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FINE ART By Peter Plagens

A Rock Shop, Pet Snakes And Abstracts

Nadja Frank: 'Rock Shop'

• Denny

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Backstories have taken over much of contemporary art. Which is to say that knowing all the personal and political reasons the artist made the art is a prerequisite for any aesthetic appreciation to be had from it. In the case of Nadja Frank, who was born in 1980 in Germany and recently earned an MFA degree from Columbia University, a viewer is supposed to understand that she travels a lot, has a particular fascination with what might be called the Sam Shepard version of the American West (barren highways, depopulated landscapes and occasional roadside attractions—such as a rock shop—among them). Otherwise, Ms. Frank's exhibition—four 9-foot-tall hollow quadrants of a model mountain set on casters and arranged around a central column, flanked by a few small, minimal paintings composed of some mineral sediment at the bottom and skylike empty space above—is only a mysterious collection of casually constructed objects. Even with the requisite printed release in hand, one is hard put to figure out whether Ms. Frank is genuinely in love with crude high-desert civilization, wryly critical of it (one of her mountain segments has a kitschy thrift-store picture fastened to its back), or simply finds it convenient material from which to fashion a gallery show.

I've come to the tentative conclusion that art like Ms. Frank's is the product of graduate art schools' numbingly pervasive critique system. In it, students are left more or less alone to pursue various and sundry art-making interests, but then called upon every once in a while to explain—and explain and explain and explain—what they've done to a group of fellow students and chin-stroking faculty. Inevitably, explanation becomes the main course, the art itself a side order. Ms. Frank is obviously a clever and inventive artist. From here on out, the less explanation her art requires, the better it will probably be.

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