so on. But as with all backlashes, what the revival of nature consciousness confirms is how deep its nemesis, the specter of "artificiality," has crept into the fabric of things. Regardless of which side you're rooting for, the antinomy between what is perceived as natural or authentic and what is perceived as fake has become a basic rhetorical structure. True, other moments in history have certainly had their forgeries, shams, and impostors, but we have one thing they never had. We have plastic. Cheap, indestructible, and ubiquitous, the synthetic cornucopia spills forth its bounty with untrammelled abundance now, from polyurethane to polyester; Styrofoam and Mylar to Lumasite and Plexi; from cellophane, nylon, acrylic, and latex to Teflon, Dacron, styrene, and vinyl. Nature's got competition.

It's hard to think about Jacci Den Hartog's art and not consider her use of plastic, given how extremely conscious her work is of its own materiality and its identity as sculpture. Plastic offers the sheen of modernity and gives each piece a distinctly artificial flavoring. That's important because Den Hartog's primary subject is landscape. Her art is torqued between the malleability of its synthetic dimension and the self-rule of nature. What humans *make* can be manipulated, but what nature *gives* stands alone. And if there is one feature in the landscape that "stands alone" more dramatically than any other, Den Hartog has located it in her recent work. It's

the mountain: majestic, irreplaceable, unmoving.

But moving that mountain is just what Den Hartog is up to, through addressing the conventions that prop up its representation in culture and art. She plunges headlong into the shifting sands of psychological projection, metaphor, and double entendre upon which perception is built. Take *Moving Mountain* (1995-96), for example, which isn't made of rock, or even simulated rock. It's made of bric-a-brac specifically, those cheap ornamental vase stands one can purchase in Oriental tourist traps. Heaped in a mess on the floor, the mountains to which Den Hartog directs us are neither the Himalayas nor the Hindu Kush but rather the piles of junk accumulating in our living rooms. And yet this stuff is not real kitsch any more than it's fake geology; it is a reproduction of kitsch. The 500 or so units aren't store-bought, but produced one by one from the artist's own mold. If most plastic goods in our society are poor cousins to versions of the same thing that were originally "better made," Den Hartog turns the complaint on its ear. She works tirelessly to produce handcrafted objects that look and feel like cheap copies, right down to their faux-Orientalism.

Landscape is only a tangential issue in *Moving Mountain*, but tangents count quite a bit for Den Hartog. There's an elfish glee to her circuitous logic. Metaphors fold in upon other metaphors with the precision of an Escher drawing, each one promising something more real, and only delivering something more synthetic and vaporous. That is exactly what

OPPOSITE: VIEWING  
THE RAIN FROM UNDER  
THE BRIDGE, 1996.  
POLYURETHANE AND  
PLASTER, 48 x 28 x 15 IN.  
COURTESY CHRISTOPHER  
GRIMES GALLERY,  
LOS ANGELES.



MOVING MOUNTAIN,  
1995-96, POLYURETHANE,  
27 x 42 x 42 IN. COURTESY  
CHRISTOPHER GRIMES  
GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

perception of the landscape has always been: synthetic and vaporous. Nature has always provided a convenient screen for the projection of human values, whether it be through association—the mountain as timeless friend, loyal, rugged, reliable (a good logo for an insurance company); or as uncompromising adversary, testing the courage, endurance, and determination of those who would do battle with it, from Sir Edmund Hillary on the summit of Everest to the human spiders who practice rock climbing. Nowhere is this revealed more pointedly than in our curious choice of nomenclature for so many landforms. With real-life examples running the gamut from “painted” deserts to “monument” valleys and “bridal veil” falls, a loony title like *Dwelling in the Floating Jade Mountains* (1995) must have been an indulgence the artist just couldn’t resist. In the

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tradition of Eastern painting to which Den Hartog alludes, the values the mountain represents are no less culturally biased, describing a philosophical vision of interlocked destinies between man and environment, and setting a premium on solemnity and impenetrable mystery.

