

Art in America

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Jennifer Bolande at Alexander and Bonin

The clouds on the horizon in Jennifer Bolande's fourth exhibition at Alexander and Bonin were made of smoke, and signaled not the gathering storm of Alfred Stieglitz's modernism (as represented in his iconic images of the sky) but a refined sensibility that resituates the peripheral, in both materials and visual incident, to the central. Bolande's recent photographs, objects and plywood "screens" advance a body of work that requires investment from its audience, eludes easy categorization and deserves greater attention.

It is frequently noted that Bolande emerged from the "Pictures" generation of the late '70s—artist whose interrogation of both the still and moving image only gains in relevance. Bolande should be counted among the least cynical of that group, opting for the sub-

jective pleasures of the scrapbook over the engineered glamour of the billboard. Much of her art originates with her own photography, though she also engages in forensic scrutiny of the print media.

The works in her "Smoke Screen" series each comprise a handful of tinted prints of smoke mounted on large (96-by-48-inch) sheets of ordinary plywood. Bolande's choice of this material recalls the use of wood-grain-patterned Formica by Richard Artschwager, whose Pop surrealism, like Ed Ruscha's, is relevant to any appreciation of Bolande's art. Formica offered Artschwager a mutable "picture" of wood; similarly, the sinuous grain of Bolande's plywood has a Rorschach-like suggestiveness that competes with the pictures themselves, culled from newspapers with the loving care devoted to high-school science projects. *Smoke Screen #4* (2007), for example, includes an image of two bystanders on a

highway overpass, observing a burning car with the nonchalance of 18th-century courtiers.

Depending on perspective, the plaster tabletop object *Plume* (2007), while identifiable as a rising cloud of smoke, can morph into a grotesque face or a Bronze-age Venus. The vaguely conical shape reappears in Bolande's prints and constructions with some regularity. I interpret these forms as tornados; they stand not for deadly meteorological events, but as logos of psychic displacement and supernatural transport—to Oz, for instance. Bolande employs a displaced chain of reasoning in her assemblage of individual pieces, a thought process resembling autism in its refusal to assign conventional meaning to places or things, and in the deliberate misreading of the physical for the pictorial. This logic, when applied to photography-based sculptures like *Plume*, often reverses the camera's magic, transforming pictures into reconfigured versions of their subjects.

Little Dead Tree (2007) is a bronze cast of, well, a little dead tree, placed atop a handsome dark wood beam (88½ inches high). In lifting one's head to acknowledge this sad totem—a charred finger or arrowhead pointing straight up—something in us stirs. Somewhat unexpectedly, spiritual interpretations of Bolande's increasingly transcendental art seem to be encouraged. Ethereal phenomena signify ecstasy in the imagery of worship associated with numerous world religions. In 1923, Stieglitz proposed that his cloud photographs, titled "Equivalents," were reflections of states of mind—as radical an idea then as Bolande's stairways to heaven may be now.

—Tim Maul

Detail of Jennifer Bolande's *Little Dead Tree* (center) with two plywood panels from the "Smoke Screen" series, all 2007; at Alexander and Bonin.

