

# Meditations on Mortality and the Depiction of Space

## ART REVIEWS

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

To walk into Kiki Smith's installation in the small upstairs gallery at PaceWildenstein Gallery is to feel like Gulliver must have felt when he visited Lilliput. Radically out of proportion with everything in the room, you experience your body as a gigantic and clumsy lump of flesh, ill-suited for the diminutive scale of its surroundings.

All around your feet, Smith has arranged 25 tiny tables whose tops reach only three inches above the floor. Squatting down to examine the objects atop them, you see hundreds of irregularly shaped spheres linked by necklace-like strings. Sometimes forming single lines and at other times forking and branching to form miniature networks, all of these elements are partially embedded like fossils in flat, shallow grounds with uneven edges. Crudely cast in bronze, like the tables they rest on, these components of Smith's sculpture are handmade replicas of lymph nodes and vessels.

To bend over and pick up any one of these 61 approximately life-size fragments of a human lymph system is to feel the entire gallery return to its ordinary scale—that is, to architectural proportions based on the human body. Although Smith's little tables still seem to belong to a dollhouse-sized world, this make-believe realm is overpowered by the strong connection you feel to the lymph systems. It's a relief to stop experiencing your body as if it were too big and unwieldy to interact with its surroundings.

The power of Smith's art, however, resides in its insistence that your return to a familiar scale is accompanied by the somber knowledge that tiny, sometimes microscopic and often overlooked bodily systems have immense control over your everyday well-being. Vulnerability, rather than overblown theatrics, takes physical form here.

Titled "Field Operation," the installation is a modern memento mori, a seemingly casual sculpture that embodies the potential to generate profound meditations on mortality. This small, introductory exhibition whets the appetite for more of Smith's work.

Also at PaceWildenstein, a handsome exhibition of prints by 11 photographers illustrates how various types of photography, including landscape, still life studies, portraiture and abstraction, depict deep and shallow space. Appropriately titled "Deep Surface: Photographs," this anodyne summer show breaks no new ground yet includes some very fine images.

Often, though, it makes too big a deal about superficial differences between abstraction and representation. For example, when Axel Hutte's huge, hazy Cibachrome of a rocky cliff is juxtaposed to James Welling's tiny silver prints of wrinkled aluminum foil, viewers are transported to a tedious classroom lecture about formal resemblance. You can almost hear a stodgy art historian drone: "The all-over patterns in these photographs, formed by their contrasts between light and shadow, render deep space ambiguous, making it impossible to determine what is more important, the subject that is depicted or the way in which it is depicted."

Three beautiful silver prints by Robert Cumming, Frederick Sommer and Harry Callahan replay this conundrum. Set in a sequence, each 7-by-9-inch photo shifts your focus—from a close-up of mosquitoes to a distant desert landscape to a dense collage of women's faces.

Likewise, Emmet Gowin's nearly abstract overview of a water treatment facility is paired with Gerhard Richter's realistic close-up of an abstract painting to present another riff on the same theme. Taking light as its subject, Adam Fuss' photogram infuses a bit of Pop color into the show's flat-footed insistence that abstraction and representation are the poles between which photography is constantly pulled.

This back-and-forth formalism continues as Walker Evans' image of a commercial photographer's storefront is juxtaposed to Doug and Mike Starn's larger-than-life-size silhouette of Mark Morrisroe. Where dozens of head shots make up Walker's loaded little prints, dozens of unremarkable prints are taped together to form the Starns' vacuous portrait. One into many, or the other way around, is the "idea" illustrated by this pair of pictures.

By focusing on the sort of formalism that simply flip-flops between opposites, "Deep Surfaces" invites viewers to think of photography as a medium that never really changes. Rather than stimulating individuals to see things differently, this exhibition draws a wide range of effects and purposes into a claustrophobic either-or-ism.

■ PaceWildenstein, 9540 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, (310) 205-5522. Kiki Smith, through Sept. 28; "Deep Surface," through Aug. 31. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

**Contemplative:** Once you get past its title, "Transcendental Meditations" is an engaging and enjoyable survey of recent, modestly scaled abstract paintings by 15 artists from Los Angeles and New York. Organized by painters Douglas Meyer and David DiMichele (who include their own works), this exhibition at William Turner Gallery is certainly meditative but hardly transcendent.

None of its paintings stop you in your tracks, catapult you into the beyond or lift you out of the material world into some realm outside the limits of sense experience. On the contrary, the best works here take you more deeply into the embodied world of physical sensation.

Nina Amsler's untitled painting on glass is sexy and refreshing: Glistening like a glass of mango ice tea on a sunny afternoon, this translucent image is simultaneously hot, cold and irresistible. Likewise, Mario Cutajar's dense fields of rich, earthy pigments draw one's eyes into their complex contours, where supercharged details and subtle tonal shifts heighten perception.

Fine paintings by Linda A. Day, Marion Estes and Deanna de Mayo retool Pattern and Decoration art's shameless embrace of the everyday. Tom Savage's inarticulate markings, crudely painted and scrawled on raw canvas, share more with children's drawings than with any desire to leave this world behind.

Advertising transcendence is risky business; delivering it is even more difficult. This is especially true with abstract painting, given the history of exaggerated claims that have been made for it, particularly in the United States.

■ William Turner Gallery, 77 Market St., Venice, (310) 392-8399, through Sept. 5. Closed Mondays.