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michael ashkin at bronwyn keenan

by John Mendelsohn



#33 (detail), 1996

Installations have become like full-sized maps of the world, with the *terra incognita* of the artist's subjectivity represented by stylized deformations of reality. This now-familiar gambit is reversed in Michael Ashkin's "Number 33," his installation at the Bronwyn Keenan Gallery, on view May 3-June 8, 1996. Here a tabletop diorama miniaturizes the world at 13 feet to the inch. Measuring 4 by 21 feet, it fills the gallery space with a scale model of two-thirds of a mile of industrial landscape. With Precisionist rigor it depicts a two-lane blacktop causeway, complete with tiny poles carrying thread-like power lines, a run of gray piping and a lone tanker truck. The causeway runs across a ghastly lake (cast in resin), polluted with oil and milky effluvia.

Set waist-high on a series of saw horses, the scene has the homemade verisimilitude of a model train layout, with its display of capitalism's infrastructure under the

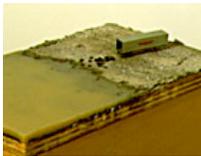




#33, 1996

loving hand of the hobbyist. It affords us the omniscient perspective of the architectural client or the police chase helicopter. The scope is paradoxically cinematic, with its small scale turning into the illusion of great distance. The doll house effect, which seduces us into the reality of someone else's obsessions, draws us in with a kind of regressive fascination. There is a filmic glamour to the whole enterprise with its mixture of environmental degradation, testosterone and highway narcosis.

Ashkin's piece has the mythic feel of an American version of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, with its spiritual aspirations flattened all the way down to horizontal. The road in this country's imagination, from Twain to Hopper to *Thelma and Louise*-- has been a recurring index of freedom and no exit. Ashkin's piece continues this dialogue as a downsized '90s docudrama, with its appeal to sentiments of loneliness and moral outrage always present, and always under permanent lockdown. The sense of apocalyptic anticipation and post-industrial pessimism link Ashkin to other contemporary American catastrophists, such as Chris Burden and John Miller.



#31 (detail), 1996

But the presiding ancestor of the work clearly seems to be Robert Smithson, the influential sculptor and Earthworks artist of the 1960s and early '70s. Present in literalized form are the range of Smithson's ideas: industrial structure as monument, entropy as a constituent part of any human process, the landscape as a social and allegorical construct, and its transposition from natural site to gallery



#30, 1996

non-site. If the literary critic Harold Bloom was right in saying that every strong reading is a creative misreading, then we can look to where Ashkin's mapping of the domain which Smithson describes diverges most distinctively. Smithson's "zero panorama" still contains structures which "rise into ruins," but Ashkin succeeds in turning the site of conceptual awareness into the non-site of an exquisitely present spectacle, a screen for the most personal, emotional projections.

Michael Ashkin at Bronwyn Keenan Gallery
May 3 - June 8, 1996

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