

## **From Elephant & Castle to Far Away Places with Abrupt Stops out West!**

Whether inventing new sculptural processes or finding new ways to display objects, Jacci Den Hartog has remained deeply invested in working within the sculptural field for well over twenty-five years. For her first few gallery exhibitions, she displayed cast rubber drawings of industrial landscapes and caged elephants; presented interconnected serial forms such as elephant heads and elephant trunks/tails; hid ordinary forms such as balls and tubes behind rubber veils and poured colored rubber over pint-size mountains, elephants and castles. She had an unusual urge to depict elephants as obedient subjects in captivity or victims of animal abuse. But what really caught people's attention was the way pristine plaster casts of exotic trinkets, drowning in pools of colored rubber suddenly made such precious objects appear abject! And then, out of the blue, landscapes emerged, no longer submerged in puddles of goo.

Flow remains a vital component of her painterly twist on *terrainscapes*, which have formed the core of her artistic career for nearly twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, images of nature's dynamism dominate, whether rivers disappear into the horizon, snow melts, dust scatters, wind displaces, heat adsorbs, sunlight trails or gravity pulls. In a 2010 interview with painter Adam Ross, she remarked how:

we usually just perceive what we think we know. I wanted to make a sculpture about that idea—time, movement, color, light, mountain, valley and plain. It moves back and forth between a representation, an experience and an idea, and if we saw it all at the same time it would be similar to a hallucination. So, in one way it is a sculpture that is about seeing time.<sup>2</sup>

I have been tasked with the daunting assignment to articulate how Den Hartog's recent sculptures, which effectively enable viewers to "see time" connect to her initial compulsion to construct space.<sup>3</sup> These newer horizontal works overcome the problem dogging her earlier floor works, whose stillness makes their subjects feel really trapped (immoveable). After two decades of creating wall works that capture events "still in motion," rather than the outcome of some process, she has finally discovered how to invigorate horizontal landscapes, defying gravity's tendency to pin down horizontal objects. As I next demonstrate, her earliest works were meant to "move" the viewer to feel compassion, while those of the last fifteen years tend to immerse viewers in sensations of movement.

### **Elephant & Castle: Empathy & Sculpture**

Not surprisingly, people were quite struck by her remarkable passion for animals. Not only was Den Hartog among the first vegetarians anyone knew, but she was deeply committed to the plight of elephants, whether tortured and hunted for their tusks or trapped in zoos and circuses for viewers' amusement. And indeed, zoos and circuses eventually caught her drift, transforming their alienating cages into natural-looking, albeit artificial, environments for their captive animals to inhabit, while the "big tents" have increasingly reduced their dependence on ridiculous animal tricks.

In hindsight, we realize how her elephant opus hinted at an emotional life that strangely eluded scientists until only recently. Her sculptures invited viewers to imagine being caged, balancing on a ball or providing passive viewers entertainment, all the while having one's feelings overlooked. Works like *Untitled (Beach Balls)* or *Spinning Foot* (both 1991) offer improbable elephant tricks, since no such props could easily support an elephant's weight. Rather than ensnare bystanders in spectacle, her sober

installations prompted animal-empathy, as viewers considered the humiliation and embarrassment elephants suffer at the hands of owners and trainers. What is the cost of being so compliant, loving, caring or connected, when one's audience neither recognizes nor appreciates such attributes? One suddenly sees a parallel between society's disregard for elephant passions and second-wave feminism's denying some women's passions. While second-wavers remained trained on the "I can do anything you can do better" mantra, third wavers restaged feminine feelings in terms of *différance*.

Back then, Den Hartog's elephant-empathy sessions seemed out of place, especially since human beings were far less connected to nature than we are today and too few imagined animals to be social creatures, let alone sentient beings capable of making judgments. Today, however, few doubt elephant's emotional and communicative skills. However, Den Hartog's fascination with elephants offered far more than an animal-rescue mission. Society's pervasive mistreatment of elephants seemed to echo people's stance towards those viewed as "not like us." Today we see a relationship between animal abuse and the kind of disaffection that makes hate-crimes possible.

Elephant imagery thus enabled Den Hartog to coax ordinary people into imagining non-human animals to be thinking beings, something scientists and philosophers have only recently accepted. Her subtle studies in animal behavior defy the typical view that animals don't "think" because only "linguistic beings" think. While philosopher José Bermúdez' book *Thinking Without Words* is focused on human thought absent language, the door has been opened for philosophers to admit other animals' wordless thoughts!

