

SEAN KELLY

Lee, Jody. "Rebecca Horn at Sean Kelly, New York," *Artwrit*, November 2011.

ARTWRIT

Rebecca Horn at Sean Kelly, New York

In her show at Sean Kelly Gallery, Rebecca Horn shows herself to be an artist who continues to make persuasive and profound work decades into her career. This formidable exhibit brings together her large-scale abstract paintings on paper, a 1986 sculpture entitled *Gold Rush* and two more recent works in sculpture. The artist, known most famously for her installation and performance pieces, showcases a quieter side with this new show, entitled *Ravens Gold Rush*.

At first viewing, Horn's paintings could read as the graphical translation of some astral occurrence. Long rows of translucent gray dots extend up, descend and dive across the page. Stick-length shards of colored line spin and splinter away. Red marks skitter under pressure, compounding the sense of emphatic motion as do light graphite streaks. Orange smears, finger-width and opaque, cross ribbons of black that brake and start again in frayed sections. The marks possess astounding lyrical power and a hallmark combination of delicacy and vehemence. Painting functions for Horn as image but also as a sort of energy snare that collects the traces her concentration leaves when, as she says, "I build my own cosmos." The beauty of this work arises in part from that speculative urgency, none of which abates as the paintings become finished works.

There is a central area corresponding to shoulder height in each of the large paintings where the mark making becomes more layered and intense. Here, white acrylic in thumb-width streaks overlaps other paint and acts as a coagulant. There is the sense of coeval building and releasing, of rapid rotation and of awakening. What finds its way onto the page conveys the broadest possible sense of human belonging, making Horn's works on paper comparable in tone to one of nature's own chaotic processes. Though the result of activity, the paintings seem withal a poignant summary of the individual who made them: part physicist, part poet.

In the gallery's main space are two sculptures. The first, *Ravens Forest*, is a forty-inch-high glass vitrine covered with imprints of black feathers, reminiscent of a startled, rising flock of birds, swathed in its own shadow cast against the wall. Inside the glass and startling in the surrounding softness is a vertical, braided riding crop that traces an arc. In its gradual, halting movement it behaves not unlike the spoor of human presence in a landscape. Further, it resembles the Duchampian trope where a mechanism defines eroticized space, as in *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*. A similarly thorough amalgam of space, human presence, mechanism and erotic energy has been central to Horn's artistic production throughout her career.

The Raven Tree, arguably the principal work in this show, is an attenuated, luxuriant object fashioned from arcing lengths of copper pipe, ground charcoal amassed in siphons, a rotating mirror and motorized disks. Like vast undulating serpents, the copper piping forms the tree's branches and the disks transmit their motion along them, lending a subtle shake to the work's sizeable mass. Then aural punctuation comes. At the ends of certain branches, dark carved wood forms a snapping bird's mouth. A motor lightly grinds and these mouths open before flatly shutting, a spare chorus of blind birds snapping cruelly at the air, then more arrestingly at sheets of crumpled gold with which the artist has lined their mouths. Greedy and importunate, they will not be sated.

One relates to *The Raven Tree* and *Gold Rush* of 1986 very differently. The Raven Tree's inviting scale suggests it is a place and story to be entered rather than a tautly structured object. But well past the physical mirror it contains, *The Raven Tree* offers a mirror trained in our direction, one that produces a rendering of our moral state as a consuming, copper-haired Medea, or a gold-laden but impecunious tree from a reduced, end-times garden of Eden.

Rebecca Horn: *Ravens Gold Rush*
28 October—3 December 2011
Sean Kelly Gallery
528 West 29th Street, New York