

**Wilson, Malin, *DeJong's Works Invite Discovery*, Journal North, August 22, 1996: 4**

Constance DeJong's works propose no answers, offer no correctives, make no judgments. They are disciplined and smart, although that is not their purpose.

They propose a transaction with the viewer devoted to contemplation, traversing self-interest and self-absorption for both artist and viewer. Quite simply, they stand for nothing but themselves. And if you are susceptible to them, they can draw you out of your daily preoccupations.

Her new works combine vitality and calm: Like a Zen koan they rely on formal parameters that allow for remarkable variety. Their language is expectant silence and receptivity without the hubris of authority.

All of the pieces in the current show are in the same format— narrowly vertical, roughly three times as high as they are wide. All are chemical patinations on copper that have been pushed by heat and sunlight, or halted at the critical moment by cold and darkness. The resulting patinas are mottled or pocked or sfumatos in textures from granular to burnished, and in colors from neon blues to sooty blacks, from viridians to bruise tones, from chalky accretions to ribbons of deep ultramarine blue.

Although DeJong has been actively exhibiting in New Mexico for 16 years, her new "Nitrate Paintings" are notably different from what preceded them. They are less cautious, more confident and reach farther. It is as if the artist added an octave of resonance to both the high and low register of feeling in her pieces.

In this exhibition the domesticated mid-range is notably missing. The four large pieces—each 96 inches high by 34 inches wide by 4 inches deep (taller than any NBA basketball player) — are lavish, surprisingly expressionist, actively physical and architectural. Their monumental presence is mitigated by uneven sides that tilt the front surface plane in subtle contrapposto. As the right lower corner advances slightly, the shift elegantly elides minimalist frontality and theatricality into an invitation of discovery.

"Nitrate Painting IV," the single large painting in the large entrance gallery, has a built-up flaky crust of a light turquoise that is surprising, even if it feels inevitable. This piece is stolid and solitary and independent in comparison with the three large pieces in the South Gallery.

These all wear extravagant patinas that suggest both flashing calligraphy and flowing water, its convergences and its edges: Here are streams, waterfalls, overlapping tide lines. While "Nitrate Painting I" has the desiccated topography of an ancient sea, "Nitrate Painting III" has the turbulent, urgent rush of a waterfall.

The small works strike an entirely different chord. Most of them are 15-by-5 inches - a size easily held in the hand. Even though their reductivism also gives them a monumental scale, they are monumental in a thoroughly mental way that depends on silence.

While the large works feel elaborate, the small feel rather obdurate, and a number are bilaterally symmetrical. The size and vertical doubling make them personal, private, intimate meditations. The paired verticals are not balanced as in the Western tradition but rather a field of activity is usually paired with a "marvelous void," as in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Japanese literati painting tradition.

As a critic who has been interested in DeJong's work for more than a decade, I find it raises a plethora of precedents from the minimalist metal boxes of Donald Judd to the solitary reductive canvasses of John McLaughlin; from the poured paintings of Morris Louis to the geologic time in the mineral accretions of Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty."

They make me reconsider the strong Modernist character of much of New Mexico's art from O'Keeffe to Agnes Martin. They remind me of the Oriental influence on West Coast artists and New Mexico modernists since the 1930s — including the Transcendental

Painting Group (especially Bill Lumpkins), Alice and Jack Garver, Florence Pierce and Marsha Skinner.

So, here in the Southwestern desert, Northern European Protestantism meets Zen against a backdrop of mystical Catholicism. Most of the large pieces are bold like the vigorous brushwork of 15th-century Japanese painter Sesshu; and the small bilaterally symmetrical works emphasize his use of "Ma" or empty space, i.e., the interval between, the void, that is often of much greater significance to Zen masters than the objects themselves.

John McLaughlin (1898-1976), a student of Sesshu and Zen who is currently the subject of a marvelous retrospective at the Laguna Art Museum (through Oct. 6), has written about his life of quietude and his search for austere calm in his modest paintings. McLaughlin did not view the making of art as any sort of competition, yet he was uncompromising in his rigor. He painted his reductive canvases during the era of Abstract Expressionism in a small seaside tourist town with a certain Yankee pragmatism and persistence.

McLaughlin's spare and plain American words seem applicable to DeJong's ongoing body of work: "Rather than announce that I have discovered the truth, I am much happier merely suggesting that the viewer himself look longer and deeper into nature."