

SEAN KELLY

Waltemath, Joan. "Rebecca Horn: Cosmic Maps," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2008.



Rebecca Horn: Cosmic Maps



Installation view of Rebecca Horn; *Cosmic Maps*.
Photography: Steven P. Harris, New York. Courtesy:
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Sean Kelly May 3 – June 14, 2008

The Snake's Ghost, the kind of kinetic sculpture for which Rebecca Horn has become known, sits on the floor in the front room at Sean Kelly. It consists of a pool of gray water in a circular steel pan and a finely fabricated apparatus with a spiraling copper rod. The rod agitates the liquid from time to time as it nudges a dark form barely visible on the water's surface. Spot lit from across the room, a circle of light is reflected onto the adjacent wall, projecting the ripples radiating from the rod's point of entry into the water. As the ripples meet the edge of the pool, they return to create a complex of interference patterns; at the same time the motion of the apparatus calls attention to itself, pulling the eye back and forth between the generated and the generator.

As the miniature waves bounce off the sides of the steel pan to devolve inwards, moments of stillness punctuate the

activity; temporal patterns of both order and randomness appear. The projection, when stilled, reveals an apparent symmetry between the shadow of the snakelike apparatus and the apparatus itself. Horn's kinetic sculpture seems capable of generating an infinite number of endlessly captivating images that recall principles of waveforms; being of a scientific nature, they afford an endless landscape of mind devoid of emotion.

While the set-up of the exhibition assumes the mind-body dualism of the Cartesian worldview, there is another reckoning of things to be found in a series of large-scale drawings in the main gallery. Departing from the usual binding of gesture to self-expression, the virtuosity of Horn's mark making is ubiquitous, giving over to a surface of consequence in the restraint of what initially might have become an outpouring. Her designation of these works as maps provides an important clue to their interpretation; the impulse to locate emerges slowly as their tendency. And there is tentativeness in these larger works, as if to acknowledge the delicateness of their probe. Smaller drawings in the middle room, responding to the dimensions and scale of the hand, are much more active. They contain denser fields than the larger drawings in the main gallery. Mostly built up of central forms that hover in a relatively empty space, they signal fragments of thoughts and movements that could be tied to the quotidian. Nearly coalescing into a namable condition, even as they remain fairly devoid of recognizable imagery, these playful images balance out the demanding presence of the larger drawings.

Baumsanduhr (Tree hourglass), measuring 71 by 59 inches, melds a tree shape and the human body into a singular form that vaguely suggests the outstretched arms of the crucified Christ. A tightly wound spiral of blue is buried under a series of random marks that fill out an implied circular form in the center of the drawing. It roughly corresponds to the artist's arm span and demarcates the limits of her gesture, at the same time establishing an overview that unfolds to map the marks' spatial framework. This implied circle flips between being seen as a plan and a device to locate the radial dimension of the human-tree form imbedded in the paper. A series of downward strokes in red mark the area where the heart (is bleeding), slightly to the left. This form is matched by a few

marks at the base of the image. While these gestures recall the blood dripping from the feet of Christ in countless iconic images, Horn doesn't seem to be specifically referencing any religious subject here. She speaks, rather, of the body—where and how it holds memory.

In "Schmerzenmann im Wolkenwirbel (The man of sorrows in a whirl of clouds)" the implied figure seems to be in motion and catapulting towards us. The fragmentation of the self into many selves, this one here, that one there, is teeming and tethered to a center which is neither still nor grounded. Horn's mastery in unleashing the whirlwind is allowing it to be anchored by one simple if dark gesture on the inner rim of the outer circle. Moving from the whirlwind's center to the periphery and back again, Horn has created a form that recalls the pre-Renaissance vision of the body as a microcosmic reflection of a universal order.

A shift in scale occurs in *Urwolke* (Primeval cloud), as pale blue marks draw out its vastness as if it were a stellar landscape. Deftly controlled drips and splatters form precisely located arrays that lead us back in and around a vision of a less tumultuous origin. The countervailing ochre drips and splatters reflect the ever-present body in front of the plane and underscore the relation of the singular to the universal. There is no urge to fill things up, rather a generous, if contained impulse that allows each mark plenty of room to breathe.

"Tree of Winter Dew Drops" contains, perhaps, the lushest of these fields, with a cascade of marks filling out the primary form. On close inspection one finds eyes and lips and any number of images forming and then disappearing again within the configuration of Horn's gestures, which, in *Winter Dew Drops*, seem to speak to the fleshiness of winter. This piece recalls the lopsidedness of the body's memories, the fact that one side knows completely different things than the other as both engage so differently in the same tasks. Physical memories are a source that informs the ability to read one thing into a mark or gesture that might or might not be present for another. With her long history of performance works, Horn is an adept in the field.

In "Dornprufed (Thorn-proofed)" a configuration of opposition within the image replaces the centrality of form found in many of the other pieces. A beautiful blue-gray underpainting of closely spaced marks is covered by other, darker and violent burnt sienna strokes; opposed to the slim margin of light blue that lines the drawing's left edge, it forms one part of the pair. A series of splatters binds the two parts; various incidents of paint, flying in the interstice, fan out from the right of the central core, itself propped up by the long thin lines running down to the drawing's lower edge.

Like "Dornprufed, Flammenaugen im brennenden Busch (Flaming Eyes in the Burning Bush)" opposes two sets of marks, creating a void in between as it maps out a field of minute differences that ground their respective configurations in vastly different realms. Deciphering what these realms signify does not have any bearing on the drawing's ability to convince us of the necessity of securing the place of one thing in relation to another.

In all the drawings we feel the presence of the body in front of the plane, its torques as well as the delicate maneuvers that performed each series of marks. Whereas their presence as images is neither new nor formally innovative, the power they exude seems to emanate from the desire to locate ourselves both physically and philosophically in the present moment.

For all their playful mark making, there is a sorrow and a struggle in these drawings, a longing for a more convinced sense of physicality. What Horn seems to document are the remains of actions that happened long ago but are still being performed, as if memories were perennials. In the sense that objects and substances can be read for traces of activities, and are ready and open to the probing of the latest hypothesis, Horn seems to be re-enacting in order to ascertain where the Cartesian drive has taken us, where the desire to find the depths of the universe will leave the last man standing. There is melancholy in her meanderings and her footprint is comprehensive.