

ELLEN DRISCOLL AND FERNANDO SOUTO

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SMACK MELLON

by *jean dykstra*

NEW YORK CITY In "FastForwardFossil: Part 2," Ellen Driscoll turned from her earlier historical and political subjects to environmental concerns, specifically the unbridled consumption of oil and water. Cutting up plastic from 2,600 #2 water bottles (the #2 signifying that they are made of high-density polyethylene, which, like many plastics, is petroleum-based), she fashioned of the non-biodegradable material a room-spanning landscape dotted with miniature structures. At one end was a 19th-century-style trestle bridge. Further on was a water-powered mill (a reference to early industry in the U.S.) and, beyond, an oil refinery. Scattered throughout were abandoned buildings, trailer homes, shacks and the splintered remains of trees cut down to make way for industrial progress. Shreds of labels (Poland Spring, mostly) were visible here and there. Landscape elements included solid expanses meant to suggest landmasses (North America, the Middle East and Africa), and interconnected hexagonal-shaped pieces symbolizing water molecules. The overall effect of the ghostly, translucent, 28-foot-long sculpture was of a barren world drained of life and color.

Five large drawings (each 80 by 72 inches) focused specifically on oil refineries and the havoc they wreak. In muddy, washed-out gray and brown ink on paper, Driscoll loosely portrays structural rigging, deforested lands and polluted, turbulent bodies of water. Each drawing presents disorienting shifts in scale. In one, gridded with gray electrical tape, tiny helicopter-like aircraft hover in the distant sky. The large stem of a plant grows past a tangle of pipes, in what seems to be a last, doomed attempt at survival. Another drawing shows a refinery reflected upside down in water darkened by threads of oil spreading from a spill. Taken together, the installation and the drawings evoked a foreboding wasteland of the future, not unlike the one described in Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*.

In the smaller rear gallery were black-and-white photographs by Fernando Souto of cattle ranches in the U.S. (where he lives), Uruguay (where he was born) and Australia (where he was raised), documenting a way of life that is gradually fading. In a statement, Souto notes that, before embarking on this series, "my thoughts of ranch life were mostly filled with romantic ideals of freedom and independence. I had no concept of the harsh environment that the ranchers lived and worked in." The photographs on view here, though, remain imbued with a sense of romance and adventure. Among the images are one of a lone horse under a vast sky and another of ranchers branding a calf beneath a dusty sun. The pictures almost suggest old Marlboro ads. They are handsome, but they do little to disturb the mythology of the cowboy.

Photo (left): Fernando Souto: U02, 2002, silver gelatin print, 145/8 by 22 inches; at Smack Mellon.