

REGEN PROJECTS *

Pagel, David, "A Model World View," review at Regen Projects, Frieze, May, 1994 pp. 32-33,

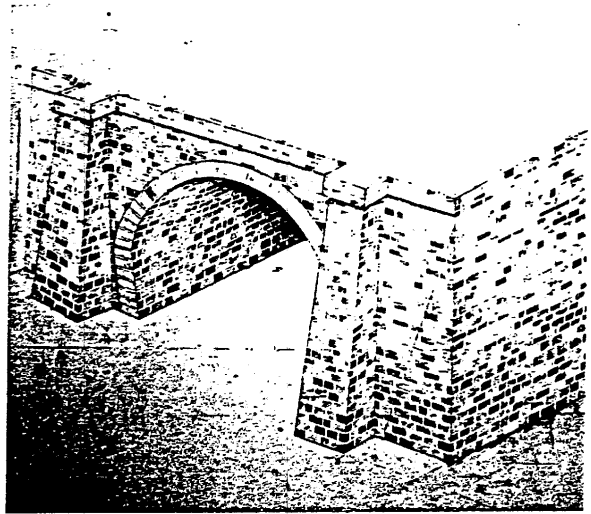
a model world view

David Pagel on Toba Khedoori

Gigantic and endearing, Toba Khedoori's wall-size drawings of a passenger train, a tunnel, a construction crane, a pedestrian bridge, a wall of windows and a series of explosions – each isolated against a vast expanse of creamy white blankness – possess the wholesome charm and sincerity of Tonka toys. Her labour-intensive images, diligently outlined in black ink and carefully coloured-in with softly tinted oils, seem to be suffused with the knowledge that the innocent playthings they depict belong exclusively to children. Khedoori endows her images with the sense that toys enter the world of grown-ups only as faded memories, as dim recollections which, more often than not, get lost amidst more pressing concerns and practical calculations. It's significant that none of her train-cars are connected to one another, and that you can look through all their windows and see no people or seats: after all, these are renderings of tiny models, not the real thing. It's also important that in Khedoori's curiously distant work no pedestrians cross the walkway; no materials are available for the crane to lift; nothing but smoke and fire goes up in the explosions; and no cars travel through the tunnel. Viewers are left with a sensitively rendered world whose machinery has ceased to function effectively, as if dreams have taken over and events unfold exceptionally slowly. This is a world in which the connection between cause and effect is stretched to its limit.

The young, Australian-born, L.A.-based artist's mute pictures feel as if they take place at some anonymous crossroads in a desolate landscape. They recall those seemingly hallucinatory freeway interchanges that pop up on the horizon after you've travelled mile after uneventful mile through bleak, vacant landscapes, where scale is difficult to measure because no human referents are present. Built in the middle-of-nowhere to link three (or more) thoroughfares with impressive webs of gracefully twisting exit- and entrance-ramps, these daunting structures form dizzying, multi-layered patterns of stacked, overlapping overpasses that would tower above most buildings, if any happened to be nearby. Suspended in mid-air, like some elaborate backdrop for a sci-fi movie, these placeless monuments to automobile transport prompt you to wonder about the strange logic and immense effort that brought them into existence. Eventually, they set you to thinking about the type of civilisation or culture in which such monumental feats of engineering make sense. This sort of drifting, high-speed speculation naturally leads to even more troubled thoughts about the fragility of all artefacts and the tenuousness of human endeavour, especially in the face of an inhospitable environment that makes even the largest man-made objects look puny, pointless and vain.

Likewise, the delicately rendered images in Khedoori's 11' x 20' drawings appear to pop out of nowhere and then to disappear into nothingness, triggering similar existential reflection as your eyes glide across their imperfect, wax-coated surfaces that are randomly interspersed with smudges, hand-prints and short strands of dog hair. Somewhat haphazardly stapled to the wall, these impersonal yet engaging pictures are located at the intersection between grand gestures and utter inconsequentiality. Khedoori's works consist of a pretty sensible blend of ambition and humility, where desire mingles with restraint. For viewers, it's impossible to determine from which distance these huge yet weirdly intimate drawings demand to be seen. You don't



Untitled (detail) 1994
Oil and wax on paper

know whether you should come in close and get lost in the uncountable details the artist has painted with mind-numbing sensuousness, or if you should stand back to try to take in a more objective, overall view of the big picture.

Each image has the bittersweet little-fish-in-a-big-pond feeling that must accompany every graduate student's departure from art school and subsequent immersion in the work-a-day world, where facelessness is the fate that most likely awaits one. To Khedoori's credit, she eschews the tactics of much slacker art, never embracing the signs of failure as some pathetic, passive/aggressive defence against success. Contrary to this tired strategy, whose jaded proponents pretend that their only ambition is to have no ambition, Khedoori packs a lot of sentiment into thoughtful, deceptively simple compositions that resonate in your memory long after you've stopped looking at them. Her resoundingly quiet and profoundly still subjects always imply activity, movement and progress, if only momentarily. They're aimed at the immediate future, evoking travel (by train, tunnel or foot-bridge), or heavy-duty construction (of multi-storey buildings). Khedoori's most recent pieces suggest the presence of hidden, inner lives – whether they reside just beyond the panes of a building's myriad windows or behind the screen-saver mechanism of a computer passively and patiently waiting for input. Potential is the password whose utterance puts this art in motion.

Khedoori's approach shares much with Ed Ruscha's understated linguistic landscapes and Vija Celmins' mesmerising dissolutions of the self into its surroundings. Making expansive landscapes out of what would otherwise be little, incidental still-lives, she draws viewers into the picture by offering generous, open-ended instances of indeterminate meaning and beauty.