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ART | AROUND THE GALLERIES

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Sculpture Seen From Within

Installation art often begins with the idea that its pieces are walk-in paintings. In contrast, sculpture rarely aspires to be a room-size composition that lets viewers enter its negative spaces to observe its forms from various perspectives. Jaci Den Hartog's new work changes all that.

At Christopher Grimes Gallery, each of the five realistic depictions of rivers, harbors and a 21-foot-long seashore makes you feel as if you're standing in the middle of a picture, from which everything but the water (and a couple of rocky outcroppings) has been deleted. It's an uncanny sensation, recalling both the visual capabilities of off-the-shelf software and the handcrafted magic of dioramas.

Two of Den Hartog's abbreviated seascapes rest atop thin steel rods that make the irregularly contoured sculptures appear to float in thin air, their wildly whitecapped surfaces of blue, green and gray water all the more turbulent for being detached from the land.

The three other pieces are affixed to the wall, where they cast shadows that resemble clouds scudding through the sky, upside-down mountain ranges and gracefully twisted bonsai limbs. The shadows add to the dreaminess of Den Hartog's sculptures, distancing them from the rules of verisimilitude.

Den Hartog has created the sinuous, undulating surfaces by a multi-step process of carving, molding, mixing and casting. To look closely is to see that they abandon the dutiful truthfulness of realism for the fantasy-fueled power of artifice.

In other words, Den Hartog's gorgeously sculpted waves, splashes and swirls are too good to be true -- and too beautiful to be denied. This links them to grand landscape paintings and Japanese woodblock prints, in which water is stylized and formalized, all for the sake of compositional effect.

Den Hartog even plays with perspective, building spatial recession into some of her works to pump up the drama without overriding the sensuous tranquillity that is becoming her trademark. As an artist she fuses sculpture and picture making, an odd combination of media and genres that she handles as if it were perfectly natural.

Christopher Grimes Gallery, 916 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 587-3373, through Aug. 28. Closed Sundays and Mondays.