

MARKY

Julian Hoerber: "The Strange and Mysterious Case of Demon Hill"

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Julian Hoerber, *Demon Hill* (2010). Mixed media installation. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles. From Hammer

Projects: Julian Hoerber. October 30, 2010 through January 23, 2011. Installation at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Heather Rasmussen. Image Source: Blum and Poe

Art can play with our perception, it can affect the way we see things, and the way we think about things. And sometimes, at least on the surface, it just doesn't make any sense. When Minimalism is considered complex, ugly art is considered beautiful, and beautiful art is considered boring, the world can seem a little upside down.

Los Angeles-based artist Julian Hoerber plays with our perception on a gut level in his work *Demon Hill*, which showed at the UCLA Hammer Museum in 2011. From the outside, the work is a sculpture in the form of a wooden box the size of a large room, built at an angle with a steel armature. It is pretty raw, just unvarnished wood, nails, and metal—but the magic happens when you walk inside it.

At first, the inside of *Demon Hill* looks like a pretty normal, unfinished wood room. But once you enter, your sense of balance and gravity goes crazy. Because the room is built at a steep angle, and even though you know that is the case, nothing can prepare you for how off-balance you will feel. Our brains automatically think that the right angles, verticals and horizontals we see are level, but it does not feel right. When you stand up straight, you look like you are balancing at an impossible angle, about to topple over at any moment.

These women are not balancing, merely standing up straight. Because the camera is lined up to the

walls and floor (which are themselves built at an extreme angle), it just LOOKS like these people are performing an impossible balancing act.

Hoeber includes a few props in *Demon Hill* to underscore how this illusion plays crazy tricks with our minds—in one instance, he has balanced a mannequin on the edge of a chair. He also built a shelf with a handy glass of water – when you pour water on the shelf it looks like it flows upwards. Feel like you need to sit down? Hoeber has anticipated that too. There's a chair in the corner in case you start to experience vertigo (which many viewers do).

The name “Demon Hill” sounds like a roadside attraction, and in fact Hoeber is referencing a long history of “mystery spots” that exist in the US. Billed as “gravitational anomalies” or natural occurrences (rather than what they actually are—man-made illusions), these “mystery spots” lure in road-trippers and curious tourists to experience this phenomenon.

In New York, Minimalist artists of the 1960s and 70s like Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Dan Flavin and Frank Stella really stripped down their sculptures and paintings into very simple forms – boxes, white canvases, black lines, even bars of neon light. Because of its simplicity, minimalism brought awareness to its context – it made people looking at the artwork very aware of its material, and their own bodies as they moved around the artwork. On the west coast this was called the Light and Space movement, and was a bit more playful – it included a lot of using light and optical illusions that messed with peoples’ perception on an even more gut level.

Hoeber added plenty of references to this generation of artists who influenced him, if you know where to look. Long neon lights forming the “ceiling” of *Demon Hill* look like Dan Flavin, Robert Morris used a lot of raw wood to make his forms (and encouraged people to play around with them), and the boxy outside form of *Demon Hill* is reminiscent of a big Donald Judd box. The young artist is tipping his hat to his forebears...but then totally pushing viewer perception to an extreme.