

Jacci Den Hartog

at SUE SPAID FINE ART, 2–31 October
ART STORE GALLERY, 23 September–15 October

Jacci Den Hartog approaches nature not as a self-contained quantity, but as a vehicle for all the cultural forces that model our perception of it. Even as her process-oriented work articulates the tyranny of a purely natural force such as gravity, it struts in a suit of distinctly inorganic textures and raucous colors. Moreover, she develops a curious formal logic whereby the animal, vegetal, and mineral kingdoms meld and flow suggestively into one another like some great culinary accident, or the freak products of industrial research run amuck.

Though one's eye may first be attracted to the titillating colors of a piece like *Spring Runoff* (1993), where green and blue rubber oozes like mucous off the slopes of a plaster rock formation and then swirls into a psychedelic pattern on the floor, the key to Den Hartog's work lies in the austere non-color of plain white pieces like *Cosmic Milk Mountain* (1992) and *Fog Rolling In* (1993). Both works, in her exhibit "Hill and Dale" at Sue Spaid, revisit a familiar motif to the artist—the elephant. Den Hartog doesn't begin with the animal as a living creature, though, but as a prefabricated one, cast in multiple out of plaster. From the outset she keeps herself one step removed from the original, whose identity only grows all the more hazy. Stacked or piled on the floor, the statuettes are swathed in festoons of poured rubber or obscured by cakes of plaster. Reversing the pachyderm's mythic claim to perfect memory, its form here is erased, the edges distorted and lost, the negative spaces filled with an obliterating sediment.

But as the intense color of other works attest, this process is a double-edged sword. Just as they become their own graveyard, the animal forms also mutate into new shapes and structures. Elephants become mountains, mountains become fog, and fog becomes foliage in a series of open-ended transmutations. Often asking the viewer to stoop down to their level on the floor, these miniature geological events redefine the viewer—not the elephant—as a somewhat ponderous and awkward giant.

In an accompanying series of drawings titled *Cosmic Milk* (1993), elephants are mashed and impacted one upon the other. Like an ironic blossoming of fractal units, they agglomerate into ever more

fanciful formations of rocks, clouds, and sky. At the breast of Mother Nature's cosmic milk, even the most earthbound of creatures has a stake in the heavens. Den Hartog isn't looking for common denominators in her subject, but raising it to an exponential power: nature². Concerned with neither observation nor imagination, her art stakes out an absurdist space where goofy possibilities coexist with dead serious consequences. With somewhat disarming candor, the artist addresses both.

An adjacent exhibition at the Art Store, "The Ivory Project," sports replicas of elephant tusks cast in clear plastic and mounted to the wall as though to mark the advance (or retreat) of an invisible herd. Each tusk is filled with an assortment of figurines, beads, and other paraphernalia carved out of the now contraband material which the artist collected both from private individuals and from the donation of articles confiscated by the United States government. Intentionally activist in nature, the work doesn't ask to be seen in aesthetic terms. But it does speak to the standards of art making as much as those of environmentalism, and in so doing exposes the basic flaw in its own logic. All the articles encased within the tusks are, after all, the products of an artistic output, sometimes of a highly accomplished degree. The ease with which any artist can point fingers, determine blame, or ascertain guilt, then, is quickly compromised. If anything, "The Ivory Project" unearths a much bigger problem than it is prepared to deal with. Like the free play of form and identity in "Hill and Dale," the questions of responsibility it addresses are much too slippery for any simple polemic.

Carminé Iannaccone is an artist living in Los Angeles.