

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Michelle Stuart:
Book of the Stone,
1984-85, earth from
Machu Picchu,
Hydrocal cover,
brown wax, linen and
muslin mounted on
paper, 9 by 9 by 2½
inches; at the Santa
Barbara Museum
of Art.

MICHELLE STUART

Santa Barbara Museum of Art

Ever since the late 1960s, Michelle Stuart has been radically expanding the idea of drawing. “Michelle Stuart: Drawn from Nature,” a traveling survey of about 60 works organized by Anna Lovatt for the Djanogly Art Gallery, Nottingham, UK, uses works on paper to touch on the artist’s interests in ecological history, mapping, nautical exploration and what she calls the “archeology of nature.”

Unlike Land art peers such as Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim, Stuart doesn’t alter the sites she works with. Typically temporary, her interactions with the landscape result in photographic documentation, rubbings and relic samples of earth, rock and minerals. She is perhaps best known for graphite scrolls on muslin-backed paper that incorporate bits of earth and the impressions of terrain, getting us close to the rich textures and colors of stones and dirt.

Serving as a kind of source library for the work shown here, a vitrine of “Specimens” (1968-ongoing) included sticks and remains of bones, as well as glass bottles of dirt identified on labels as “Nepal,” “Mesa Verde” and “New Zealand.” Among her early works are investigations of large-scale actions in nature. Represented in the exhibition by video documentation, “Niagara Gorge Path Relocated” (1975) involved running a 460-foot rubbing on paper down an escarpment at Artpark, near Lewiston, N.Y. Layered with applied earth, the scroll marked a point where Niagara Falls had flowed centuries earlier. Photos and drawings also stand in for *Solstice Cairns* (1978-79), a ritualistic circle of stones and cairns 100 feet in diameter on a site overlooking the Columbia River in rural Washington.

Stuart’s far-flung travels have taken her to Guatemala, Morocco, Finland, Bali and the Galapagos, resulting in works that respond to exotic surroundings with a kind of hands-on sensuousness. Small sculptures in the form of books, fully encrusted with earth and wax, stand as journal-like artifacts of her encounters with nature. With its gnarly cover of hydrocal, *Book of the Stone* (1984-85) is embossed with symbolic markings and coated with earth from Machu Picchu. It seems the record of a buried history conjured from a now-inscrutable ancient civilization.

For the “Seed Calendars” (1992-93), Stuart used stockpiled seeds she had gathered from sites, gridding them on rice paper and heating them to pop open and release their nutrients. These exploded life forces torque in a positive direction the idea of the daily calendrical grind.

Many of Stuart’s works are animated by her fantastical imagination. Spun off from the writings of Herman Melville and Captain James Cook, her “Sacred Precincts” (1984) include a map drawing of imaginary South Seas islands and a photo documenting an installation of artist-made relics strewn along the Nantucket shore. These tools and ship fragments were made to seem as if they were the wreckage of a fictional 19th-century whaler ship. Documented in a photograph, a 1985 installation on a tiny Finnish island related to the voyages of the Vikings, featuring a ceremonial, boat-shaped arrangement of boulders surrounded by candles and crowned by an elk skull figurehead. Using historical fact and fiction as she sees fit, Stuart responds intuitively to exotic locales in artworks that tap the poetic mystery of nature.

—Michael Duncan