

September 2009

LUCY SKAER

KUNSTHALLE BASEL

by Chris Sharp

Basel Lucy Skaer's exhibition "A Boat Used as a Vessel" consisted of three new installations (2009), a fourth from 2008 and a scattering of earlier works, all characterized by an austere beauty and a sense of meaning being withheld. Like the other installations, *Fabrication*, located in the first room, combined objects and works on paper—here a series of large-scale monotypes hung around an antique wooden



table with removable leaves. The prints, pulled from the surface of the inked table, consist of varying, serial-like arrangements of black rectangles. Here and there one can just discern a comma beneath the black, suggesting the repression of language. In the same room an untitled work presented two large-scale watercolors with aluminum leaf, and a half dozen wooden triangles seemingly tossed on the floor before them, like runes. Similar triangles appear in the paintings, along with a group of figures never explained and difficult to read, given the brightness of the white paper support and the reflectiveness of the aluminum leaf.

Further on, the small sculptural group *Solid Ground—Liquid to Solid in 85 Years* (2006), a group of circular and semicircular painted plaster objects resembling broken tops or fragments of architectural fittings, again arranged on the floor, are in fact Rorschach blot shapes fabricated in three dimensions.

Leviathan Edge features two wall-size multi-medium drawings and a minke whale skeleton on loan from a local natural history museum. Four white partitions with small gaps between them blocked physical access, allowing only glimpses of the artifact. Meticulously composed of small dark squares in graphite embellished with felt-tip-pen curlicues, the accompanying drawings nestle repeating screenprinted images of whale skeletons within segmented and abstract fields. Hovering on the threshold of legibility, the whales come and go as if decomposing and recomposing within their surroundings.

In the final room, *The Siege* (2008) was bounded on one side by a massive, crescent-shaped cinder-block wall, and featured a spare configuration of antique wooden tables accompanied by the monotypes they produced. In this case, the tabletops had been carved to print zeros and a hand. The installation also included sculptural forms copped from Constantin Brancusi and Paul Nash. A black wooden *Bird in Space*, for example, was multiplied in two groups—one consisting of around a dozen standing Birds and the other a pile of them stacked, like ammunition. Nash's painting *Landscape from a Dream* (1936-38) is cited in another object in the installation—a wooden folding screenlike object with open panels, which felt like an isolated grammatical element. Clearly trading in linguistic syntax, this installation nevertheless demonstrated a resistance to language, at once demanding and confounding interpretative engagement.