

From Elephant & Castle to Far Away Places

Since the late eighties, Jacci Den Hartog has remained committed to working within the sculptural field. For her first two gallery exhibitions, she displayed cast rubber drawings of caged elephants; presented interconnected serial forms such as elephant heads and elephant trunks/tails; concealed forms such as cast rubber beach balls and thick rubber cylinders behind rubber veils and poured colored rubber over pint-size mountains, elephants and castles. This interest to depict elephants as subjects in captivity or victims of abuse gave rise to a compulsion to sculpt spaces where nature's dynamism holds sway. By 1993, works alluded to the way rivers march into the horizon, snow melts, dust scatters, wind displaces, heat adsorbs, sunlight trails or gravity pulls, events her works have depicted for nearly two decades.

Once Den Hartog started pouring rubber over piles of cast plaster forms, the tables turned. While her earlier elephant works capably "moved" the viewer to feel compassion, as they invited viewers to imagine being caged, balancing on a ball or providing entertainment; later poured works immerse viewers in sensations of movement. Images of captive animals suddenly gave way to viewers feeling captivated by floor works, whose titles such as *Never Land*, *Grey Pour*, *Purple Fog*, *Fountain*, *Cosmic Milk Mountain* (all 1992) allude to imaginary places. Like the elephant works, her earliest floor works provoke an eerie stillness.

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 a series of ink wash



drawings known as the *Cosmic Milk* series (1993). When images of rocks, clouds and skies emerged from milky, ink wash drawings originally created to depict piles of elephants, new figure-form relationships emerged. While reviewing Den Hartog's third exhibition at my gallery, "Hill and Dale" (1993), Carmine Iannacone described how elephant forms suddenly 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."¹

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.”² If the earlier floor works freeze events still in motion, the later floor works use color to defy gravity’s tendency to constrain whatever lingers on the floor.

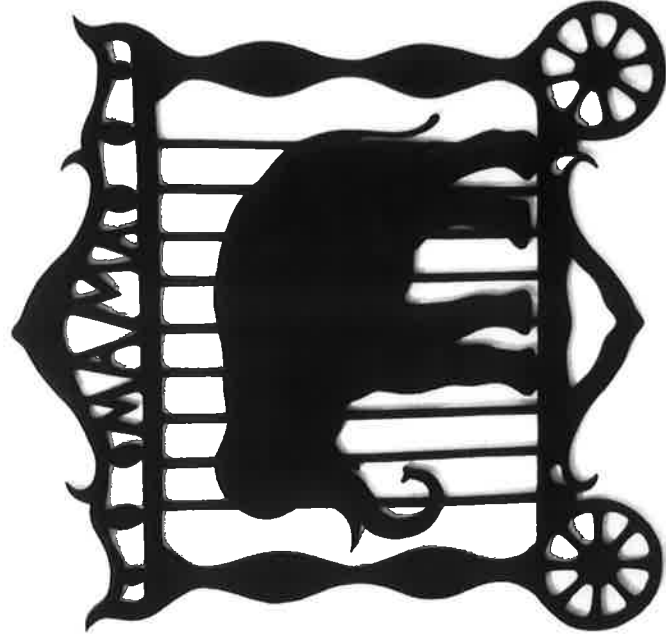
One could argue that Den Hartog’s entire oeuvre stems from her studying ink wash drawing some twenty years ago. In 1998, she started integrating the watery surfaces with the craggy edges, yet the familiar look of inky strokes remained. This move signaled her drift away from characterizing Chinese landscapes toward memorializing familiar places, typically western geographical forms. These days, swaths of color, rather than rivers and glaciers, drip, flow and melt in Den Hartog’s increasingly psychedelic works. Such works characterize landscape as vast plains of hallucinatory distortion, the sense lannaccone must have felt as he knelt alongside Spring Runoff (1993), “where green and blue rubber oozes ... off the slopes of a plaster rock formation and then swirls, into a psychedelic pattern on the floor.”³

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¹ Carmine Iannaccone, “Jacci Den Hartog,” *Art issues*: January-February 1994, p. 42.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*



Mama, 1991, Cast rubber, 25 x 25 x 1/2 "