

Art in America

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ERIC WOLF

AT JESSICA FREDERICKS

There is an engaging quality to Eric Wolf's recent black-and-white works—seven midsize oil paintings and two ink drawings on paper. Wolf works in a limited palette—black on a white ground. The relation of positive and negative spaces makes one think of woodcut, as though the white in his paintings were those areas cut away from a block, and the blacks were the remaining raised portions that pick up the ink.

While Wolf takes recognizable subjects—trees, clouds, Chinese scholars' rocks—as his starting point, it is often a work's title that allows us to interpret the shapes. His canvases are filled with flurries of undulating forms that alternate between a represented subject and an abstract pattern. In *Pine*, for instance, one can safely make out parts of three tree trunks with protruding branches on the right side of the canvas. Other marks proliferate with such abandon that one is hard pressed to decipher them. In wolf's work—as in traditional woodcut—subtleties of shading and form are absent.

Cornered Tree Tops makes clear the artist's strategy in its title. The few trees huddle in a corner, while the canvas is dominated by tightly curving black forms. We can call them "clouds" or "sky" but feel no immediate need to do so. This painting has a discernible momentum to the shapes. A predominantly black swath moves from the lower left corner to the midpoint of the right side of the canvas, then continues up to the middle of the top edge.

Two paintings of Chinese scholars' rocks are at once more defined and less readable than the landscapes. The titles help us recognize a white band across the bottom as a table, black background as space, and the undulating, pockmarked form



Eric Wolf: *Perforated Vertical Stone in the Form of a Dancing Figure*, 1997, oil on canvas, 48 by 35 inches; at Jessica Fredericks.

as a rock. Wolf strips his subjects of their evocative subtlety, rendering them in Pop-like simplification, though his hard edges look hand-painted and lack mechanical precision. If Wolf were to become more precise in his mark-making, his works might lose some of the raw energy they now possess.

— Vincent Katz