

Entering a New Dimension

There's rich heritage of landscape art, but until recently it's all been two-dimensional murals or works on canvas. Now young artists have virtually invented a new genre: landscape sculptures.

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If someone asked you to recall a few of the landscape images you had seen in museums or books, there would be an abundance of examples to choose from, including ancient Chinese watercolors, romantic oils on canvas from all parts of Europe and grand American panoramas. It's also likely that numerous photographs would come to mind as you scanned your memory bank of images depicting the splendors and terrors of Nature.

Very few sculptures, however, would pop into your mind's eye. Their absence has nothing to do with your unfamiliarity with art history, for, in fact, not many sculptures of landscapes exist. In sculpture, landscape has primarily functioned as a backdrop--the passive ground against which vigorous figures are meant to stand.

With its roots in statuary, sculpture traditionally marked significant locations within a landscape, often at crossroads or graves. Although modern abstract sculptures do not necessarily commemorate specific places, they function similarly, offering generic instances of heightened perception and detached contemplation--often in handsomely landscaped sculpture gardens.

To make a carved, cast or molded sculpture of the landscape itself must have seemed pointless and illogical--like going against a fundamental sculptural principle or competing in a game with no chance of winning. In any case, figurative and abstract sculptures have almost never represented the landscape's natural expanse.

Until now. Over the past few years, and with increasing frequency, seven talented, young Los Angeles-based sculptors have made powerful works in this unlikely category. Working independently of one another, they have, in fact, begun to invent a genre out of almost nothing but thin air.

Among the most beautiful of these new, three-dimensional representations of the landscape are Jacci Den Hartog's wall-mounted sculptures of mist-shrouded mountains, waterfalls and lakes. Shown at Christopher Grimes Gallery in April, Den Hartog's semitranslucent landscapes are based on her memories of Chinese paintings, particularly the fabulously realistic works of the Sung Dynasty (from the 10th to the 12th centuries) and the stranger, more Surreal ones of the Yuan Dynasty (from the 12th to the 14th centuries).

But to contemporary viewers, Den Hartog's gorgeous clusters of polyurethane, plaster and pigment also resemble tacky restaurant decorations, especially those found in Chinatown, where faux waterfalls gurgle over plastic rocks into synthetic ponds filled with real water and the fish on the menu. Being fake takes nothing away from the artist's sensuous sculptures.

In fact, by shamelessly embracing fakery, Den Hartog intensifies the effects her miniature mountains have on viewers. Unconcerned about depicting nature accurately or realistically, she says her goal is "to conjure natural experiences."

For Den Hartog and most of her fellow landscape sculptors, nature is not some vast expanse out there, but an internal, individual response to the world.

"My works depend on viewers who are able to use their imaginations," the artist explains. "I constantly think of Disneyland. If you go there and don't immediately try to analyze it, you can have interesting experiences, even though you're an adult. I know it's fake and exploitative, but that doesn't mean the emotions it produces aren't real."

Michael Pierzynski's three-dimensional vignettes infuse this sense of playful make-believe with a wonderful touch of melodrama. Charming yet barbed, each of his compact scenarios consists of a precise combination of a few ceramic and plaster elements the artist has cast from aquarium decorations, holiday centerpieces and cute knickknacks.

Pierzynski describes his pieces as being "just a cut above kitsch, though in no way critical of it." Common components of his sly, Symbolist landscapes are tiny houses, snowy meadows, crystalline lakes, towering trees and dismembered deer. Although the brutalized Bambis should be shocking, they inhabit such placid, stage-managed environments that the benign sentiments they solicit ultimately win out.

Their palette of chalky, light-absorbing colors combines with their small scale to give viewers a detached, bird's-eye view of a pristine world. Open-ended narratives ripple just beneath the surface, getting under your skin with disarming delicacy.

In contrast to Pierzynski's table-top props, Jennifer Pastor's often larger-than-life sculptures nearly crowd you out of the room. To navigate one untitled work shown at Richard Telles Fine Art in May 1994, you had to duck under gigantic Christmas tree ornaments and keep your back against the wall.

In the center of the narrow gallery, five artificial Christmas trees appeared to fall from the sky and splash down in a frothy tumult of crystal-clear water made of vacuum-cast plastic. At first, the suspended scene seemed utterly unnatural, but after a little time passed, the sculpture began to look natural, as if you had magically entered the space of a ravishing landscape painting.

