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Dennis Leon at 555 City Center

Dennis Leon: Perpetual Objects at Gallery 555, the Oakland Museum's off-site exhibition space in City Center, closed July 2002.

By Juan Rodriguez



Dennis Leon, *Altered Rock*, 1989, plywood, 115" x112" x84", at Gallery 555, Oakland.

Dennis Leon's sculptures, standing in the light bathed lobby of 555 City Center in downtown Oakland, look like boulders or rocks that have been cut away from a quarry or bulldozed off a piece of land. Of the six sculptures exhibited here, two are bronze castings from "real things," while the other four are constructions in metal and plywood. Leon's objects ironically signal to the viewer that nature and art are substantially interchangeable.

Melville, a casting from a section of the hull of a boat, and *Proscenium*, which originates from a small boulder, have intended literary meaning but their message is unclear beyond their metallic presence. In contrast to the castings' inert qualities, the two metal constructions, *Untitled #1* and *Untitled #2*, look like roaming crusty-skinned creatures that have momentarily taken rest on the smooth lobby floor. Their contours bulge and contract in response to the structure of the armature built inside them. Thin rectangular sheets of metal are nailed onto the armatures and painted in patinas of dark red, orange and green. In late afternoons the sunlight rakes across the metal, giving these objects the appearance of quilted fabrics suspended in midair, as if their interior supports had melted away.

Rockface #5 and *Altered Rock* are plywood objects with faux surfaces that are created by torching and routing the wood. The bulging and undulating look of rocks is simulated by individual sections of plywood nailed over wooden armatures. Because of their faux texture and boulder scale, these pieces are the closest realistic representation of geological structures in the exhibition. Their artificial geology has an aura of a horrific and dislocated nature.

We know nature cannot be dismantled, reduced, altered and recast anew. Art, on the other hand, can be destroyed and rebuilt. Leon's objects are the subjects of this rebuilding process. His work is technically well done and clever in its meaning, leaving the viewer nostalgic for nature's "real thing."