



LOS ANGELES
JOAN BACKES
 LA CONTEMPORARY

The ostensible subject of Joan Backes's paintings and multimedia installations is trees. During the last decade she has made rubbings from actual trees, painted exquisitely detailed studies of various tree barks, laminated leaves for floor pieces, constructed stick and bamboo "houses," fabricated trees from lumber and huts from recycled commercial paper. This exhibition, "Trees and Houses," included two human-scaled structures as well as several near-photorealistic bark renderings. Ranging from Minimalist-inspired elongated planks painted to simulate birch to modestly sized acrylic paintings on panel, all entail tightly cropped close-ups of textured bark sections, in surprising shades of mauve, icy blues, peach, green gray, browns and yellows. Swarms of meandering lines and intricate patterns yield pleasurable painterly abstractions but also describe various species in the manner of rigorously observed scientific illustration.

The conversation between science and esthetics is taken even further in Paper House (2007) – a white, faintly glowing structure clad in shaggy shredded recycled paper. With its orderly illuminated vitrines and built-in recessed shelves, the interior mimics the institutional atmosphere of a museum or laboratory. Once

inside, visitors can hear musical interpretations of wind blowing through trees, draw trees on a chalkboard, and view black and white negatives that resemble X-rays of tree bark, magnified amber, cutaway slices of bubbly baked earth, petrified wood, exotic pods and dioramas of ancient forests. Still other niches contain small artworks and implements made from natural and manmade materials: trees made from computer wire, miniature conifers fashioned from junk mail and newspaper pulp, a chromatic mobile of laminated tree leaves, and bound stacks of drawings of trees on velum executed by various people selected by the artist.

Similarly, Cardboard House (2008) is built from neatly overlapping shingles of colorful corrugated cardboard decorated with vivid commercial images and texts referencing nature. Inside, four videos present diverse perceptual approaches to trees, ranging from old-master paintings to clichéd mass-media images of the changing seasons and enlargements of bark taken with electron microscopes. Backes's near-encyclopedic foray into the esthetic, scientific, commercial, ecological, historical, and poetic experience of trees adds up to a meditation on symbiosis. By moving the dialogue beyond a romanticized tradition, she hints that we might begin to see the forest for the trees.

--Constance Mallinson

Joan Backes: Left, *Cardboard House*, 2008; right, *Paper House*, 2007, each approx. 9 by 8 by 9 feet; at L.A. Contemporary.