



Landslide

by *John Hawke*

Despite the title *Landslide*, this Smack Mellon exhibition is equally concerned with landscape art, which presumes a stable and distant vantage point, as with the sloppy side of raw matter, which might indicate more of an engagement with 1970s Land art. Curator Rebecca Graves describes the intention to present the work of eight artists who use "revisionary tactics to approach the tradition of landscape art."

The exhibition has a proscribed path, beginning with a video installation entitled "Slip," by Itty Neuhaus. She has sealed off the loading dock gallery entrance with black velvet curtains, which, upon parting, open into a black velvet cave. On the floor immediately underfoot is a video projection of gurgling mud pools. You must walk across the pool to advance, and there is an interesting moment when the substantiality of the floor is put into question, as the video image of the plopping bubbles incorporates into itself the circular pock marks in the concrete floor, leading to a small satori of all matter being in a state of decomposition. Entering the dark medieval tent at the end of the curtained cave, one discovers a second video, rear projected onto a screen far above in the tent's apex. The video is simple tourist footage of icescapes in Iceland, but the sudden sculptural extension upwards and the craning vertical realignment of the visual field provides a dramatic analogy to the sublime state of awe.

In the project room upstairs, Liza McConnell projects silhouette drawings of the "Colorado Front Range" through the oculus of reversed clamp lights. The resulting effect pictures a misty northern Sung landscape around the room. The cartographic data of the Front Range profile is transformed to its opposite— an ethereal landscape of the imagination.

Installed between the windows of the main room's ceiling breezeway is Kathleen Gilrain's "like being under water," which is composed of 1,008 blue and green plastic bags hanging in three layers by their handles. As gusts of wind pass through the piece, the bags are roiled and churned in waves, the plastic crinkling like a foaming ocean. The effect is soothing for the senses, but is perhaps not so ambitious in its implications.

In "Other Stories," Robert Ressler's carved branch forms hang from nylon line in the main gallery, and resemble giant blond matchsticks. Some of the forms end in knurled balls, others in cloven hooves. The aerial installation, however, seems distracting, and without rational. Fishing line, in art practice, is too often used as an annoying signifier of invisibility rather than as something that is truly invisible. This may work in theatre, with its conventions of directed attention, but in the gallery, there is no consensus "backstage." On the contrary, the entire purpose of the gallery is to provide a hyper-sensorial space where everything is charged with meaning. In the end, such aerial installations become a kind of gracefulness on the cheap that undermines the integrity of the tactile and alluring forms.

Virginia Beahan and Laura McPhee present a diverse series of color 30-by-40 inch photographs. They range from seductive beaux-arts landscape of nature at its cataclysmic sublime, as in "Lava Flowing into the Sea, Hawaii," to photographs where the man/nature relationship is problematized, as in "The Blue Lagoon, Porbjorn, Iceland." Here, kids swim in a strangely luminous pool of turquoise water with the smokestacks of a geothermal energy plant in the background. On one hand, we may know that geothermal energy is a "green" form of energy production and thus "good," yet we are faced with our immediate repulsion by the juxtaposition of frolicking kids in the shadow of the churning smokestacks. The same ambivalence of visual shock and rational appeasement occurs in "Water Catchment for Livestock, Hawaii" where, nestled in highland Hawaiian pastures is a large rectangular pool of water sitting in a plastic tarp held down with old tires. The squareness of the pond, the fencing around it, and the tires just seem wrong— an environmental violation. Yet the rational mind intervenes, for it is just water after all, and at least the dead tires are finding a recycled use. These are photos that, while immediately beautiful and perfect, linger in the mind, and ask questions about our supposition of the "natural."

The periodic resounding "thwack!" comes from Bill Schuck's counterweighted catapult entitled "Surge." With admirable industry, Schuck has devised a machine of sturdy oaken members, churning motor gyres, and revealed circuit board controllers, which throws a cupful of plaster dust into a corner of the main gallery, where, with the aide of mist drifting down from pipes overhead, it is meant to slowly reconstitute the place of the plaster's origins— a limestone cave. The intention was to impose upon the gallery space a "small record of increasing entropy." And intention here is everything— whether the work is a slightly heavy-handed exercise in da Vinci mechanics or if the pathos of the machine (the mist puddling up on the plastic dropcloth, the ejected plaster falling in desultory clumps) is a smart explication of dumb entropy— the great disorganizer.

Finally, Mary Temple's wall painting "Window Sculpture, East Wall, South Skylight," is easy to miss, as it exists on a tantalizing liminal fringe. Temple has painted an impossibly cast shadow raking down the long wall of the gallery as if from late afternoon light. It is only for the silhouette of some slightly dangerous creeper tendrils that one is alarmed enough to look up for the window source, and discovering none, to realize the presence of the artwork. This artistic camouflage is the much more interesting twin to so much of current art spectacle; for even when one is aware of the artifice, one cannot ascertain its limits— where the trompe l'oeil coercion of the eye begins in smoothly modulated gradations down the wall. This subtlety is dangerous stuff, as it undermines our basic perceptual faith, and leaves one with a certain tingling trepidation of the benevolence of nature.