Boundary I, 2007. Glass. H 7 ½, W 25 ½, D 12 in.
PHOTO: JONAS LINDSTRÖM
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Bertil Vallien

"Black"
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A dark sense of urgency pervades Bertil Vallien's new body of work. It's less the slow, global-warming variety of creeping doom, and more the desperate, George Bush, "Mission Accomplished" version—a dire, immediate need to reassure that everything is okay, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Buried deep within Vallien's oily black landscapes is a sincere seed of hope, a glimmer of faith in the versatility and ingenuity of mankind to sort things out in the end.

With his "Black" series, Vallien breaks out of his long-established form—the sculptural encasement of captured images in glass. In some ways less self-consciously primitive than his earlier work, these pockmarked noir landscapes are recognizable but not realistic; they exude an aura of otherworldliness. These are vacant, abandoned topographies reduced to experiment and calculation, poked and parlayed by unnatural intrusion and handling. Edges are punched by blocks of empty space. Bleak terrain is marked in an attempt to control both atmosphere and neighbor. Cut with the geometry of abode, these new cropped and partitioned tableaus flirt with the fine line between abstraction and representation.

Nobody sand-casts glass better. In *Boundary I* (all works discussed are from 2007), we see clearly the depth of Vallien's understanding of the medium. Using sand's inherent fissures and fickleness, its ability to take even the finest mark from the maker, Vallien displays extraordinary finesse and finds room for expression through ingenious virtuosity.

Be it home, heaven, or headstone, the division of space in these works is often misdirected. In the plotting of this land we find fences erected not only between properties but also delineating the old and the new, the past and the future. Fine dots denote pathways, the history of movement across the Earth's surface as depicted in a thick black glass slab. Conquest is a familiar theme in Vallien's work, and in the "Ararat" series his familiar boat form returns to offer sanctuary.

The game board composition of *Desert Snow II* is an attempt at establishing rules in which a bright red, seemingly seaworthy pawn floats across the "playing field" like a lone flare sent out to survey a battlefield. The alarming color of this element contrasts sharply with its support, and we anticipate its next move. An iridized powder-blue coating, sparingly sprinkled over the surface like freshly fallen snow, seduces the eye to explore this cold, twilight landscape.

In *Tension III* we find a foreign polished-glass orb that contrasts sharply with the rough terrain. Apparently fallen from the sky, it is an unexpected intrusion into the neatly arranged row of houses built up to the point of the alien form's impact. We witness some attempt at understanding the disruption, inducing thoughts of escape, reconciliation, and cohabitation.

Vallien's new body of work is increasingly proactive and drives to change rather than simply reflect. His color is less chromatic than in the past, and Vallien utilizes a greater variety of materials, such as the pairing of glass and a painted back panel. While at times this mixing of materials feels incongruous, at other times it is highly effective, as in the inclusion and placement of a block of wood in *Desert Snow III*. Vallien exhibits a desire to learn from the too-often-repeated mistakes of the past. By celebrating alternatives through language and touch, change and accord, he is seeking to point the way to a better place.

A New York City-based artist, writer, and teacher, JOHN DRURY is one-half of the art duo CUD, a 20-year collaboration.