

Landscape as Metaphor

DENVER ART MUSEUM

CURATOR MARTIN FRIEDMAN CREATED this exhibition, which included 13 American artists who do not believe that representing the landscape means painting nature. Their art refers to scenes as disparate as the water gardens of Monet and the salt flats of Bonneville, Utah. Several artists made site-specific works acknowledging the vertical fortress-of-the-future architecture of the museum, the parklike surroundings, and the Rocky Mountains.

Martin Puryear chose a grassy site shared by museum buildings and some neoclassic park structures. There he erected a 60-foot scaffold, the base of *Camera Obscura*. From its triangular crosspiece (which echoes nearby Greek-style pediments) hung an upside-down, once-magnificent cherry tree, now dead, split, and bolted together. The tree, which was trucked in from the Rockies, symbolized man's dislocations of the landscape. In contrast to its naked quality, neighboring leafy trees seemed brooding and protective.

Lewis deSoto's installation *Tahquitz*, occupying two rooms of the museum, presented a Cahuilla Indian creation myth about a fearsome ice spirit, Tahquitz. In a blue-lit antechamber, a tabletop display electronically alternated a map of the spirit's home, the San Jacinto mountains of southern California, with a readout of the myth, also intoned by a voice moving about the space.

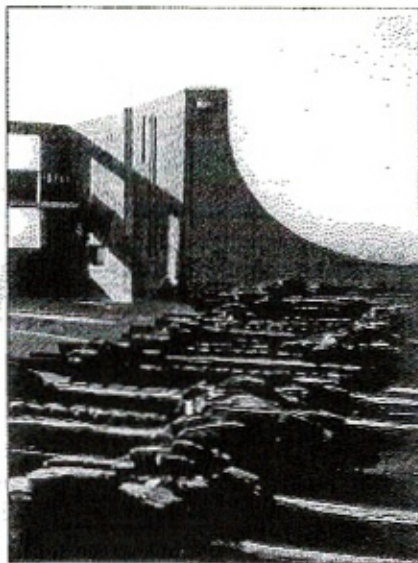
The main room was a contemporary temple of mysteries. There were small televisions displaying Tahquitz's high, dry landscape at the ends of a steel table, which held blocks of ice—metaphors for mortals consumed by the spirit. The ice—at once murky, crystalline, and filigreed—was riveting and portentous, slowly melting into great terra-cotta vessels. This piece suggests the evanescence of life and the power of myth.

Monumental and still, but equally sug-

gestive, was Mei Chin's *Spirit*. A gigantic barrel above viewers' heads seemed to be balanced on a thin rope of scorched native grasses. Here the landscape references are subtle, metaphorical: the thin rope gleaned from nature can only symbolically support the 2,000-pound barrel, a heavy symbol of mankind's material demands. The impact is visceral—will the barrel roll off the rope and onto our heads?—and elegant, even Shinto in feeling, with its polished wood, axial symmetry, and handmade rope.

Ursula von Rydingsvard's *Slepa Giena* (Blind Eugenie) aligned 13 roughly carved lengths of laminated cedar across the museum roof. The objects seemed ceremonial, as old as the mountains visible on the horizon. Chunky and weathered, they were like a row of long-abandoned ritual boats. The catalogue's interpretations of this and other works sometimes felt obscure, unnecessarily complicating the simple idea behind this rich, marvelous exhibition: the most eloquent metaphors for unknown territory are to be found in the landscape itself.

CAROL V. DICKINSON



Ursula von Rydingsvard,
Slepa Giena (Blind Eugenie),
installation view, 1994.
Denver Art Museum.