

Art & Design

A Cosmos of Matter, Enshrined in Her Art

Michelle Stuart's Work at the Parrish Art Museum



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Artist Michelle Stuart, 80, in her studio loft in SoHo.
By CAROL KINO Published: August 29, 2013

“HOW better to know a place than to know the earth of a place?” Michelle Stuart asked recently, as she held court in the expansive, light-filled SoHo loft that has been her home base since 1971. Furnished with textiles, antiques and artworks, it is also brimming with collections of seeds, bones, photographs, neatly labeled bottles of soil and other souvenirs of her travels.

Ms. Stuart, who is 80, has immersed herself in the culture, history and archaeology of different regions, transforming six decades of adventures into a lifetime of art. Now her works are featured in a wide-ranging survey, “Michelle Stuart: [Drawn From Nature](#),” at the [Parrish Art Museum](#) in Water Mill, N.Y., through Oct. 27. Focusing largely on drawings and land art projects made between 1968 and 2011, the exhibition includes more than 50 sculptural assemblages, photographs and works on paper.

Among its highlights are two 12-foot-long paper scrolls created in 1973 in upstate New York, their surfaces covered with intricate marks made by placing the muslin-backed paper on the ground and rubbing pencil or graphite across it. There is a photograph of “[Niagara Gorge Path Relocated](#),” a renowned 1975 piece for which Ms. Stuart marked up a 460-foot-long scroll by smashing rocks into the paper and then unfurling it down an

escarpment at a spot where Niagara Falls was situated 12,000 years ago.

For “Nazca Lines Chart Book” (1981-82), Ms. Stuart created a triptych that recalls the famous Peruvian geoglyphs and the constellations above them, using graphite and crystalline earth taken from the site.

The curator Cornelia Butler, who has included her work in drawing surveys at the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, said that Ms. Stuart was one of “maybe only a handful of artists of her generation who made a significant contribution during those early moments of land art” around 1970, when mostly male artists like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson began sculpturing lakes and canyons. Ms. Butler, now chief curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, points out that not only did Ms. Stuart “incorporate the earth into her drawings,” but she also “brought drawing into the landscape,” as with the Niagara Gorge project.



Multimedia

Slide Show

‘Drawn From Nature’

Now Ms. Stuart’s work is being rediscovered by a new generation of curators, like Anna Lovatt, the 35-year-old British art historian who conceived the idea for the Parrish show after doing research for her dissertation on New York drawing practices of the 1960s and ’70s. Dr. Lovatt said she was particularly struck by the artist’s monumental, labor-intensive scrolls, a series begun in 1970, when Ms. Stuart reinvented Surrealist frottage by working with, and against, the earth.

Stand before them, and “you really get a sense that those were works that had not been produced before and that redefined the way drawing was understood,” Dr. Lovatt said. (The show opened last February at the [Djanogly Art Gallery](#) at the University of Nottingham, in England, and will travel to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in January.)

Ms. Stuart’s newer pieces incorporate grids of photographs: “Ring of Fire” (2008-10) has images of people, ships, plant life and constellations, taken throughout the seismically active South Pacific Basin, as well as of mementos, including of love letters exchanged by her parents after she was conceived in Australia. Alicia Longwell, chief curator at the Parrish, called it “Michelle’s own creation myth.”

Warm and vivacious, Ms. Stuart seems to have at least one fond anecdote at the ready for each piece. Take “Baltic Boat Book,” a 1985 assemblage whose loose pages are covered with scrawled drawings of boats observed during a yacht trip in Finland.

As she recalled, she had just completed an Earthwork (involving a boat made from boulders, an elk carcass and hundreds of handmade candles) on a remote island in the Turku Archipelago. “I’d been there for quite some time, living in a sauna with an assistant,” she recalled, when her Helsinki dealer took her to lunch in a nearby port town.

Suddenly, she spotted a Finnish artist she knew, waving from a race boat.

“He said: ‘If you can get up at 4, you can come with us. No luggage!’ ” Ms. Stuart said, her eyes shining. “I love racing and I love to sail. So I said, ‘Fine,’ and I went.”

Ms. Longwell said she thinks of Ms. Stuart as “this unique time traveler,” because of “the way she looks at ancient civilizations and our own civilization, always with this capacity for wonderment and astonishment.”

Over the years, she noted, Ms. Stuart has also traveled between genres and movements — at least in the eyes of curators and critics. “She has been looked at in the context of postmodernist theory, of land art, of feminism. It’s all there, depending on the lens you bring to it.”

In 1984, for instance, “Nazca Lines Star Chart” was included in “[Primitivism in 20th Century Art](#),” at the Museum of Modern Art, a controversial exhibition that positioned her alongside Modern masters like Gauguin and Picasso and the indigenous artworks that inspired them. In 2010, MoMA exhibited the same piece in a completely different context, in “[On Line](#),” a show that explored different ways of “drawing” a line, from dancing to sculpture.

Yet Ms. Stuart seems far more interested in pursuing her many interests than fretting over her art historical significance.

Growing up in Los Angeles, she was fascinated by art, maps, archaeology and, especially, Mexico. After studying at the Chouinard Art Institute, now CalArts, she moved to Mexico City, where she stumbled into a job assisting the muralist Diego Rivera. Soon Ms. Stuart was living the artist’s life — a lone gringa ingénue embraced by the avant-garde.

At a raucous studio party in 1953, she met the much older Catalan painter and political cartoonist José Bartoli, who had just ended an affair with Frida Kahlo. “We really hit it off,” she said. “He asked me to marry him that night, and I said yes.” Ms. Stuart, then 18, moved to Paris with him and became immersed in a crowd of refugees, many of them Catalonians, Surrealists and deposed Eastern European royals.

“It was a big education,” she said. “There were a lot of decent painters, but none of them could hold a candle to the energy that was beginning to happen in New York.”

Ms. Stuart and Mr. Bartoli moved there four years later. She loved it, and he didn’t; they divorced in 1963 (but remained lifelong friends). She found that making her way as an independent artist was tough. “You had to be a good-looking chick who could be picked up in a bar,” she said, and it helped if you liked to drink and argue. “It wasn’t my thing. I like to be on my toes the next morning to work.”

To support herself, she worked as a fashion illustrator and assisted a clairvoyant at the Sherry-Netherland Hotel. (“I had a pack of tarot cards and a lot of imagination,” she said.) She also worked ceaselessly in her studio, first making abstract landscape paintings and then plaster sculptures. “You know all those things that women did of themselves?” she said. “I cast myself, my hands, my face, different parts of my body.”

Soon she was creating relief constructions by putting these sculptures into boxes. In the

late 1960s, while living in Atlanta with a second husband (“the unmentionable,” she called him), she decided to incorporate red earth from an American Indian archaeological site. One such piece, “[Earth Diptych: Self Imprint/No Imprint](#)” (1969) is in the current show. The left side holds smooth earth; the right bears the imprint of her hand, marking the start of a long preoccupation with human markings on the landscape.

Since then, Ms. Stuart has made many different sorts of artworks, traveled throughout most of the world and worked with dealers and museums in many far-flung cities. Yet she has somehow managed to retain a wide-eyed, eager approach to life and to art making.

“I just say yes to everything,” Ms. Stuart said.

“Michelle Stuart: Drawn from Nature” runs through Oct. 27 at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y.; (631) 283-2118; parrishart.org.

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