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February 24, 2011

MICHELLE STUART: 'Works From the 1960s to the Present'

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Leslie Tonkonow Artworks & Projects

535 West 22nd Street, Sixth Floor

Chelsea

Salomon Contemporary

526 West 26th Street, Fifth Floor

Chelsea

Both through Saturday

These two shows add up to a lucid précis of Michelle Stuart's four-decade career, [with the selection at Tonkonow](#) covering its span. A 1969 work, an exactingly detailed graphite drawing of the moon's surface, is followed by four near-abstract drawings from the early '70s, which find Ms. Stuart blanketing the Minimalist grid with dark networks of lines, their patterns suggesting aerial shots of topography and nose-to-ground views of patches of earth.

At that early point she had already started using real earth as a medium. She rubbed it into paper, then folded the paper into packetlike books or hung it on the wall in long strips that scrolled across the floor. For a monumental outdoor piece in upstate New York in 1975, she unfurled a 460-foot-long paper scroll down a cliff-side and into the Niagara River, at the point where Niagara Falls had been located in the last Ice Age. As always with her work, the interaction of time, place and change was the theme.

From the '70s on, she traveled constantly, harvesting materials from specific locations she found significant, from American Indian holy places, to stops on Darwin's voyage to the Galapagos, to a

family graveyard in New Zealand. In honor of each place, she made site-specific work by bringing the site, in the form of raw material associated with it, like dirt, seeds, feathers, stones and splinters of wood, into her studio and working on it there. She has transferred this hunt-gather-and-shape process into the medium of photography, to create photo-murals like "Ring of Fire" (2010) at Tonkonow and "Silent Movie" (2010) at Salomon that combine multiple images to tell complex, time-traveling stories.

The two shows coincide with the publication of "Michelle Stuart: Sculptural Objects, Journeys In & Out of the Studio" (Charta, Milan, 2010), a kind of retrospective in book form, its images accompanied by her eloquent, plain-spoken anecdotal commentary on them. "Her works are not about intellectual distance, but about intensified intimacy," writes the art historian Lucy Lippard, an old friend, in the book's introduction. And this is true.