

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

### MICHELLE STUART LESLIE TONKONOW AND SALOMON CONTEMPORARY

Michelle Stuart's long-standing engagement with the natural world is governed by a grace, and formal discipline, that have not flagged in 40 years. A two-gallery sampling of work ranging from the late 1960s to the present—her first solo appearance in New York since 1999—demonstrated the vigor with which Stuart continues to negotiate relationships of scale between discrete art objects and immeasurable landscapes, and to urge attention to the frailty of the natural world.

The earliest work, the 1968 *Earth Diptych* (shown at Tonkonow), consists of a two-chambered pine box containing red Georgia dirt: a kind of rough homage to Joseph Cornell, it is a little memory palace for the ground beneath our feet. Among other early works at Tonkonow was the majestic *#28 Moray Hill* (1974), a gleaming sheet of graphite-heavy muslin-mounted paper that drapes onto the floor. Like *Sayreville Quarry History* (1976), a book-shaped compilation of flesh-colored pages into which rusty earth has been pressed, it suggests itself as a peeled section of the planet's skin. In a recent interview, Stuart said, "I often have thought about how those early works are like etchings," the dirt- and rock-scored paper holding the pigment as if the sheets had been pressed to an inked plate. A surprise among the early works is *Moon* (1969), a finely detailed pencil drawing of the pocked lunar surface. Made the year of the first moon walk, it has a preternatural clarity reminiscent of Vija Celmins's drawings of oceans and outer space.

Of the newer works shown at Tonkonow, the most commanding included *Trajectory of Evolutionary Correspondences* (2009-10) and *Ring of Fire* (2010), which both combine grids of altered inkjet photographs of various natural formations with metal tables containing natural and handmade artifacts. In the first, the objects include a desiccated horned toad and seeds in beeswax bowls; there are baskets, cloth and stones from the South Pacific in the second.

Recent photo-based works were also shown at Salomon, as was a table—*Collection*



Michelle Stuart: *Trajectory of Evolutionary Correspondences*, 2009-10, inkjet photographs, metal table and mixed mediums; at Leslie Tonkonow.

*Table (for Rumpf)*, 1997—bearing an array of seeds in small wax cups. The idea that these small vessels are reliquaries, containing preserved fragments of still spiritually vital organisms, is made explicit in works like *Extinct* (1995-97), at Salomon. A grid of 35 dried leaves, flowers and grains pressed against small pine boards with what looks like medical tape, it is an elegant memorial to biodiversity.

Few of Stuart's works are this directly addressed to environmental threat, and some depart from the theme altogether. For instance, *Identity* (2010) involves a series of collages made on the backs of old paintings; many of the collages include fingerprints. The more personal nature of this series is mitigated—deliberately, it seems—by the collages' mediated presentation as photographs. As in Stuart's other photo-based works, the sacrifice of tactility pays off in images at once precise and fundamentally mysterious.

—Nancy Princenthal