

ARMIN HARTENSTEIN

PALM-SIZED MOUNTAINS

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The artist Armin Hartenstein (b.1968), who studied under Fritz Schwegler at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, has developed a series of model-like objects in the group of sculptures entitled „Mes Amis de Emmanuel Bove“ that combines painting and abstract, three-dimensional fragments of material.

Over the course of time, Hartenstein has drastically reduced the dimensions of his works, which bear the unusual collective title based on MES AMIS, the first novel by the French writer Emmanuel Bove, published in 1924.

In the interim, the individual elements have shrunk to sizes between ten and thirty centimetres, whereby the precision of the painted section of the objects has increased.

In early installations, such as HONDA (2002) Hartenstein shifted the boundaries between nature and culture into the surreal realm, by cramming a whole collection of indigenous and exotic pot plants into a small car, until all that could be seen behind the windows, inside the car, was a jungle-like morass and a seemingly rank proliferation of vegetation. In works such as KLEINE WOLKE (2001) or VULKANINSEL (1999), he had already devoted himself to painterly models of fictional landscapes, presented as minute topographical studies in quasi-scientific cross sections.

In his most recent series of "Mes Amis de Emmanuel Bove", he contrasts the precise spaciality of painted volcanic craters, rock formations, deep valleys and gorges, luscious alpine meadows, and jagged mountain ridges with broken and frayed elements, made from wood or cardboard, and loosely attached by their edges. These initially alien and apparently disconnected elements actually, in which different ideas of landscape collide or become conjoined in a surprising manner.

In this way, it is apparently possible to recognise a few minute fir trees on a wooden edging of the object „Mes Amis de Emmanuel Bove XLI (Berchtesgaden)“, but upon closer inspection, they are revealed as fine wooden stems that have accidentally come to rest on the torn edge. This intrusion on the part of the abstract into the meticulously implemented and carefully outlined pictorial ensemble extends the potential of the representation in each individual piece in an unforeseen way. The incursion into the homogeneity and overall cohesion of the motif strengthens both the presence of the painting as well as the sculptural quality of the object.

The illustrations and representations of landscape, drawn on parts of the untreated wood using graphite, extend the topographies carried out in oils. In other objects, a photographic fragment adds a further dimension to the scenery suggested in the painterly design. In this way, Hartenstein condenses each one of his objects into a landscape phantasmagoria, the seemingly monumental scale of which contrasts starkly with its miniature dimensions. It remains a matter of speculation as to the extent to which these works are planned, in view of the conjunction of two fundamentally different systems of organization, i.e. the accidental protruding, fragmentary form of the rough, untreated material, and the perfection of the carefully painted surface. In their contradictory insularity, "Mes Amis de Emmanuel Bove" stand out from White Cube slickness and assert themselves with an equally grandiose and yet miniscule gesture.