

May 12, 2000 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | TIMES ART CRITIC

*

Imagined Journeys: For several years Jacci Den Hartog has been making strange and unusually compelling sculptures extrapolated from landscapes familiar to traditional Chinese painting. It's as if the artist had accepted the common visual invitation made by many Asian paintings, which is to enter the depicted landscape and take an imaginative journey across vast distances, and then made a model of where she had been and the sights she had seen.

The four new sculptures Den Hartog is showing at Christopher Grimes Gallery continue down that road, but something slightly different also seems to be afoot. The works, all made this year, feel somewhat awkward and labored--not fully confident. But there's also an eccentric quality to these pieces, and it bears watching.

Standing on a square, rectangular or round pedestal table, each sculpture is apparently made from white plaster (or Hydrocal) that has been thickly slathered over a linear armature. One sculpture grows upward in jagged zigzags, two others rise up and swirl in and around themselves, a fourth breaks out into exuberant ornamental scrolls. Unlike her earlier landscape sculptures, which typically plunged out from the wall or pedestal base to probe surrounding space, these works remain contained within precise volumes determined by the size and shape of the table tops on which they stand.

The surface of each table is composed from mirror and colored plexiglass--red, blue, green or white--which has been cut like a jigsaw puzzle into decorative mosaic patterns. Four ink-and-watercolor drawings on an adjacent wall likewise show dramatic, Chinese-style mountains in black and white, rising up from fields of color. Pink and violet flowers, dense tangles of autumnal leaves and a rushing, streaming tide of cool blue water are platforms above which mountains climb.

Den Hartog calls her four sculptures "viewing pavilions." I'm not quite sure what that means, except to say that abstract armatures rising above colored mosaics do in fact function as places for the imagination to rest, refresh and amuse itself. These are strange and quirky sculptures, unlike anything else around, and it will be curious to see what comes next.

Also at Christopher Grimes, in the small rear gallery, Bay Area artist Dean Smith is having his local debut with a solo show of 10 abstract linear drawings, all dating from 1999. Intimate and organic, they offer simple pleasures.

Imagine a close-up view of close-cropped hair spiraling out from the crown of a man's head, or perhaps little iron filings standing at attention as a magnet swoops by, and you'll have some idea of the dense, intricate patterns that enliven the three drawings in black graphite. The negative spaces between the short, staccato pencil marks assume a contradictory material presence, which gives these flat drawings visual heft.

Other drawings are made from tiny loops of hot pink or pinkish orange, which cluster in tight, concentric circles like minute cells or a microscopic view of skin. Elsewhere dense, parallel, undulating lines ripple across the surface of the page, filling the sheet, or else establishing an internal bodily shape (the largest drawing carries the subtitle "portrait of my father's brain"). Smith uses metallic or fluorescent ink for these EKG-like works, which gives them a subtle evanescence.

The most curious drawing is a narrow triangular form, like a pie wedge, that begins at the topmost point with a small fleck of ink. As the line is repeated at progressively increasing widths across the triangle, it begins to get wavy. By the time the final line crosses the bottom of the triangle, it's a veritable ruffle, like the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil and causing a hurricane in Texas. Neat.

* Christopher Grimes Gallery, 916 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 587-3373, both through June 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

*