

Reed, Arden, *Nitrate Paintings*, THE Magazine, October 1996: 51

An old Romantic metaphor buried under the junk heap of history is the artist as alchemist, she who turns dreck into gold. Constance DeJong revives this image with Nitrate Paintings, the product of a kind of chemical warfare. DeJong poured copper nitrate down eight-foot sheets of copper suspended at a diagonal. She burnt this off with a hand-held torch—a potentially explosive process that produced toxic fumes and required wearing a gas mask, like a soldier in World War I trenches. DeJong repeated the procedure, firing many times over to obliterate all but hints of the original blue, and building texture, density and adherence. Over this surface she then poured other chemicals—ferric nitrate, liver of sulfur, ammonium chloride, etc.—that turned the blue into ochres, forest greens, umbers, midnight shades. Finally, the pieces cured under the sun for several days to bring out the colors. Such a technique poses a major aesthetic risk, along with the physical ones: the work may look gimmicky, pretty, or contrived. But what saves the nitrate paintings is likewise the impersonality of the process, the sheer letting go.

For years DeJong has worked the margin between sculpture and painting, but if her earlier work was primarily sculptural with subtly toned surfaces, the ratio reverses itself here. The "canvas" of a nitrate painting remains sculpture, for DeJong bends the copper sheets into warped slabs with their own harmonies. The forms are more giving than pure rectangles and engender motion as the copper comes off the wall. Hence the form itself moves as well as the poured patina—but they move at different tempos, which heightens the tension of the work. (I would like to see still more definition to these shapes). The other shift is that where DeJong's earlier work was largely controlled and geometric the new "paintings" result from the interplay of deliberation and accident or intuition. There is no arranging how the chemicals will flow and exactly what forms or colors will result. Once a patina is achieved it can never be duplicated.

The nitrate paintings are deeply enigmatic, built on ambiguities and contradictions. While the surface looks nothing like canvas it no more resembles metal. And although that surface is "composed" of passages of color, they neither look nor behave like paint. To the degree that the nitrate paintings are not representational, they paradoxically manage to evoke a range of representations: various passages look like earth or slices of minerals, tangles of forest branches, underwater scenes, and atmospheric or cloudy images. The central enigma is that the surface seems at once bone dry and liquid—De Jong had "fired water" and somehow retained the qualities of both elements. The result is simultaneously nostalgic for nature and post-apocalyptic or post-human. At a time when nobody discusses nuclear war any longer, this work creates the impression that a great fireball has burst and embedded traces of organic life in the metal surface before sealing it with heat. A glowing tombstone to the planet: political art in the best sense.

Four large works (96 x 34 x 4"), and 14 small ones (15 x 5 x 1") comprise the exhibit. The colors have great gravity and intensity, yet the tonal play can be extremely delicate. The palette ranges from charcoal to indigo, Prussian blue, emerald green, plum, vermilion, sepia, forest green, and subterranean colors. While there is nothing like composition in the traditional sense, of course, the work offers the satisfactions of rhythm and variety, line and shape, movement and balance, without feeling contrived. Nothing quite like them has ever crossed my eye. Number I looks the most charred, balanced by the sensations of dripping, cavernous spaces and marbled pages. Number II has a forest fell, or the look of translucent fabrics or washes overlaid, with illumination coming from behind. With its central passage of green light emerging as if from the sea, Number III has the most seductive color harmonies. Number IV is at once the most atmospheric and "archeological." since it discloses the blues undergirding I, II, and III. It recalls both Constable's cloud studies and slices of gemstones, but mostly Monet's late

water lilies stacked vertically. The smaller pieces continue this atmospheric feel or recall Color-Field painting. Noteworthy are Number VIII, which suggests the three bands of a Rothko, and Number IX, a diptych with a burnt, dark green panel welded to a coppery one, creating the impression of landscape at the bottom with an enormous sky (or sea) looming overhead.

DeJong has gone where the danger is, taking a brave new direction that promises more illuminations ahead. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, she walks into the furnace; she mixes with lethal substances, and she emerges with a new and strange kind of gold.