

# frieze

**Issue 30** September-October 1996 

## **Jacci Den Hartog**

Christopher Grimes Gallery, [Santa Monica, USA](#)

Very few examples of landscape sculpture exist. Among modern and contemporary artists, only David Smith's handsomely anodyne Hudson River Landscape (1951), and Chris Burden's Medusa's Head (1991), a menacing globe overrun by criss-crossing model train tracks, stand out in a realm otherwise almost entirely monopolised by the figure, even when it is rigorously abstracted (by the Minimalists) or thoroughly dispersed into the ephemera of its gestural residue (by the post-Minimalists).

Jacci Den Hartog's lush, wall-mounted sculptures thus make a place for themselves, in a tradition that doesn't really exist, by choosing an impossible genealogy from which they might have descended at least in one's imagination. Resembling the unlikely offspring of Chinese landscape painting and tacky restaurant decorations (especially those found in Los Angeles's Chinatown, where faux, mini-waterfalls gurgle over plastic rocks and synthetic moss, cascading into ponds filled with samplings of the fish on the menu), Den Hartog's lavishly fabricated objects are simultaneously refined and slick, if not sleazy. Both frivolous and magnificent, these smart, sexy hybrids are firmly rooted in history yet free of its constrictive, determinant pressure.

Irreducible to the sources it appropriates and transforms, Den Hartog's art shamelessly embraces juicy beauty to play a ball game all of its own. In front of these gorgeous pieces of polyurethane, plaster and pigment, exquisite artificiality never functions as a means for sneaky, deceitful illusions. Instead, it is the slippery ground for embodied contemplation: for sensuous thinking that is neither literal in its physicality nor transcendent in its aspirations. Somewhere in-between, it is an intoxicating world whose fluid boundaries are permeable and whose substances segue through matter's various states from the solidity of snow-covered ice blocks to the liquidity of flowing streams and the gaseous ephemerality of drifting mists. This young, LA-based sculptor's landscapes begin by disregarding whether or not responses to images (or vistas) are natural occurrences or instances of cultural inscription. Ambiguously scaled, Den Hartog's seductive sculptures are as impatient with dim-witted spirituality as they are with the equally short-sighted conviction that art functions primarily as a means of critique. Each of her six, delicately coloured wall works draws you into a world where translucence and opacity intermingle as suspended movements simultaneously follow gravity's downward path and accumulating snow's upward piling. Rising Before the Mist has Risen (1994) is a harmoniously proportioned array of carved clumps of plaster echoed by similarly configured polyurethane casts over which are gracefully draped thin, curtain-like skeins of subtly tinted resin. Pretending to beat nature at its own game, as its title playfully suggests, Den Hartog's work lives up to the idea that art's job is to intensify a viewer's experience of the world; not to dress up reality's flawed appearances, nor compensate for history's unconscionable injustices, but to clarify the world's character by focusing attention on its nature. Likewise, Reflection Through a Plum Blossom Mist (1994) efficiently complicates the relationship between a sign and its referent, or an image and its depiction. The bottom third of this sculpture of a mountain mirrored in a lake glistens with dense royal blues and sumptuous lavenders while its chalky upper component appears to dissolve into powdery then cloudy intangibility. More than five feet tall, this piece suggests that reflections of the world have greater substance than the thing itself. To Plato's horror, Den Hartog's 3-D landscape proposes that subjective perceptions pack a more powerful punch than idealised realities.

The whole show, entitled 'Invitation to Reclusion', demonstrates that drawing back from reality sometimes increases one's understanding of its complexities. In the end, Den Hartog's art retreats from history only to engage in it more captivatingly. Making a place for the present out of a tradition that barely exists her sculptures do not distinguish between ancient paintings of landscapes and their tacky manifestations as commercial decorations, but draw both into a generous solicitation of the viewer's attention.

**David Pagel**