

# Art in America

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Michael Ashkin: *No. 74*, 1997, wood, dirt, glue, Envirotex, 3 by 17½ by 36 inches; at Andrea Rosen.

## Michael Ashkin at Andrea Rosen

Michael Ashkin's miniature landscape sculptures are made by attaching dirt, tiny sticks, fake foliage, occasional HO-scale vehicles and Envirotex to the surfaces of variously sized plywood tables. Seven works were featured in this exhibition, each portraying a relentlessly flat and barren site marked by cultural signs—empty highways, scattered machinery and creeping pollution. In *No. 61* (1997), an abandoned railroad bed with scattered foliage at its sides angles across a gritty, bleak terrain. The scene is simultaneously abject and riveting: just an obscure section of a

broken-down railway route with no beginning and no end, surrounded by an expanse of such mind-bending sameness that it might threaten to go on forever if everything were not so tiny. If you look from above, it's like seeing an anonymous landscape from an airplane window; crouch down to look horizontally and you get a feeling of sweeping distances and far-off horizons.

While these fabricated wastelands seem forlorn and psychologically punishing, they also retain traces of romantic uplift—Emerson's nature-based sublime or Whitman's open roads. In *No. 74* (1997), a yellowish ooze, with little sticks poking from it like withered trees, has spread across the landscape like some chemical lava. Intermittent dark splotches suggest submerged forms. While the whole scene is frankly appalling, it also has a pronounced, even painterly beauty.

Much the same is true of *No. 59* (1997), which is presented not on a table but on a diminutive panel protruding from a wall. Here a seemingly toxic, greenish-yellow mass has sluiced across a dark field. Ashkin's landscapes seem like the aftermath of events, and they invite you to read into them your own story; it's ambiguous whether they refer to actual sites or are purely invented.

Ashkin is clearly an heir to Robert Smithson, who pioneered an engagement with exactly this kind of marginal site. Also included in this exhibition were four photographic works displayed on the walls: grids of snapshots juxtaposing the details of rusted trucks and trash in the green underbrush of Sandy Hook, N.J., or depicting vehicle tracks in the sand of a Cape Cod beach. These works, too, seem inspired by Smithson and by Gordon Matta-Clark. Ashkin's landscape sculptures are evocative and convincing, but they also raise the question of how far he can take this idiosyncratic aesthetic before it becomes predictable.

—Gregory Volk