### **Landscape Formation: Far Away Places with Abrupt Stops out West**

As already mentioned, Den Hartog suddenly started pouring gooey rubber over piles of cast plaster forms. Over night, the tables were turned: images of captive animals gave way to viewers being captivated by floor works, whose titles such as *Never Land*, *Grey Pour*, *Purple Fog*, *Fountain*, *Cosmic Milk Mountain* (all 1992) allude to imaginary places.

What cannot be overlooked here is the ongoing relationship between Den Hartog's drawing practice and her sculpture studio. During the early nineties, she actively studied Chinese ink drawing, which led to her *Cosmic Milk* series (1993). When images of rocks, clouds and skies emerged from milky, ink wash drawings destined to depict elephants, new figure-form relationships emerged. While reviewing "Hill and Dale" (1993), Carmine Iannacone described how elephant forms engendered landscape formation: "Reversing the pachyderm's mythic claim to perfect memory, its form here is erased, the edges distorted and lost, the negative spaces filled with an obliterating sediment."<sup>4</sup>

Around this same time, Den Hartog began to layer colored rubber, enabling sculptures like *Fog Rolling In*, *Bridal Veil Falls*, *Spring Runoff* and *Driving Through Utah* (all 1993) to appear moist, drippy, flowing and even boiling hot, rather than frozen in time. Noting the viewer's changed perspective, Iannacone continued: "Often asking the viewer to stoop down to their level on the floor, these miniature geological *events* [italics mine] redefine the viewer –not the elephant –as a somewhat ponderous and awkward giant."<sup>5</sup>

One could argue that Den Hartog's entire oeuvre stems from her studying ink wash drawing some twenty years ago. In 1998, she started integrating the watery surfaces with the craggy edges, yet the familiar look of inky strokes remained. This move signaled her drift away from characterizing Chinese landscapes toward memorializing familiar places, typically western geographical forms. These days, colors are applied after the forms are made.<sup>6</sup>

As her first quote above indicates, she considers it impossible to experience the idea, representation and landscape at the same time. That the landscape cannot be reduced to sculpture only magnifies the problem originally identified by the Cubists, the problem of reducing 3-D objects to 2-D surfaces. In "Coming Home" (2010), she exhibited

sculpted drawings (works on paper) alongside companion sketches, which anticipated her next move.<sup>7</sup> Rather than create hallucinatory 3-D landscapes, as she did for “Coming Home,” she could actually mimic mountain formation, letting hallucinatory landscapes arise directly from psychedelic paintings, whose horizontal position enable stripe patterns to double as topographical keys. This effect recalls her rocky landscapes emerging from the goo exactly twenty years ago!

These days, swathes of color, rather than rivers and glaciers; drip, flow and melt in Den Hartog’s increasingly psychedelic works. Such terrainscaapes characterize landscape as vast plains of hallucinatory distortion, the sense Iannaccone first felt as he knelt alongside *Spring Runoff* (1993), “where green and blue rubber oozes like mucous off the slopes of a plaster rock formation and then swirls, into a psychedelic pattern on the floor.”<sup>8</sup>

Given the current fascination with sculpture’s ever-expanding, expanded field, Den Hartog’s ongoing commitment to sculpture is laudable. Having already designed a garden for the site adjacent the City of Angels Incline, she could easily have expanded out of the gallery and into the plaza, leaving sculpture in the dust. Thankfully, she hasn’t.

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<sup>1</sup> Given the way today’s artists use terms like artscaapes™, soundscapes, edible landscapes or sculptscaapes to describe what they make, it doesn’t seem a far stretch to call what Jacci makes terrainscaapes.

<sup>2</sup> Jacci Den Hartog. “Jacci Den Hartog Interviewed by Adam Ross.” *Coming Down*. Los Angeles: Rosamund Felsen Gallery 2010. p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding Den Hartog’s early fascination with Chinese landscapes, she comments: “For me the tropes in Chinese landscape painting opened up very abstract ideas that I could draw upon for the construction of space.” 2010. p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Carmine Iannaccone, “Jacci Den Hartog,” *Art issues*. January-February 1994. p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Den Hartog. 2010. p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> The affinity between Den Hartog’s watery drawings and Terrie Friedman’s mylar paintings cannot be overlooked, especially since both artists began as sculptors concerned with human being’s alienation from their environment!

<sup>8</sup> Iannoccone. 1994.