

Magenta Magazine – Rocks, Stones, and Dust



Rocks, Stones, and Dust

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Toronto

On view until December 18, 2015

“Common sense” still said that the earth was a sacred living being, the mother of life. Her skin was the soil; her bloodstream the rivers and her breath the wind. Her soul lived in stone and the bones of the ancestors under the ground.”[1]

Rocks transcend their material qualities, whether they are found on the land or held in our hands. They are representative of the profound ways in which life is always, in essence, relational. The artists in *Rocks, Stones, and Dust* remind us of this, including various perspectives on how we can “learn from stones, rather than [simply] about them.”[2]

My desire to write about this exhibition stemmed largely from seeing one of its focal artworks—Jimmie Durham’s photograph *Self-Portrait Pretending to be a Stone Statue of Myself* (2006)—which I have not been able to get out of my head. The image is given a central location in the University of Toronto Art Centre, claiming significant space for a relatively small two-dimensional work that portrays Durham outdoors holding a rock in front of his face. His self-proclaimed “self-portrait” effectively demonstrates

John G. Hampton's curatorial premise for the exhibition: the point that "stone is not material but [instead] subject." [3] The work also evidences Durham's belief in the "communicative potential already present in stone," [4] such as the fact that stones "carry histories, stories, and essence" in their very form and make-up. [5] More importantly, though, Durham's portrait acts as a poetic prompt, one that asks us to (re)consider "the power of stone to inspire respect for [both] its known and unknown properties." [6]

So what exactly is at stake in understanding the loaded implications of rocks, stones, boulders and their composites? What can we draw from art historian David Garneau's description of them as "site[s] of ontological reflection" [7]?

The stones that outline the base of my childhood home in Weston (Toronto) originate from the Humber River that flows southwards beside our house. These stones—once submerged in rushing waters called "The Carrying Place," travelled by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years—now serve as fixed architectural features for a settler family home. Demonstrating Hampton's thinking that "rocks aren't eternal," my story of domestic stones' geneses points to the complex knowledge that they inherently hold, as they "erode, aggregate, sediment, metamorphose... are carried, carved, deposited, dissolved, shattered; and... are named, pictured, mapped, and prayed on." [8] Indeed, rocks are "mobile, changing, and alive," [9] and as such, offer us much to learn.

How can we listen to rocks more closely? How do we access the intrinsic knowledge that they hold? Marcelo Moscheta's installation *Parallel 45N* (2015) offers us a pertinent example, displaying a geological collection of stones gathered along the American/Canadian border to emphasize an invisible space of statelessness—the midpoint between both nations, also known as the 45th Parallel North. Notably, each collected stone is presented as a unique specimen spanning the distance of an entire gallery wall, tagged with its precise GPS location and catalogued as distinct coordinates representative of statelessness. Garneau reminds us that much of the USA-Canadian border is "an unnatural division, not marked, for example, by a river or geologic divide, [but rather] performed by human agreement [such as] math, treaty, mapping, and behavior." [10] Moscheta's installation emphasizes this fact, using stones as witnesses to related acts of human division and colonization.

The late Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetok's stoneworks *MOTHER WITH CHILDREN, MOTHER AND CHILDREN, FACES, MOTHER AND CHILD, GROUP OF PEOPLE, and FAMILY* (from late 1970s to early 1990s) also function as witnesses. Presented together in a vitrine and meant to contain a unified scene, Tutsweetok's subtle carving and arrangement of family members stems from "the various effects and stories of environmental circumstance found already inscribed on her source rocks." [11] Discovered around her home in Arviat, which is the southernmost community on the Nunavut mainland, Tutsweetok's minimal sculptural interventions on the stone emphasize forms already existing in the material, proving Hampton's point that "stones carry a unique impression of the world" [12] and thus have much to say. He elaborates, "stones have history inscribed within them as much as they do on their surface: they are pressed in sequential layers, ordered according to geological movement, environmental forces, human intervention, and chemical interactions." [13] With this perspective, we can

look to Tutsweetok's pieces as telling of the ways in which rock compositions along Nunavut and the Northwest Territories have changed over time, especially in accordance with territorial expansion, resource extraction and environmental contamination—all of which are interrelated and ongoing processes of colonialism.

While rocks have served as sacred sites, navigational tools, defensive weapons, and industrial material over time and across cultures, their histories also involve spiritual significance, in particular, for Indigenous cultures who view rocks akin to grandfathers.[14] Garneau elaborates on this perspective in his exhibition essay, explaining that rocks are indeed 'animate' and represent important archives of knowledge.[15] Michael Belmore's installation *Smoulder* (2010) proposes this notion, suggesting that the age-old practice of building a fire is similar to the omni-presence of stones around the world. Appearing as a pristine pile on the gallery floor, each crevice in between the stones looks as though enflamed, inlaid as they are with copper in order to suggest their "being-ness" as keepers of insight.

Rocks simultaneously combine geologic narratives, geographic histories and Indigenous epistemologies. As such, Hampton uses the phrase "rocks and their relations" as "a material and conceptual framework for understanding interconnectedness." [16] Garneau describes them as "repositories of experience," [17] which suggests their need for much closer readings. Though the space of this review prevents me from exploring each artwork in greater detail, I hope to have illuminated some of the overarching considerations Hampton's project asks of me—which are many.

[1] Anne Bishop, *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression*, 3rd ed., Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2015, 26.

[2] John G. Hampton, "Contemporary Rock Art," *Rocks, Stone and Dust* exhibition essay, Toronto: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and University of Toronto Art Centre, November 2015, 4.

[3] Ibid 12.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid 4.

[6] Ibid 18.

[7] David Garneau, "Rocks, Stones, and Grandfathers," exhibition essay, Toronto: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, November 2015, 1-2. <http://www.rocksstonesdust.com/>

[8] Hampton 2.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Garneau 2.

[11] Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetok, artist statement for *MOTHER WITH CHILDREN; MOTHER AND CHILDREN; FACES; MOTHER AND CHILD; GROUP OF PEOPLE; FAMILY* (late 1970s to early 1990s), accessed at <http://rocksstonesdust.com/#artists>

[12] Hampton 19.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Garneau 2.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Hampton 5.

[17] Garneau 2.

Ellyn Walker is a writer and curator based between Toronto (Tkaronto) and Kingston (Cataraqui), on Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Wendat land. Her work is informed by critical art history, decolonial theory and anti-racist methodologies, and focuses on modes of cross-cultural engagement within the arts as potential sites for resistance, re-imagination and (re)conciliation between Indigenous peoples and diverse settler communities. Her writing has been published in such venues as *Prefix Photo*, *PUBLIC Journal*, *Fuse Magazine*, the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *BlackFlash* and *C Magazine*, among others. Ellyn is currently a PhD student in Cultural Studies at Queen's University where she looks at the politics of alliance in contemporary curatorial and artistic practices.