

Letha Wilson: Landmarks and Monuments

Friday, June 14, 2013



JTF (just the facts): A total of 10 photo-based sculptures, framed in white and unmatted or mounted without framing, and hung against white walls in the spacious single room gallery space. All of the works are digital c-prints prints from 2013, with additions of concrete, white portland cement, wooden 2x4s, aluminum, adhesive vinyl, UV laminate, and/or cor-ten steel. No physical dimensions were available on the checklist, and all the works are unique, many of them site specific. The show also includes a 48-page saddle stitched artist's book and a supporting column stripped of its paint. (Installation shots at right.)

Comments/Context: Following on the heels of her terrific first solo show at Higher Pictures earlier this year, Letha Wilson has brought location specificity to her tactile photo-based sculptures. While this selection of objects reprises some of the aesthetic themes from her previous show (rock wall photographs dipped in Portland cement, trees and canyons merged with undulating, fan-like concrete tondos), Wilson branches out to consider the architectural and artistic challenges posed by this particular roomy, wood floored gallery. In many ways, these new works function like installation pieces, or more indirectly, like the interventions of Land Art, only brought indoors.

In general, Wilson's work turns on the intersection of the natural and the man made, where classic landscape photographs are married with brash interventions of construction materials, creating objects that bring physicality to the landscape form. What is different here is that Wilson has incorporated the limits of the display space into her compositions, opening up a dialogue with her surroundings. The center of the gallery is dominated by a huge wave form moonscape, cut through by the bold whiteness of one of the room's supporting columns. The graceful undulation of the image matches its quiet blue moodiness, only to be skewered by the jolting white dowel. In another work, a commonplace skyward view of tree branches and leaves merges with the plane of the wall behind it, the corners of the photograph tucking directly into the sheetrock. A long two-by-four slashes across the image, embedded in the drywall, like a man made branch added to the composition. Perhaps the most unexpected intervention in the show comes from a desert canyon image with bright spots covering its surface. From afar, they look like Robert Smithson's Yucatan mirror displacements, but up close they reveal themselves to be holes to the outside world; the work has been mounted over a small unseen window, letting the view to the city peek through the circular openings. It's a clever combination of desert and city, West and East (American that is), natural and highly constructed.

Two other works in the show force the viewer to consider the floor. At first glance, one looks like a toppled over slab of Richard Serra steel or a Carl Andre floor piece. But one corner slyly curls up, revealing just a hint of a sunset hiding underneath, making us wonder what else might be on the other side. A second concrete based work hulks near the back of the gallery, tipped up against the wall. It's a swirling, slashing mass of images of desert canyons and evergreen needles, mashed together and mixed up with grey concrete. It's massive weight makes it easy to see that it had to be made right in the gallery, flat on the floor like a Pollock drip painting. It's by far the most energetic work in the show, exuding a kind of manic, twisting physical immediacy.

Given the momentum of the original ideas embedded in this show, I'm becoming more and more convinced of Letha Wilson's talents. Rarely has photography had such a natural physical presence; her works have a thickness and tactile quality that challenges the typical boundaries of the medium and plays with the dualities of the paper image and its real life subject matter. While plenty of other artists have explored the sculptural qualities of photographs and cobbled them together in piles, gatherings and collages, Wilson's works somehow seem more effortlessly integrated. Her images don't fight the breaking of the two dimensional plane, they move past that constraint without even noticing, smartly transforming photographs into objects of rough elegance, each one an innovative hybrid of opposing forces.

Collector's POV: Since this is a non-profit exhibition space, the works in this show aren't overtly for sale. Wilson is represented in New York by Higher Pictures. Her work has not yet reached the secondary markets, so gallery retail is the only option for those collectors interested in following up.