

Rebecca Johnson at Larry Becker

Taking as her material means the wood, rock and water of the Welsh countryside where she spent last fall, Rebecca Johnson has fashioned a powerful and rewarding body of work. This exhibition of sculpture and painting is landscape work for the end of the century: mingling a deep feeling for nature with a melancholy that seems to come from the land itself, it shades without bathos into a very contemporary foreboding of natural disaster.

Johnson's mastery of a personal woodcarving style was evident here in a group of tall, carved and constructed columnar pieces. All are topped by outstretching forms, also of wood. In *Column of Smoke* (1992), a series of chunky clouds of blue-gray stained pine rise from a squarish base of charred maple. *Treehive* (1991) is the strangest of the group, with a pocked, hornets-nest puff of dried walnut erupting from a thin standing trunk. A saclike form of bleached pine protrudes from its base, painted with a delicate oil-wash image: tree or mushroom cloud?

Most of the paintings in the show were on wood grounds, and one was done directly on the long, back gallery wall. With their vague, drooping lines and washed-out palette, they recall 19th-century mourning paintings. One pervasive image is of rain: in *Fallout* (1991), black rain falls from a heavy black cloud. Seen against the paintings, the columnar works gain extra symbolic weight: they variously suggest smokestacks, recalling Wales's sorry industrial history; mutant growths poisoned by bad rain; and spirit-trees that speak of both destruction and continuance.

Some small, dark sculptures carved from dense Welsh slate are more intimate but no less strange: some are plate-sized medallions, some forearm-sized statuettes, including a female figure of near-Cycladic simplicity. On one medallion, *On and On* (1991-92), a figure-eight form stands in relief, evoking both the female figure and the symbol for infinity, while around it a number of liplike openings have been cut through the slate.

Another group of works consists of stones that have been hollowed out and placed on the floor to hold shallow pools of water. In *Moon Water*, the most

Rebecca Johnson: *Column of Smoke*, 1992, mixed mediums, 74 by 17 by 17 inches; at Larry Becker.



striking of these, a long, concave rock form creates a kind of pond, at the bottom of which can be seen a few scratched markings and two pebbles, one a brilliant egg-yolk yellow. Some of the pools are double, connected by a narrow channel. This motif of connection is amplified in the large wall painting, which depicts a descending series of swirling pools.

Slate, with its telluric origins, and water both speak to feminine associations with nature—the dark, wet regions of regeneration. The contemplation of these works may offer a soothing silence, but it is a silence that is also brooding and somber. This is no escapist Arcadia. The very darkness of Johnson's vision is what makes it so eloquently of our time.

—Miriam Seidel