

Miles reviews an exhibit of the works of Jacci Den Hartog at the Christopher Grimes Gallery in Los Angeles from Art Forum, Nov. 2004

JACCI DEN HARTOG

CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY

Jacqui Den Hartog has made a career of exploring rocks and water both as substance and subject. She investigates materials, processes, and stylistic devices for modeling them and examining the shapes they impose on one another. Isolated from broader land- or seascape contexts, and supported by wall mounts and stands, her boulder-spotted pools and torrents, cast in polyurethane and, in one instance, Hydrocal (a high-density plaster) over steel armatures, seem to hover in space as if time had stopped and the rest of the world had fallen away.

Den Hartog's most recent sculptures represent a departure from earlier works in which waves and crags seemed bound by aesthetic codes halfway between Japanese and japonaiserie, Chinese and chinoiserie. Instead, her latest offerings seem to take cues from Romanticism and nineteenth-century realism and dazzlingly manage to pack the spirit of the epic into small static objects.

In fact, Den Hartog's latest efforts flow between an assortment of unusual referents. The sleekness of their molding and initial appearance of precision suggest compliance with a trend toward the hyperreal that has denuded much recent sculpture (especially from Los Angeles), but their energy and the traces registered by their surfaces signal a kind of expressionism. The ridges of the artist's fingertips are echoed in the surface of the plastic, as what initially appears to be an obvious attempt at replicating water, guided by fidelity to how the liquid troughs and crests, gradually reveals itself as a record of the artist's act of making, the traces of hands modeling raw material.

Yet as much as manner, artifice and gesture become subtexts, if not themes, the works are also informed by a sensitivity born of observation. This is most evident in Den Hartog's manipulation of color and opacity: Where the water is stormy, its surface seems to take on the reflected gray of cloud cover, and where the artist suggests turbulent shallows, her materials become appropriately frothy. So handy is Den Hartog with such nuances that the works, absent of nearly anything that might channel, contain, and otherwise affect the water, encourage us to imagine a physical world around them.

And while it's fun to flesh out the narratives and locations suggested by Den Hartog's frozen fragments of ocean and stream in one's imagination, it is also productive to relate to them as sculptural interruptions and interrogations of actual space. Just as water carves out coastlines and canyons, Den Hartog's fluid forms, as they trail off or splash in front of us, carve up our space. Like expressionist gestures in the round, they change as we negotiate them. Regrettably, the point at which one fully apprehends the successes of these works also heralds a discovery of their weaknesses. Rather than assuming a politely distant vantage point, we want to move around and above and below them to get as physical with them as they are with us. Unfortunately, in so doing, we become aware of the clunkiness of their stands and substructures. This is less a problem of shattering an illusion than throwing a wrench into otherwise elegant dynamism.

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