

Peterson, William, *Constance DeJong, Artspace, November/December 1990: 54-55*

"It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night/like a rich jewel in an Ethiopian's ear". I know the issue is enchantment when I can't get Romeo's remarks on his first glimpse of Juliet out of my head. But these haunting sculptures by Constance DeJong keep evoking the words, though they reverse the setting. They are dark, faceted, jewellike forms, and their darkness is curiously not unlike that of certain African artifacts whose surfaces have been charred and blackened, and whose strangeness and mystery are somehow set off and concentrated by the isolating distance and expanse of an empty white wall. I think that, beyond the suggestive image of a jewellike presence, what causes Shakespeare's beautiful image to keep surfacing when I look at DeJong's work is the way that light and dark are so evocatively juxtaposed. In each case, the object of enchantment both enhances and is enhanced by the oppositeness of its surroundings. Then, too, there is the sudden turn of intimacy and seductive sensuality (the cheek of night) which is coupled with the allure of exotic and mysterious otherness (an Ethiopian's ear), qualities that I find in DeJong's black forms as well.

They are made of wood faced with copper. The metal has been chemically treated so that its surface, on the broader planes, is a velvety black. Occasionally, along edges or seams, bits and ragged patches of the original copper color have been retained. These fissures create the effect of an internal warmth and luminosity, like the light burning through the ashen blackness of smoldering coals. Sometimes there are also side planes of untreated copper whose slightly stained but still shiny surfaces reflect a ruddy glow onto the surrounding wall and onto the adjoining dark planes.

There is a quiet sensuousness in the velvety softness of the blackened surfaces and within the fleshlike color and warmth of the copper that reveals itself once you get up close. And then there is the seductive complexity of the shrouded, sloping, wedge-shaped forms as they interact with a kind of back and forth motion of respiration. This warmth is surprising among forms that are otherwise austere in their color and severe in their reductive, minimalist geometry. But, just as the black and the copper temper one another in a sensual way, the intellectual precision of the geometry is warmed by DeJong's predilection for the proportions of the Golden Mean, a system of subtle interrelationships and triangulations that can be found throughout the organic growth patterns of the natural world.

In fact, it seems that from the first DeJong has preferred to operate in an artistic territory that triangulates the jeweler's precision and intimacy of metal working, the tangibility and spatial presence of sculpture, and the graphic and planar purity of abstract painting. For her earliest academic training she opted out of the sculptural curriculum, with its carving and welding and modeling from the human figure, in favor of the closer procedures and discipline of jewelry making, where the body would not be the subject, but the context for her concerns. She chose to work with small and precise plates of sheet metal, using them as geometric facets that could be brought together to create rhythmic and harmonious wholes. Modern jewelry making of this sort is in many ways closer in spirit to the early aesthetics of Cubism than are most of the schools of painting and sculpture that have evolved from Picasso and Braque's primary discoveries.

When Picasso and Braque freed the shifting planes in their pictures from their normal subjects, these planes became detachable and independent pictorial elements. With the invention of collage they showed that the planes need not even be painted, but might instead be made of some foreign material affixed to the pictorial surface. These Cubist

moves are the source of DeJong's use of thin planes of metal that are applied as if each was a physicalized coating of paint. As broad expanses, however, they are probably more immediately related to the abstract planar fields of Barnett Newman and Brice Marden, or the literalizing folds of Dorothea Rockburne.

Ultimately, of course, it was Cezanne who was first concerned that the unity of the world is not a pre-existent given when the emphasis shifts from the supposed objectivity of the world to the existential subjectivity of the individual perceiver. The abutments of DeJong's angular and solid-looking forms remind me of Cezanne's strained disjuncture of planar elements which not only produced an illusion of solidity, but also declared that the overall unity of the picture was the product of will and imagination working to discover and bring about some form of coherence and order.

"In art the criterion of success is twofold," notes T.W. Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* (pp. 9-10), "first, works of art must be able to integrate materials and details into their immanent law of form; and, second, they must not try to erase the fractures left by the process of integration, preserving instead in the aesthetic whole the traces of those elements which resisted integration: ' In the disjuncture of their planar elements, both Cezanne and DeJong subtly retain the tensions of resistance to integration, allowing their works to breathe. Like Cézanne and Picasso, DeJong has developed a sophisticated sense of graphic presentation that can turn an empty space into an implied solid. In "Torque V", for example, she extends one jutting plane horizontally beyond the core of massed volumes, the way one might assertively cross a "T" or draw out a line at the end of a signature. Beneath this line an imaginary solid is proposed that gives the negative space of the white wall the presence of a positive volume.

In some notes on his drawings Richard Serra has remarked, "Black is a property, not a quality. In terms of weight, black is heavier, creates a larger volume, holds itself in a more compressed field." He then adds that "it is comparable to forging," by which he seems to mean that a black shape can forge and remake the space around it. This is the effect of DeJong's jutting and angular forms. They have their weight and gravity and somber attractiveness.

"I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which strongly attracts me . . . ,” writes Thoreau in the last chapter of *Walden*, discussing his method for pondering and seeking a firm foundation from which to proceed in his actions. There is something exemplary in the way DeJong's quietly ponderous forms objectify the mind's efforts at integration and resolution. And there is something attractive in the way their internal gravity holds that integration in suspense. The forms appear to be settling together before our eyes, but their resolve is not petrified nor coldly finalized. The light reflecting from their internalized copper elements is like the luminous emanation of an indwelling spirit.