

THE COMPANY
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Eli Hansen at The Company

It's too bad that the concept of "place" has become such a treachy, sentimental, not to mention overused, idea in recent years because it could be useful in trying to position the work of Eli Hansen. Hansen is deeply committed to defining an authentic aesthetic of the Pacific Northwest, the region in which he has lived his entire life. This endeavor can be seen as a counter-reaction to the internationalizing homogenization that has overtaken the artworld, an attempt to put forth ideas that bear a refreshing uniqueness and difference because they could not have been made anywhere else. His approach should not be seen as conservative or reactionary, however, as he does not willfully shut out ideas from the outside world and maintains a nimble, critical stance towards the history of Northwest art and culture while also presenting a perspective that doubtless has relevance to conditions elsewhere.

Hansen in fact adopts methods that are rigorous, even scientific, and has developed real expertise and craftsmanship in processes as rarefied and labor-intensive as glassblowing. But any virtuosity is deliberately kept in check by limitations in his skill sets and a tendency to favor expediency and pragmatism over high-craft. He knows how to form a vessel out of molten glass that could challenge the decorative exuberance of Dale Chihuly, but prefers to anchor his creations in the practical milieu of early 1970s counterculture, when hand-blown glass could be best used as a makeshift window in a rough-hewn hut. His recent sculptures in this exhibition bear out this predilection, strapping beautifully crafted crystal lenses to tin cans with wire so that low-fi photographs can be scrutinized. The objects in the photographs, like the sculptures that house them, are of structures defined by an in-between state, some devoted to itinerant lifestyles like RVs, others downtrodden houses in the process of being reclaimed by nature. Hansen has long been fascinated by off-the-grid lifestyles, a movement with particular momentum and history in the Northwest, but in these tumultuous times, such living arrangements are not always adopted willingly, and this ambiguity charges Hansen's images with new relevance. The old dictum that teachers pass on to students to "paint what you know" or "write what you know" in order to capitalize on deeply ingrained experience has been taken up with gusto by Hansen, translating his profound and nuanced understanding of the mossy nooks and crannies of Washington state into poignant and lucid commentaries that transcend any one particular locale.

-- Michael Darling

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