

Chris Sauter: Just Married

Elizabeth Dee Gallery

John Ewing

With all that it implies, *Just Married* is a canny title for the various domains joined together in Chris Sauter's recent New York show. These four drawings and two sculptures further hone this artist's distinctive union of conceptual and formal extremes (i.e., art/science, masculine/feminine, private/public, micro/macro, above/below, near/far, highbrow/lowbrow, delicate/tough, historical/contemporary). The works in *Just Married* blithely bridge these categories, which feel rigid and small-minded once incorporated into Sauter's generous, boundary-defying juxtapositions.

Generator, the show's centerpiece, conflates a marriage bed with the Hoover Dam. Complete with bed frame, comfy linens and a perfect replica of the Southwest's primary hydroelectric producer, this sculpture loads new meaning into the phrase "just married." As depicted, the jagged path of the Colorado River echoes the piece's rumpled pillows and mussed-up bedclothes. Cut into the foam mattress, the river's craggy canyon terminates near the foot of the bed in the graceful, fan-shaped curve of the marvelous dam, cast in painted resin.



Chris Sauter, *Generator*, 2004

Queen sized bed frame and mattress, bed clothes, foam, painted resin, etched copper and thread
50 x 70 x 90 inches

Starting here, two separate networks of tiny, copper towers and connecting power lines snake up paisley-patterned sheets and pillowcases to a substantial dark-wood headboard. This fusion of materials, images and analogous elements amps up the conceptual possibilities of *Generator*, from ironic humor to straight-on metaphor. The bed becomes a literal landscape of power, engulfing a marvel of civil engineering within a soft domestic setting, slyly charging each with the other's current.

This inversion of intimate softness and macho engineering has subtler dimensions in Sauter's



Chris Sauter, *Expanding the Lineage*, 2004

Graphite and spray paint on MDF
20 1/2 X 24 inches

medium-sized drawings. Open and airy, they are composed primarily of misty atmosphere, rendered with a *sfumato* effect in pale pink and blue spray paint on panel. In graphite, low, diffuse horizon lines (either ocean or land) are delicately punctuated by drawings of drilling platforms, utility towers and construction scaffolding. The detailed drawings are highlighted here and there with flecks of white, as if sun-dappled.

Like the bed-top landscape of *Generator*, the drawings' horizon lines are locations of symbolic potential or mysterious reckoning: drilling apparatuses disappear under gray water and veiled mountains materialize in the far-off, smoky distance on the side edges of the pictures. This expansive depth and delicate rendering allow for dramatic effects. *Loner*, a small, solitary drilling platform covering in a sea of brooding atmosphere, gains a rich psychological patina highly unusual for this industrial subject.

Likewise, *Expanding the Lineage* is an unexpectedly lovely drawing of utility towers in a vast, flat landscape. The curving network of towers and lines swoops across the lower half of the picture, then resolves into a beautifully superimposed marching column that reaches back into the depths of the image toward a distant mountain range. All of these dramatic, even heroic effects are convincingly achieved through Sauter's delicate line and careful manipulation of scenic and spatial characteristics. The artist can sustain this suspension of disbelief because the work is so well crafted. Sauter's care with materials heightens his capacity to persuade; viewer's can take the mental

leap to see the associative and imaginative dimensions of his art beyond its material parts.

Consequently, we have come to expect this kind of transforming, extra kick from Sauter's sculptural work. When the work lacks scale-bending *trompe l'oeil* and detailed environments, there is a marked absence of magic. Less successful, therefore, are the bed-sheet/dam combinations, which feel too conceptually pat and materially contained. In *Domestic Dam Sheet Set (Damask)*, another resin replica of Hoover Dam is upholstered in a wine-colored bedsheet. The model sits atop a factory-packaged set of the same sheets, folded neatly and sealed in clear plastic. In this work, the materials only flatly denote the collision of wildly different domains. There is no convincing illusion of multiple contexts or the magical suspension of disbelief Sauter achieves in his evocative drawings and surreal dioramas.



Chris Sauter, *Domestic Dam Sheet Set (Damask)*, 2004

Upholstered resin and queen-size sheet set
Dimensions variable

This quality of illusion is, to my mind, what makes Sauter's work so intellectually "spacious"... BIGGER is better, if you will. Yet 'BIGGER' in Sauter's work is never a simple matter of size. The San Antonio-based artist is more concerned with the mental signposts that give us our innate sense of scale within our surroundings. He appeals to our understanding of space, size and geography, and these preparatory considerations are where his marriage of extremes is most striking. The fact that Sauter can also weave in conceptual dynamics and cultural content is the clever recipe that makes his dialogue of extremes extremely effective.