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whitewall
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By Lily Alexander | June 5, 2009



"Untitled," 2009, turquoise, paper, ink, plaster, 13 x 10 x 2 1/2 inches

If you happen to be down on the Lower East Side you should stop in and see Hilary Harnischfeger's quite unusual and unique work in her first solo show at Rachel Uffner Gallery. Hilary, who graduated from the MFA program at Columbia University, grew up in Texas where she spent a great deal of time amongst the geological wonders of Big Bend Natural Park. It was here that she developed the desire to create her own landscapes which could express a similar beauty to that which she experienced in nature.

Hilary's small-scale multi-media wall pieces (there are also a handful of plaster sculptures) – what she calls paintings, but which also incorporate collage and sculpture, are primarily abstract, although visually they suggest topographical maps, geological formations, and architectural models, while the pastel-hues and abstract forms bring to mind the early American Modernism of painters such as Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe. From far way they seem vague, indistinct. But as you approach you see the intricate details and involved artistic process which has gone into their creation. While at first glance it may seem that you have walked into the Nature Company, or the home of a rock-collector, it is surprising once you realize that these forms are man-made, and not only are they not taken from nature, they have a distinctly man-made character which indicates the subtle yet purposely insistent impossibility of natural formation. Layers of dyed paper are stacked and then cut at slants that reveal cross-sections in which the varied colors of each sheet become visible – like the varied colors of a rock-cliff formed from layers of volcanic magma. From between the precipices of cut-out paper layers

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

emerge sparkling, rock-like structures made of inked plaster and crushed glass – Hilary talks of the sensation of light bouncing off the waterfalls of the glacier lakes in Colorado, another of her regular haunts. Geometrical slices of dyed paper are collaged onto areas of flat paper surfaces, and some works have a natural stone, such as rose quartz or green calcite, inserted into the man-made formations.

These pieces are most engaging, and possibly best understood, when approached through the creative process. Hilary explains to me that she builds these works up through a layered, time-consuming sort of process which for her relates to the slow aggregation of natural elements that come to form geological structures. Hilary begins with stacks of white paper that she dyes for varying periods of time to get different levels of saturation. The saturation of color symbolizes to her the dark inky swamps of Houston – a city which she explains is built upon mushy, unstable ground. She puts areas of wax on the paper to resist ink and form patterns. Once this dying is finished she hangs the numerous sheets of color wash up to dry around her studio. She uses the patterns in which the dye dries, created in part due to chance and in part due to her use of resistants such as the wax, to guide the build-up of structures on the paper. Hilary, whose parents are both architects, tells me about her attraction to certain traditional, building practices, such as some homes in Mexico which are built up of cement blocks over years in a sort of organic process which accumulates and adapts as needed, over time. She likens her own process to this slow, instinctive sort of creative process which also resembles the formation of structures in nature. Following patterns in the dyed paper, she stacks layers of paper, cuts with a razor, and begins jimmying these ridges and filling in the openings, so that the planes can build up. Once she has achieved the thickness she is hoping for she begins to mix plaster with aggregate, glass, and pigment. Building temporary dams, she peels away paper and pours the plaster mixture, which oozes into the openings – again like the earth's fiery mantle. The whole progression is organic and unplanned, with decisions made on the spot, in the midst of creation.



"Electric Pass," 2009, paper, ink, plaster, mica, 24 x 22.5 x 4 inches

The sculptures, made of the plaster mixtures, appear to mimic rock formations, and are definitely the weakest works in the show. The majority of wall pieces are color themed – some made up of various shades of rosy pink – like *Astrid* which has a girly, pretty-pretty feel, or shades of powder blue and turquoise, like *El Jebel*, which feels darker and more volcanic. The best work in my opinion, *1,2* moves away from this sort of pastel palette. It is rougher, and not so pretty – with a mixture of black and unpainted white paper with bits of orange, yellow, green and a piece of Pyrite (Fool's Gold) in the center. Here the bright colors contrast, and the geometric qualities stand out with graphic intensity. Hilary herself thinks this is one of the best works as well, and sees it as sort of a transition piece – possibly opening up avenues into further exploration of this style.

"Hilary Harnischfeger," Rachel Uffner Gallery, 47 Orchard Street, New York, NY 10002, (212) 274-0064, May 9 - June 21, 2009.