

As artists, our relationship with art history is not unlike our relationship with our parents. It's a necessary but complex set of understandings and ambivalencies. Too much reverence and one never establishes one's own path. Too much irony and one risks perpetual adolescence. No relationship and we have no idea of what patterns lie waiting ahead for us to haplessly repeat. What is required is a synthesis formed of affection, respect, questioning and the ability to hold one's ground, a synthesis that is often hard-won and not to be taken for granted.

It is also often the case that the work we artists most admire is that which at first bemused us: the passage from incomprehension to understanding cements our appreciation for another's achievement. Jacqui den Hartog's work gave me such an experience. When I first saw her work at Sue Spaid's gallery in 1992, her small floor-bound sculptures of castles and elephants seemed too easily folded in with a lot of other art in the early 90s that was mired in puddles of viscous goo. I was wrong. As the years went by, I found myself becoming engaged, then astonished as Den Hartog's sculptures compelled my attention and made me think of aesthetic references as disparate as the theatrical space of Bernini and the sugared, mouth-watering surfaces of gum drops. Eventually I arrived at an intense admiration, from which I now write.

In Sung dynasty painting, landscapes are formed from collaboration between the observed, the imagined and the physical aspect of making. Towering mountains recede concentrically backwards into mist, their perimeters flicked with inky brush marks that stand in for trees. Chinese painting such as this forms part of the complex matrix of Den Hartog's work, an ambitious engagement with history and culture as seen through nature, wedded to fearlessness when confronted with technical challenges. Her sculptures are extravagant, merging the combustible energy of Baroque sculpture with the meditative space of Chinese landscape painting.

Let me give some examples: a long, rippling tide line floating before a wall and advancing towards us; a vertical mountain with outcroppings made of candy-colored resin translucencies, an ink drawing sculpturally embodied; water leaping off a wall, breaking over invisible rocks and spilling down in rivulets, painted in the lurid colors used for decorative elements in home aquariums. Den Hartog's art engages passionately with natural phenomena and their cultural reconstructions, but her rigor and intensity restrain the work from simplistic illustration. Like those Sung dynasty painters, she partakes equally of artificiality, observation and engagement with art histories, placing us into a relationship with nature that is immensely generous and cool-eyed at the same time.

Den Hartog has always shown a careful concern for the relationship between her sculptural work and the physicality of the viewer. From the earlier work, with its echoes of Joel Shapiro's small-scale sculptures placed directly on the floor, to the work which leaps off the wall towards the viewer, she has created situations in which we look through and around sculpture, rhyming with our ways of looking through and around landscape. In the newest work, she proposes something different: work not simply on a pedestal but on a large, low pedestal which compels us to see the landscape / sculpture from a bird's

eye view. The low pedestals signal a more subjective stance: the exploration of not only her own sensations as they play a part in constructing landscapes but also of the unimaginable, of what it is like for her mother, who is struggling with Alzheimer's, to be losing her memory. The landscape is seen as similar to one of those dioramas offered in natural history museums or world fairs: this is what the world looked like in the Stone Age, here's the city of the future. But now the sculptures say to the artist and to us: this is how the landscape looks covered over and obscured by zigzagging patterns that disrupt comprehension, this is how someone you love is experiencing memory, as details submerge and run off the edge.

This anchoring of the work in her memories, in the collective memory of Navajo culture whose blanket patterns run riot over these tabletop landscapes, and in the disappearing of her mother's memory, seems to me very Proustian in how it goes beyond the autobiographical and into an investigation of how remembrance operates for us all. We view our memories from a distance, imagining they are as navigable as a map; but they are fragile, vanishing, obscured by other patterns that prevent us from complete comprehension. The most we can hope for, as Proust points out at the end of *In Search of Lost Time*, is that art will give us the perspective (perhaps illusory) to see ourselves as part of a larger fabric: the fabric of our parents and families, the fabric of art history, the fabric, increasingly frayed, of nature and culture. Den Hartog's art, in its ambition, persistence and imaginative use of history and materials, knits together that fabric and offers us the comfort (sometimes cold but comfort nonetheless) of knowing that our memories and sensations are part of a vast landscape larger than us, larger than our losses and pleasures.

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