Faculty Development Grant Report

Jacci Den Hartog
Foundation and Fine Arts
Summer and Fall, 2012

Project Description:
In the spring of 2012 I received a Faculty development Grant to help fund the fabrication of metal sculpture stands to exhibit my work. I also received funds to assist with the publication costs of producing a catalog for an upcoming exhibition at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery and to commission an essay for the catalog.

Benefits:
In my new body of work I am exhibiting for the first time in many years sculpture on bases. These bases are integral to how the work is seen and it is important that the work be exhibited in a professional manner. To do this it was necessary to engage the skills of a professional fabricator. The bases that I had built are modular in design so they can accommodate very large or small works and be easily assembled and dissembled for shipment and storage. Having the bases professionally fabricated allowed me more time to focus on developing the work and extending the time I spend in the studio.

These are some of the bases being assembled for my exhibition at Rosamund Felsen Gallery.
These are some of the bases with sculptures installed. The bases are simple and refined and function in such a way that they elevate without distracting from the work.

This is the cover image of the catalog. Attached are two essays written for the catalog by the artist Tom Knechtel and the writer and curator Sue Spaid.
The catalog and the essays serve to provide context and interpretation of the work. It is a document that is a valuable resource after an exhibition closes. For an artist it is important to have a way to disseminate what we do when our work is not on public display. Catalogs provide a physical and lasting document of the work that we do. This catalog will continue to be a resource for me to use professionally to give to curators, galleries and museums who may have interest in my work. I have found this in the past to be a highly effective means to generate interest and provide a means of knowledge about the work that I do.

Value To Otis:
As instructors we are always providing examples to our students about what it means to take our work seriously and to be a professional in our fields. I think it is of great value to my student’s for them to see the work of their instructor in a professional context and to understand what it takes to do that. I am so happy with the bases, I realize I could never have built them with the level of skill that a professional fabricator brought to the project and I think they greatly enhance the exhibition. I think it is important for student’s to understand that as well.

I also think that a catalog is an important document for students and lends a value to the work. It is different from on line documentation in that it is also a physical object that is professionally produced with lasting impact that can continue to be shared with the Otis community.

Conclusion:
I am extremely grateful for this grant in that it allowed me to see the possibilities of working with a professional fabricator. I have always tried to do all of the work for an exhibition myself, but having the bases fabricated took a off a tremendous burden of time that allowed me to focus on making the work and this was very liberating for me. It has also been wonderful to be able to work with two writers for this exhibition. The insight they have brought to my work has been very valuable for me as it gives me new insights as well. It has also been fascinating working with a printing company. This is my first experience working with a printer in this way and I have learned so much through this process. The details involved with lay out, editing, color checking etc. have been very eye opening. I have loved the process and it makes me want to learn more about every step, from the history of type face to paper, to photography and color. It has been fascinating.
Thank you!
Catalog Essays:

As artists, our relationship with art history is not unlike our relationship with our parents. It’s a necessary but complex set of understandings and ambivalencies. Too much reverence and one never establishes one’s own path. Too much irony and one risks perpetual adolescence. No relationship and we have no idea of what patterns lie waiting ahead for us to haplessly repeat. What is required is a synthesis formed of affection, respect, questioning and the ability to hold one’s ground, a synthesis that is often hard-won and not to be taken for granted.

It is also often the case that the work we artists most admire is that which at first bemused us: the passage from incomprehension to understanding cements our appreciation for another’s achievement. Jacci den Hartog’s work gave me such an experience. When I first saw her work at Sue Spaid’s gallery in 1992, her small floor-bound sculptures of castles and elephants seemed too easily folded in with a lot of other art in the early 90s that was mired in puddles of viscous goo. I was wrong. As the years went by, I found myself becoming engaged, then astonished as Den Hartog’s sculptures compelled my attention and made me think of aesthetic references as disparate as the theatrical space of Bernini and the sugared, mouth-watering surfaces of gum drops. Eventually I arrived at an intense admiration, from which I now write.

