

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS: MOLLY SMITH "WHETHER" AT KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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View of "Molly Smith," 2010.
From left: *Shell*, 2010; *Stand*, 2010; *Sink*, 2009.

For her third New York solo show—and her first at Kate Werble—Molly Smith grouped diminutive sculptures in casual table-bound cliques, with other, larger assemblages hugging the surrounding walls. Surprisingly evocative installation devices, these bases offered up their wares in a manner that highlighted the delicate formal specificity of each of Smith's structures, while simultaneously rendering the pieces all the more affective for their staged interrelations. For instance, the triangular, sail-like zenith of *Sink*, 2009, repeated the apex of the adjacent *Stand*, 2010; the former's cracked mirror base—though both wholly abstract and obdurately specific in its employment of this material—called to mind nothing so much as the undulating surface of water, whose hues reappeared as the color on *Stand's* aqueous membrane. Then there was the intricate *Shell*, 2010, a small crepe paper bowl resting alongside them; it recalled a toppled acorn, or, more to the theme perhaps, a beachcomber's prize, with an interior positioned to reveal a dense, quasi-geological moiré of striated concentric rings. Yet such a description (or associative train) risks overwhelming these objects, for the also insist on their distantiated relation to meaning as only, at best, loosely referential things, more evocative than even obliquely representational.

In this, Smith seems to take seriously her show's title, "Whether," a qualifying phrase that additionally suggests a position of doubt relative to two possibilities—as in, whether *x* or *y*, *z* still proves unlikely. She frames the issue in her accompanying statement: "Walking to my studio, a discarded object I pass on the sidewalk is transformed in my mind, eliciting narrative possibilities through its gesture, condition and context. I am drawn to the enigmatic possibilities of an accidental scene...The images waver between coming together in their specificity and falling apart in ambiguity. I explore this transition from image to abstraction, whole to part." Her work thus offers and retracts signification, more generally advocating for possibilities (i.e., whether a particular arrangement of objects or an interpretation might be viable, and under what conditions): a fiberglass fan crumpled just so over a wooden umbrella handle in *pour*, 2010, or the ingenious curvature of a fractured CD case in *Wing*, 2010. Indeed, her use of Hydrocal, a white gypsum cement, evidences an emphasis on making that displaces, or at least forestalls, incursions of exogenous meaning—or meaning apart from finding manipulating, and making.

Smith uses such quotidian mainstays as plastic bags and paper coffee cups as molds, and she dyes the plaster as it is being cast. The resulting pieces appear to be sketches in three

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dimensions. This tentative, ultimately vulnerable quality recalls the work of Eva Hesse, whose own ostensibly “non-connotive” paper, tape, and cheesecloth test pieces—christened “studioworks” by Briony Fer—were laid out on surfaces reminiscent of worktables at Hauser & With in New York this past spring. Made in the late 1960s, they summon allusions to skin and anatomical parts (often quite literally, sometimes appearing to have been formed according to the precise contours of a body) while actively disavowing the biographical and biological anthropomorphism that this reading elicits. I couldn’t stop thinking of them while looking at Smith’s works, as they, too, articulate a rare openness regarding form and of meaning’s only provisional but still possible opposition to it—or at least a desire to have it both ways.

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