



NEW YORK SEATTLE

ARTFORUM

Julie Speidel

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DONALD KUSPIT



Julie Speidel, *Otemma Glacier*, 2016, stainless steel, overall 3' 8" x 10' 3 1/2" x 4' 1"

Seen out of context—within the gallery's whitewashed walls rather than on the lush green grounds of Vashon Island, Washington, where they were made—Julie Speidel's twelve sculptures became exquisitely intricate abstractions and, with that, lost something of their larger meaning and purpose, if not their aesthetic magic. They were meant to be seats or resting places, according to the local Chamber of Commerce website, on "the little piece of paradise"—a sort of *hortus conclusus*—that is Vashon Island. The three boulder-like geometric objects in *Otemma Glacier*, 2016, were the exception that proved the rule. *Amukta*, *Orenas*, and *Porirua*, all 2017, were benches; the rest looked like stools (including *Sanibel Bench*, 2009, its name notwithstanding.) A particularly notable piece that showcased the sculptures' double meaning as autonomous, abstract objects and familiar functional furniture was *Binifat*, 2017, which

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has two vertical ends, one of them pregnant with a large curvilinear form. We were not invited to sit on this strangely self-contained work, but it seemed to have its own intimate character. The sculpture is made entirely of white marble speckled with brown, as though to signal the earth from which it came, and rests on a brown base made of wood from Bugina, a province in the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, it could just as well have done without the base, which didn't appear to be an integral part. In contrast, other works did need a foundation: Without the earth-brown bronze that forms the legs of *Porirua*, the construction would fall apart. The same is true for the integral slabs of walnut and ash that support the marble in *Naeba* and *Nantai*, both 2017.

Speidel is acutely sensitive to materials, textures, and tones—dark and light matter, hard stone and soft wood, rough and raw, smooth and refined. The polished black limestones of (3) *Pods*, 2009, and *Sanibel Bench*, which glisten as they absorb light, are in dramatic contrast. But however much one can be “awakened by the experience of nature . . . sitting on one of the benches made from the elements of the earth,” as Speidel says, and despite that the works were made on Vashon Island, they also bespeak a wider geographical imaginary. *Otemma Glacier's* eponymous geological reference is located in the Pennine Alps in the canton of Valais in Switzerland. Amukta is a volcanic island in the Aleutian chain, Naeba and Nantai are sacred mountains in Japan, and Örenäs is an enormous Baroque-style castle in Sweden—all suggesting that Speidel has traveled far beyond her insular island to venerated sites and special “elevated” places (most geologically hallowed, some culturally revered) in pursuit of some kind of spiritual enlightenment. Each sculpture is a milestone on a pilgrimage. Art is a means, not an end; however, many of the artist's works are ends in and of themselves.

Speidel's creations also have an important place in the history of so-called furniture sculpture. Their romance with nature, rich materiality, contrasting light (marble) and dark (wood), and spiritual import make them distinctive within a diverse corpus that also includes the artful decor of Donald Judd, Mary Heilmann, and Franz West, among others. Along with Scott Burton's comparable oeuvre—which also is eloquently abstract and functional, uses stone (granite) and bronze, and is deeply personal—Speidel's work signals that the hybrid of furniture and art can be active and engaging.

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