In Sung dynasty painting, landscapes are formed from collaboration between the observed, the imagined and the physical aspect of making. Towering mountains recede concentrically backwards into mist, their perimeters flicked with inky brush marks that stand in for trees. Chinese painting such as this forms part of the complex matrix of Den Hartog’s work, an ambitious engagement with history and culture as seen through nature, wedded to fearlessness when confronted with technical challenges. Her sculptures are extravagant, merging the combustible energy of Baroque sculpture with the meditative space of Chinese landscape painting.

Let me give some examples: a long, rippling tide line floating before a wall and advancing towards us; a vertical mountain with outcroppings made of candy-colored resin translucencies, an ink drawing sculpturally embodied; water leaping off a wall, breaking over invisible rocks and spilling down in rivulets, painted in the lurid colors used for decorative elements in home aquariums. Den Hartog’s art engages passionately with natural phenomena and their cultural reconstructions, but her rigor and intensity restrain the work from simplistic illustration. Like those Sung dynasty painters, she partakes equally of artificiality, observation and engagement with art histories, placing us into a relationship with nature that is immensely generous and cool-eyed at the same time.

Den Hartog has always shown a careful concern for the relationship between her sculptural work and the physicality of the viewer. From the earlier work, with its echoes of Joel Shapiro’s small-scale sculptures placed directly on the floor, to the
work which leaps off the wall towards the viewer, she has created situations in which we look through and around sculpture, rhyming with our ways of looking through and around landscape. In the newest work, she proposes something different: work not simply on a pedestal but on a large, low pedestal which compels us to see the landscape / sculpture from a bird’s eye view. The low pedestals signal a more subjective stance: the exploration of not only her own sensations as they play a part in constructing landscapes but also of the unimaginable, of what it is like for her mother, who is struggling with Alzheimer’s, to be losing her memory. The landscape is seen as similar to one of those dioramas offered in natural history museums or world fairs: this is what the world looked like in the Stone Age, here’s the city of the future. But now the sculptures say to the artist and to us: this is how the landscape looks covered over and obscured by zigzagging patterns that disrupt comprehension, this is how someone you love is experiencing memory, as details submerge and run off the edge.

This anchoring of the work in her memories, in the collective memory of Navajo culture whose blanket patterns run riot over these tabletop landscapes, and in the disappearing of her mother’s memory, seems to me very Proustian in how it goes beyond the autobiographical and into an investigation of how remembrance operates for us all. We view our memories from a distance, imagining they are as navigable as a map; but they are fragile, vanishing, obscured by other patterns that prevent us from complete comprehension. The most we can hope for, as Proust points out at the end of *In Search of Lost Time*, is that art will give us the perspective (perhaps illusory) to see ourselves as part of a larger fabric: the fabric of our parents and families, the fabric of art history, the fabric, increasingly frayed, of nature and culture. Den Hartog’s art, in its ambition, persistence and imaginative use of history and materials, knits together that fabric and offers us the comfort (sometimes cold but comfort nonetheless) of knowing that our memories and sensations are part of a vast landscape larger than us, larger than our losses and pleasures.

Tom Knechtel
Los Angeles, 2012

*Tom Knechtel is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles.*
From Elephant & Castle to Far Away Places with Abrupt Stops out West!

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; 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. Works that initially depicted elephants as subjects in captivity or victims of abuse gave way to a compulsion to construct space in works where images of nature’s dynamism began to dominate with pieces where rivers disappear into the horizon, snow melts, dust scatters, wind displaces, heat adsorbs, sunlight trails or gravity pulls.

These early floor works had a stillness at the same time that they captured events apparently still in motion, defying gravity’s tendency to pin down horizontal objects. While her early elephant works were capable of “moving” the viewer to feel compassion, inviting viewers to imagine being caged, balancing on a ball and providing entertainment, the poured works immersed viewers in sensations of movement.

In 1992, when Den Hartog started pouring rubber over piles of cast plaster forms 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.”

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.”

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, swathes 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 Iannaccone first 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.”

Sue Spaid
Baltimore, Maryland

\[2\] Ibid.
\[3\] Iannaccone. 1994.