

Patrick Hill BRUCE HAINLEY

FROM THE LAST DECADE, the most demanding critique on sculpture is Dennis Cooper's *Period* (2000). Dedicated to Vincent Fecteau, the novel becomes a meditation on form in the face of death, which is also to say, on the form of the face of death—facing beyond's effacements. An older artist figure, Bob (like the text, which ends by returning to its start, disappearing Möbius-ly into itself, his name is palindromic), has reconstructed an "average, citified house . . . in a completely impractical spot," and painted the inside "wild black"—"zip, inkiness"—so that shadow swallows any hole, corner, or corridor. Bob's unhomely sculpture, a memorial for a lost beauty, is a portal to the unspeakable—or not: Bob tells one of the look-alikes he fucks: "It's just a house painted black inside . . . but as far as you're concerned it's art." In the novel's remains, Cooper spatializes desire and mourning, positing absence (the "meaning" to keep watch over) as a viable dimensional form with which to struggle against the unknown. *Period* can be read as a blueprint, or rather, a blackprint, for much of LA's best sculpture of the late 1990s, its various psychic, historical, and libidinal explorations.

Enter Patrick Hill, who, circa 2000, was doing what most recent MFA grads in Los Angeles do: finding work to pay the rent, setting up a studio, and surfing. La-di-da, dude. About a year into la-di-da, after a session when the waves weren't too glassy, Hill was driving home on the 5 and blacked out. He awoke in a hospital, disoriented. The diagnosis: brain tumor. He moved back to his native Ann Arbor, Michigan, underwent invasive brain surgery, and then submitted to more than a year of intensive chemotherapy. It was in this state, facing his own mortality, grappling with something bigger than the sea, that he found a way to start over and continue. Endings are never not beginnings, if one can get at a vantage (which often remains beyond us) to see it that way; and biography never solves art—what it does, how it does it, and why. But I relate Hill's background (with his consent) not to explain anything so much as show how he deploys this alteration as a material and formal component of his work—part of what compels him to take on the immaterial and formless—while attempting to make gnarly matters look effortless. He proffers nonrepresentational structures so that the viewer can experience something like the mute awesomeness of shooting a tube, with full knowledge that a wave—uncaring because unconscious—would just as well wipe you out.

Hold on. It's more complicated than that. A head-to-head with Sturtevant's work, for one, compelled Hill to question history and to negotiate interior structures, the immaterialities and invisibilities girding things, which find partial analogy in his use of the dynamic quality of glass to instantiate shimmeringly what is not there. Hill's not just some naïf stabbing at the dark to make something of it.

One can feel the working out and working through of these concerns in his recent *Heavy Rising*, 2005, in which what appears to be a solid, quasi-ritualistic wooden plinth—actually made up of ferociously bound wood slats, empurpled with Rit and other dyes swirled with bleach—is disrupted by rising slices of clear glass harlequined into stark, triangular, fabric-paneled zones of black, mauve, and purple: the fortress of solitude seen through black light. The flat planarity of the glass panes starts to open up, transforming into trompe l'oeil volumetrics as the viewer circles the sculpture, *looking-at* becoming *looking-through*: The syncopated rhythm of the different triangular fabric zones starts to reveal shifting geometric portals to inner and outer spaces where actual volume, negative volume, and—because of transparency and reflection—even seeming interdimensionality collide. Meanwhile, the lumbering ground of the piece both hovers and bluntly reveals all the apparatus (timber, hardware) of why it couldn't or

shouldn't. "Heavy" waves are kick-ass swells as opposed to rubbishy wind chop. Rather than drop in someone else's referential wave (by use of blatant cultural appropriations, etc.), Hill trusts his own deep poetics to rip the associative ocean. With *Heavy Rising* he carves simultaneously agnostic historical resonances (purple haze, Minimalism via skateboard architectonics) with the dire representational consequence of the sublime.

Appearing in some sharp group shows, Hill worked steadily toward his breakaway solo at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles in 2004. A key earlier work, *Memento Mori*, 2002, which was made for "Grey Gardens," a summer exhibition at Michael Kohn Gallery that year, set up many of Hill's principal engagements—reflection, translucency, transparency, and the various planes of the actual and apparent—in an icier manner. A Vans shoebox is cut in half, one portion providing the precarious support for a large two-way mirror balanced horizontally on top of it, while the other half of the box rests in the middle of its reflective surface, making it appear as though the box is intact and seamlessly penetrating the mirror's thin depths. The reflection seems to "complete" the top half of the box, providing its clear inverted double; but from an oblique angle the two-way mirror reveals the shadowy actuality, diffusing the bottom half of the box into its own ghost. The reflected representation exists with more clarity than the real box; the precariousness of the balance, the potential shattering of the entire affair, allows destruction its proper place as pleasure's shadow.

In all the chatter about a "new formalism" going on, folks who should know better tend to overlook that any so-called new formalism is still formalism—a crucial aspect summoned too often just as formula or a way of putting thought on crutches when confronting abstraction and nonrepresentation, instead of allowing it to stumble into the unknown. Artists create and de-create new forms, which mostly aren't categorizable until they've already moved elsewhere. Like any other artist who actually wishes to accomplish something meaningful, Hill's trying to sort through many things at once. I doubt he'd start with his "interest" in form, point blank, as what gets him out of bed, but neither would he prioritize grooving to the sometimes contradictory currents of Sturtevant, Billy Al Bengston (color as space, vernacular as history), and Fecteau (poetic rigor) over possibly testing the aesthetic potential of Spencer's Gifts (the "adult" novelty shop specializing in the black-lit paraphernalia of stoner eroticism), fabric and glass arts, or the low-key cool of surf culture (coral, pastel beach stones, killer airbrushing) and its mum, soulful atmospheric.

Art is not a cure, which isn't to say it can't be a mode of survival and a way to probe the contingency of, well, everything. Consider *Anti-Tumor Painting Two*, 2005, in which Hill uses ink, dye, bleach along with blackberries and blueberries to put a god's-eye talismanic back into painting: It's as if a Stella were cracked open to explore its swirling, unruly interior power—history metabolized into something ominous but always elusive; painting released, if only briefly, from the bank vault of sheer commodity to an abyss. In his assured work, Hill shores up presentness as the grace to find the littoral between here and nowhere, for, like, ever. □

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