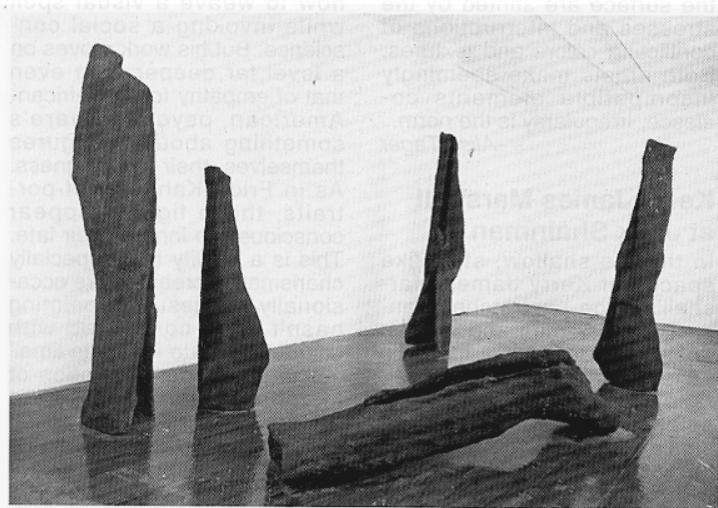


Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK



Tova Beck-Friedman: View of *Homage to Ashera*, 1992, ferro-cement with black pigment; at Bill Bace.

Tova Beck-Friedman at Bill Bace

Tova Beck-Friedman titled her show "Excerpts of a Lost Forest" and suggested in an exhibition handout that her theme was archetypal images that connect the feminine to nature. Her installation *Homage to Ashera*, making reference to the Hebrew mother-goddess revered in groves, consisted of five tree trunks made of ferro-cement over a steel mesh armature, four of them standing and one reclining, each partially split to reveal a dark, hollow interior and to suggest decay.

The various gashes, knot-holes and other openings in the sculptures read as vaginal. What's interesting is that this allusion was sustained without the aid of sensuous surfaces or suggestive color and without in any way falsifying the tree

forms. The five elements would be unremarkable if one came upon them in a forest. They were set apart from typical dead trees only by their blackish-gray matte coloration and their raspy, cementy, entirely uninviting textures (an honest expression of the material) that one was not much inclined to touch. Yet the erotic association persisted. Slit openings seem to be as instantly referential as protrusions that look phallic or as the three dots that are sufficient to suggest the human face.

Once the viewer made the connection, the forms could be read on both micro and macro scales as simultaneously genitalia and figure. As figures, the vertical pieces suggested familiar postures—standing with legs spread, for instance. The reclining form arched upward in the middle, in a straining, yearning position.

Beck-Friedman also showed five black-and-white "tablets" consisting of photographs mounted on board. Each portrayed the same sort of squirrel hole one could see in the sculptures, and in each case all of the photographic surface except for this center of interest was covered with black netting or canvas along with sooty gunk that was as repellent as the skin of the tree sculptures. The shape and contour of the hole shown in the photograph was reiterated in the surface manipulation. One looked through the physical layering into the illusionistic image.

Janet Koplos