In particular, landscape painting (both Eastern and Western) valorizes the atmospheric, the suggestion of space and expansiveness rather than material presence. The inability to contain a scenic view, even by a scroll or picture frame beyond whose edges it implicitly expands, has made landscape a much more visual than tactile experience for fine artists. *Viewing the Rain from Under the Bridge* (1995) sounds like a title that’s been lifted from a Japanese *ukiyo-e* print, and as such, it points out a whole range of illusionist mechanisms—like framing, focus, and manipulated viewing angles—at the painter or printmaker’s disposal. The two-dimensional art work can direct a viewer’s attention and define landscape in ways that a discreet sculpted object simply can’t.

Given her taste for offbeat logic, the problem for Den Hartog then comes down to a formal paradox: how *would* you sculpt a landscape? Her answer is simple. For the sculptor conscious of the cultural matrix in which she lives and through which she thinks, the project cannot be one of modeling and building the subject up; it must instead be a matter of boiling it down. Her landscape pieces are like condensed bouillon cubes in which the human idea of “place” collapses into the topographical features it animates.

*Rising Before the Mist has Risen* (1996) takes not just the mist, but all the moody attributes of landscape painting and literally solidifies them into the crust of translucent plastic that has congealed onto outcroppings of plaster. In some ways, the work is like a sculptor’s revenge on painting. The intangible effects of light that all schools of scenic painting relish are rudely materialized as the intense pigmentation frozen into the structure of Den Hartog’s material. Since the

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plastic itself begins in liquid form, its very physicality transmits this feeling of solidifying something fluid. With all her current work Den Hartog translates the pictorial invention of space into a physical invention of form, while still insisting upon a full investment of illusion and imagination. Plastic is what makes that possible.

Plastic is used to imitate other things, from Naugahyde's take on leather to Formica trying to pass itself off as marble. Plastic is the mockingbird of modern civilization, the blank slate to be etched with whatever qualities "research and development" can force it to have. Den Hartog's work is peculiar because although she often uses polyurethane and resins in a conventional way to cast other forms, she also persistently misuses them in a non-imitative way, allowing them to have properties of their own. In a word, she recuperates the organic attributes of a substance that isn't supposed to have any organic attributes. Her process-oriented approach lets the material pool, drip, flow and cascade in its own way, giving the impression of something autonomous—something, dare we say, *natural*? At best, we can only use the word metaphorically, and that's just fine with the artist. This sculpture is not about creating a situation that will conform more closely to or mimic more accurately the real. She wants it to be duplicitous. Plastic has the perfect semiotic value because whether it is stamped out to make bric-a-brac or poured to glisten like morning dew, it is both what it is and other than what it is at the same time.

The new disguise lends a new inflection to the phenomena it imitates. Nature becomes just as potentially toxic as picturesque, just as grotesque as beautiful, just as revolting as it is attractive. *Landscape in the Manner of Old Masters* (1996) presents Den Hartog's most intricately sculpted model mountain, but its withered form feels squishy and vaguely sickening, like a rotting carcass, even as it retains the perfect tripartite compositional structure of Chinese tradition. If the glaze of green



polyurethane that bathes it looks like moss, it also calls up a feeling of gangrenous disease.

Perhaps we're too conscious of ecological disaster now to simply enjoy what is lovely in nature. After all, it was the rumble of heavy machinery spewing out diesel exhaust that helped make the Earthworks relevant to their time. But Den Hartog's sculpture isn't looking for a newly relevant form: it's looking for the rhetoric of form. Her ambition is to be artful, not honest. What Den Hartog wants is a sculpture that will be just as fake as painting. In the same way landscape painting has its lexicon of spatial techniques—its bag of tricks—this artist is gradually working out the vocabulary by which materiality is read and interpreted, a set of signs and triggers just as duplicitous and conventional, hopefully, as anything the Old Masters ever conceived.

*LANDSCAPE IN THE MANNER OF OLD MASTERS*, 1996, POLYURETHANE AND PLASTER, 26 x 22 x 19 IN. COURTESY CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

CARMINE IANNACCONE teaches critical theory at the University of Southern California and Visual Interpretation at the Los Angeles High School for the Arts. He is a regular contributor to *Art issues*.