



JEFF BAILEY GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

MAY 2005



Chris Gentile, *Thinking About Not Thinking*, 2005, color photograph, 30" x 40"

CHRIS GENTILE

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Operating in a conceptual space populated by artists like James Casebere and Thomas Demand, Chris Gentile's recent work is a hybrid of sculpture and photography that asks interesting questions about the nature of both. Like these better-known contemporaries, Gentile's sculptural practice is in this case a disembodied one, manifested only in the context of photos—a move calculated to probe the indexical gaps between things and their depictions. In contrast to the form's more architecturally oriented pioneers, however, Gentile doesn't pursue totalizing verisimilitude for his meticulously crafted sources. Instead, his images of his own quirky, amiable sculptures—stylistically varied but at their best suggesting low-key versions of the carefully crafted surrealism of Jim Hodges or Tom Friedman—typically treat their subjects as discrete objects, choosing not to draft them into encompassing scenarios but rather to locate them in familiar display settings like the artist's studio or the gallery (in fact, all but one of the works here depict a previous exhibition of the actual things).

Gentile's modest but appealing New York solo debut included eight C-prints that demonstrate the range of his formal (sculptural) vocabulary. Each features a single work strategically shot to confound

attempts to comprehend it spatially, creating a series of visual puzzles that beg questions about the true nature of their subjects. These pieces work least well when the forms they present are at their most literal and integral. *Big Winners* (all works 2005) for example, in which a ramp supported by a wooden lattice extends from near a wall toward the center of the bare floor, struggles to rise above the status of a craft project, perhaps because it contains too many contextualizing visual clues for an illusion of scalar indeterminacy to be sustained. A similar issue limits the impact of *Thinking About Not Thinking*, though the sculpture itself, an odd twelve-legged table draped with a dark swell of carved gray-painted foam—variously suggesting entrails, a storm cloud, or a mass of extruded petrochemical sludge—does provide a compelling focal point.

Thinking About Not Thinking also makes a useful case study for one of the artist's central conceptual gambits here, namely how photographic mediation disrupts the kinds of information viewers typically rely on to understand sculptural objects. In the same way that Gentile's images purposefully disguise the size of his structures, they also withhold most of their material specifics: Is the ebony cloud-things soft or hard, smooth or rough, light or heavy? As with the indeterminately sized

mound of lichenlike material growing out of a corner in *Kellygreen*, the experiential distance inherent in photographic image making adds a layer of intrigue to what, in real life, would be more easily apprehended (and possibly less appealing); it empties out the perceptual space usually filled with empirical information in order to make room for the viewer's imagination.

A similar scenario plays out with the confounding *Penchant to Drift*, an image of a series of painted vertical elements that seem to blossom into three dimensions at both the top of the composition, where they appear to coalesce into a kind of white mesa, and its bottom, where they unravel into a tangle of white and robin's egg blue tape. And the fact that it's sometimes easier to comprehend the way particular works operate doesn't necessarily diminish their appeal. This is the case with the delicate *South Pacific*, for example, in which the artist has cut hundreds of tiny flaps in a map featuring the blue of open ocean, each shaped like a perfect maple leaf. Gentile's approach here is intriguing, yet for all the theoretical appeal of the mind/body problem it engages, in the end I kept finding myself wishing I could see the actual sculptures. Given that the whole point of the enterprise is based on the idea that I can't, I'm not sure if this is ultimately praise or criticism.

—Jeffrey Kastner