Pastor aggressively compresses and expands space, messing with perspective and manipulating vanishing points to increase her art's impact on your body.

Similarly, Chris Finley's rearrangeable constellations of pencil stubs, puzzle pieces, whittled talismans and woven baskets form abstract landscapes in which time and space are dramatically compacted. Shown at ACME Gallery last year, these obsessive little sculptures immediately invite speculation about the long hours required to make them, piece by patiently carved piece.

They also invite you to forget all that and get lost in playfully arranging their simple components according to your own whims. Laid out on the floor like children's toys, these works function like do-it-yourself Rorschach blots. Their indecipherable elements jump-start your imagination by appealing to illogical intuitions.

Where Finley's low-tech landscapes make room for viewers by letting them play in their space, Luciano Perna's collaborative installation "Occupato" made room for artists. Last summer at Bennett Roberts Fine Art, Perna used a pingpong table, a dining-room set and a basketball backboard--among other thrift store items--to build a multilevel stand for an ordinary toy train layout that became "Occupato." He then invited 150 artists to fill the landscape with whatever they wanted.

More than 70 artists responded, contributing miniature parks, art museums, shantytowns, water towers, hotels, billboards, bridges and bars. Only bombs were not permitted in Perna's model city. The dynamic metropolis that resulted mirrored the unpredictable synergy of real cities.

Perna recalls: "The best part was the sense of surprise. I took a chance. I trusted the people I invited, and the day after the opening, I noticed pieces I hadn't seen before. It's exciting to have an exhibition and not know what's in it."

The democratic impulse at work in "Occupato" humorously casts artists as city planners. Perna's urban landscape transforms such city-sanctioned endeavors as art-in-public-places into art-as-public-places--at least in the imagination. In front of his wonderfully orchestrated, multi-authored, fun-loving Conceptual work, viewers are given a glimpse of art at its best.

Far from the potluck sociability of "Occupato" are Tiffanie Morrow's abstract sculptures, most recently seen in April at Newspace. Meticulously crafted and painted in a Minimalist's palette of black, white and green, these reticent works articulate space in a grammatical fashion. Their rigorous logic would be hermetic if it didn't rhythmically punctuate the space your body also occupies.

Morrow's tiny wall works, none of which measure more than 4 1/4 inches on a side, resemble impossible architectural models. Out of their shelflike platforms sprout imaginary plots of property, growing both above and below ground in forms that recall skyscrapers, walled yards and parking lots.

The artist's much larger floor works, sometimes measuring up to 26 by 8 feet, consist of approximately the same amount of material that make up her little wall sculptures. Always white, these rectangular tracks function as tenuous bases for perfectly vertical and oddly angled appendages, which recall the lines students use to diagram sentences.

These spindly pieces make the gallery seem bigger and emptier than it is. Morrow's sculptures compel viewers to abruptly shift scales, to try to live in two worlds at once. And that's exactly what happens when any art moves you.

Nearly four years ago at the now-defunct 1301 Gallery, Thaddeus Strode exhibited a series of modest dioramas that rank among the best works he has made. Each of these 10 detailed landscapes rivals the realism of accomplished model-making hobbyists.

But Strode was never interested in fabricating mere illusions of reality. He dressed up his dioramas with villains cut out of comic books, uniformed train conductors dancing on an abandoned highway and an alpine couple picnicking and doing their laundry. Signs with strange messages also intrude into these little worlds, nudging viewers toward the realization that Strode would rather make room for goofy lunacy in everyday life than construct idealized landscapes. His dioramas depict those moments when real weirdness transforms the mundane into the bizarre.

There is one contemporary precedent for these artists and their new genre: recent works by Chris Burden.

His "Medusa's Head" (shown at MOCA in 1992) may be the single most daunting work that could be called landscape sculpture. Resembling a crusty meteorite crisscrossed with hundreds of feet of model train tracks, this huge, dark, 5-ton orb hangs from a chain like an apocalyptic pendulum. A world unto itself, it embodies a sense of horrifying finality.

But "Medusa's Head" is also a demonstration of unexplored territory, a loaded model for other artists to respond to. The landscape sculptures by these seven artists suggest that such explorations are only beginning but are already going in many directions.