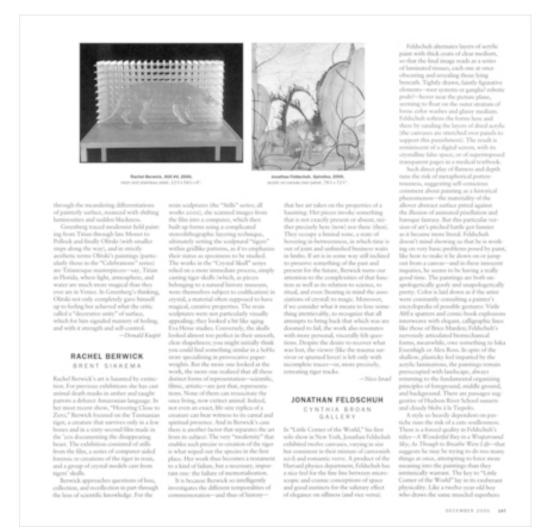
ARTFORUM



Rachel Berwick

SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO.

Rachel Berwick's art is haunted by extinction. For previous exhibitions she has cast animal death masks in amber and taught parrots a defunct Amazonian language. In her most recent show, "Hovering Close to Zero," Berwick focused on the Tasmanian tiger, a creature that survives only in a few bones and in a sixty-second film made in the '20s documenting the disappearing beast. The exhibition consisted of stills from the film, a series of computer-aided forensic re-creations of the tiger in resin, and a group of crystal models cast from tigers' skulls.

Berwick approaches questions of loss, collection, and recollection in part through the lens of scientific knowledge. For the resin sculptures (the "Stills" series; all works 2000), she scanned images from the film into a computer, which then built up forms using a complicated

stereolithographic layering technique, ultimately setting the sculptural "tigers" within gridlike patterns, as if to emphasize their status as specimens to be studied. The works in the "Crystal Skull" series relied on a more immediate process, simply casting tiger skulls (which, as pieces belonging to a natural history museum, were themselves subject to codification) in crystal, a material often supposed to have magical, curative properties. The resin sculptures were not particularly visually appealing; they looked a bit like aging Eva Hesse studies. Conversely, the skulls looked almost too perfect in their smooth, clear shapeliness; you might initially think you could find something similar in a SoHo store specializing in provocative paperweights. But the more one looked at the work, the more one realized that all these distinct forms of representation—scientific, filmic, artistic—are just that, representations. None of them can resuscitate the once living, now extinct animal. Indeed, not even an exact, life-size replica of a creature can bear witness to its carnal and spiritual presence. And in Berwick's case there is another factor that separates the art from its subject: The very "modernity" that enables such precise re-creation of the tiger is what wiped out the species in the first place. Her work thus becomes a testament to a kind of failure, but a necessary, important one: the failure of memorialization.

Let is because Berwick so intelligently investigates the different temporalities of commemoration—and thus of history—that her art takes on the properties of a haunting: Her pieces invoke something that is not exactly present or absent, neither precisely here (now) nor there (then). They occupy a liminal zone, a state of hovering in-betweenness, in which time is out of joint and unfinished business waits in limbo. If art is in some way still inclined to preserve something of the past and present for the future, Berwick turns our attention to the complexities of that function as well as its relation to science, to ritual, and even (bearing in mind the associations of crystal) to magic. Moreover, if we consider what it means to lose something irretrievably, to recognize that all attempts to bring back that which was are doomed to fail, the work also resonates with more personal, viscerally felt questions. Despite the desire to recover what was lost, the viewer (like the trauma survivor or spurned lover) is left only with incomplete traces—or, more precisely, retreating tiger tracks.

—<u>Nico Israel</u>