



(2002)

Falling Into The Whole

There is a theory that madness, like emotion, results from sensory overload. Information floods in so fast that it is stripped of its referents, its place in the system, and can no longer be classified or sensibly arranged. This September/October, Julie Becker debuted the first fragment of her massive, in-progress installation, *Whole*, at Greene Naftali: a 28-minute film (*Whole Film 2002*) and an accompanying series of drawings. The film contains elements of a sculptural installation that has yet to be realized in a gallery setting, but evolved from the space in which she was living for nearly three years.

Becker, the enfant-terrible stepchild of Los Angeles neoconceptual art, debuted with great acclaim (at Sao Paolo, the Tate, and Regan Projects Gallery in Los Angeles) with a similarly complex installation begun while she was an MFA student at CalArts called *Residents & Researchers* (1993–1996). *Residents*—which spanned several rooms to recreate an investigation into the lives of certain, residents, in an old SRO type hotel—somewhat (in its messiness) evoked Jason Rhodes, and somewhat (in its complexity) recalled the works of Jessica Stockholder. Yet it was neither. SRO's—single room occupancy hotels—are a dying breed of cheap transient housing once found in all large American cities. They were the last stop before homelessness—the place where the functionally crazy, the drunk and the poor could rent a cheap sin-

gle room with a lock and a door. Becker—whose own childhood was marked by similar transience—was fascinated by the lives of these occupants. Who were they? What were their histories? The piece combined a Balzacian zeal to excavate urban archeology through fiction, and a very postmodern willingness to acknowledge the strange penetrations and crossed subjectivities that occurred in the body and mind of the researcher herself. When Becker completed the work, she was 24 years old.

Whole tells us what happened after. Becker, embarked on a career as an upcoming young Los Angeles artist, rented a bungalow house with a cellar to use as a studio in Echo Park, a soon-to-be-gentrified section of inner LA. Owned by a bank—which was Becker's original landlord—the house was tied up in a Dickensian series of lawsuits, while sliding ever deeper into the shallow mud on which it was built. Her predecessor in the house had recently died there: a gay man who did some kind of stained-glass craft for a living, before dying of AIDS. The man had lived in the cellar, and when Becker arrived all his stuff was still there. "Clean the space out," said the bank, "and you can use it for free ..."

Except she never actually did. There was cheap wood-paneling everywhere, and a strange Tiki Bar built into the wall—the kind of shingled bar set up by a poolside to sell tropical drinks. He'd hung up a sign over one wall that said, *If You Can Keep Your Head In All This Confusion You Just Don't Understand The Situation*. The bar seemed to Julie like an alchemical thing, and since she was studying astral travel, it occurred to her the bar might be *used* as a metaphysical-alchemical lab ... The windows upstairs looked out through a park to some highrise buildings, and the CalFed bank, with its helicopter-landing pad on the roof, was at the center of that. Going up and down between the house and the cellar, Becker began to experience some affective connections between the city control-grid out the window and the chaos downstairs.

What I am trying to say is, that while *Residents & Researchers* drew a schematic map of urban experience—that conflux of architecture, real-estate commerce, and the litter of real people's lives—in *Whole*, she psychically penetrates it. Becker enters the conflux, so you can no longer tell what's outside and what's in. She builds a scale model of the CalFed Bank building. She cuts a hole in the floor between the cellar and living room. She repositions the bank from its fixed place outside her window, brings into her room as a model, and then hoists it on pulleys down into the pit. It is that wonderful moment of madness after everything's been ripped loose from its moorings and floats, before the anguish and suffering start to set in. The faux-grandeur of commerce and the constriction of poverty exist on the same plane, both are equally present. Art as a form of astral travel between social realms ...

Whole, which by its very definition may never be actually "finished," is painful, ecstatic and dangerous. While much contemporary installation art presents a cosmetic chaos, Becker is reinventing process art for her generation ... that thing, that once it's begun attains a life of its own, and you don't know where it will go.