

# Model of a plan of a design: art/reality at Sala Díaz and Finesilver

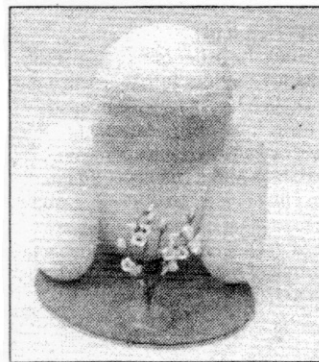
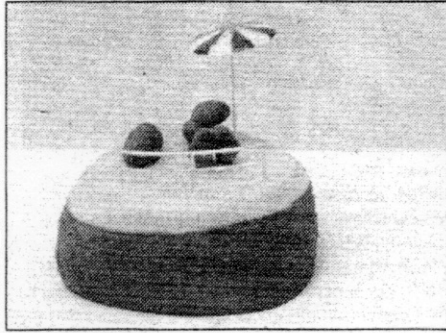
BY JOHN EWING

Over millennia, our relationship to models for complex activities has become so intertwined that we're often hoodwinked by our own design, failing to distinguish the plan from reality. Alongside our expanding physical presence on the planet, a systematized, virtual world of graphic models has charted its own destiny within the collective human consciousness, newly redefined by the Internet. We might wonder which came first: the real world or its simulacra? At Sala Díaz and Finesilver Gallery, artists Sharon Engelstein and Aya Ben Ron play with graphic models to further frustrate the slippery divide between reality and the merely imagined.

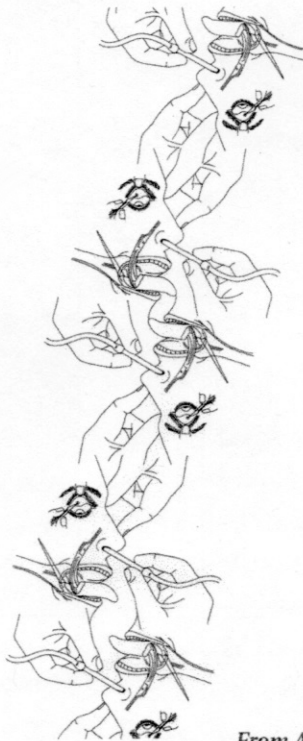
From Houston, Sharon Engelstein's "Models for Me" is a collection of drawings and small maquettes using the latest in CAD/CAM (computer-aided design/computer-aided manufacturing) technology. Both beautiful and absurd, these humorous models capitalize on viewer familiarity with computer graphics and architectural language. Mathematically precise, her line-drawings feature lacy orbs and oblong spheres joined in clusters by curving conduits. In these transparent renderings, the designs suggest plans for free-floating structures, like underwater or extraterrestrial habitats. When fleshed out and shaded, the forms appear solid and organic, even animate, like slugs, snails, or cartoon blobs.

Engelstein's maquettes, however, truly challenge the viewer's perceptions. At first glance, these bizarre and colorful objects seem to be futuristic models for machines or architectural projects. Made from what appear to be foam, plastic, and clear vinyl, these models have the smooth, rounded shape of what we imagine the future to look like. Closer inspection, however, exposes their nonsensical, utterly ridiculous pastiche of familiar design signatures — stairs go nowhere, while vents, railings, canopies, and exhaust tubing occur randomly. Metal-like armatures that seem to connect or support separate structures actually do neither.

How are we duped by these fakes that, being fraudulent models, are twice-faked? Engelstein's more pictorial objects let us in on the perceptual trick. In one piece, small blob-creatures are placed on an island under a red and white, striped umbrella. In an-



Objects by  
Sharon  
Engelstein



From Aya Ben  
Ron's "Strips"

other, a curious, white figure made of oblong shapes gazes at a flower. As with the Golem myth of the creature formed from mud, we are quick to read shapes as figures when they are placed in narrative contexts. Whether figurative, mechanistic, or architectural, images tend to be interpreted by reading identities or uses into what we see. Without actually being anything at all, these objects use a graphic lexicon to quickly lead us from one association to another. As simulacra, they offer a déjà vu of visual cues we are certain we've experienced before.

Instead of architectural models, London artist Aya Ben Ron challenges perception with models of the human body. Ben Ron's "Strips," shown in the Finesilver Gallery's Valve Room, engage viewers in different ways, depending on where you're standing. From a distance, the long, narrow sheets of milky plastic project web-like designs that snake downward in graceful curves. As the viewer approaches, these dense, beautiful systems open up into graphic depictions of surgical procedures. Hands, mouths, and eyeballs are poked, sliced, and sewn together in a cascade of clinical imagery made clean and crisp by computer-controlled lines.

Inspired by surgical manuals, Ben Ron's imagery is disembodied; we only see the parts being operated on. Decontextualized, the floating details are ripe for all sorts of combinations and transgressions. Hacksaws and scalpels slice at random, their placement governed by the horizontal or vertical effect on the overall drawing. Likewise, heads and hands tessellate up and down, side to side, in Escher-like alternations that form pleasing and symmetrical patterns. All of this careful arranging leads the viewer away from a literal reading of the models.

But what do we see if we scrutinize the seductive patterns? Multiple surgeries occur on the same body part; all involve cutting or pulling the body against its natural inclinations. Some of the instruments are poked into the body with no apparent benefit. In some vignettes, strange, unrecognizable organs are grafted onto external body parts; in others, cryptic insignia are carved into secret surfaces, e.g. under the eyelid. Is this invasiveness prescribed for health reasons, cosmetic alterations, or methodical torture? Are these surgeries performed on the same body? And what about the surgeon, whose perfectly shaped, seemingly benign hands orchestrate this floating gallery of horrors?

Of course, surgical manuals are not intended for laymen. Our imaginations run wild when we see such things; the world of the model can impinge on our ability to live in the real world. At a distance, Ben Ron's "Strips" look like the DNA double helix, an atomic model, or fancy embroidery. Maybe that's the relationship we'd prefer with such information: healthy, prosaic distance. Ben Ron and Engelstein construct elaborate ruses for the mind's eye, but trying to avoid models is the real trick, and a genuine folly.