

*MICHELLE STUART*

# EARTH WORKS AREN'T EASY



Interview ABBEY MEAKER

For more than four decades Michelle Stuart has explored ideas of land and space, history and myth, astronomy and botany. From obsessive, embodied drawings and scrolls to massive site-specific earthworks, Stuart's process involves intense physical contact with her respective materials: from crushing sediment and clay into the fibers of paper and rubbing in the residue until it becomes imbued with earth, to hauling 3,200 rocks and boulders near the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon to make space for the monumental work "Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns," (1979). Each exchange is intimate and durational.

In 1969, the year we landed on the moon, Michelle Stuart made drawings of the lunar surface using photographs from NASA. From a scientific document came a sensuous, romantic rendering, a picture of the moon we see in our imagination, a representation of our mythical connection and fascination with this curved, voluptuous object. Photograph-informed fantasy. Stuart creates a dual sense of place, the flux of memory and time in physical space.

OPPOSITE PAGE Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns, 1979. 3,200 boulders, varying sizes from Hood River starting at the foot of Mt. Hood. Overall 1000' x 800', approx. Courtesy of the artist © Michelle Stuart  
THIS PAGE Michelle Stuart in Yucatan, 1979. Courtesy of the artist © Michelle Stuart





*Niagara Gorge Path Relocated*, 1975. Rocks, earth with strains of red iron oxide, on muslin-mounted archival paper (site: Artpark, Lewiston, NY) 460' x 5' 2" Courtesy of the artist © Michelle Stuart

**ABBEY MEAKER** What prompted your career-long investigation of place, land, space, and ritual? Is there a particular first experience that stands out, or was there an innate curiosity about these themes?

**MICHELLE STUART** I realized as a very young child that I was very acutely aware of places. Some people are and some people aren't. I had a terrific memory of a place that was very unusual. I would take trips around Baja California, and I would remember everything. I was thinking, *how did I get this way?* And it's because I have this almost indelible memory of a place. Of course, I take notes many times when I take trips because you need them for other reasons, but it's okay because I remember the place perfectly anyway. I can see it in my mind's eye. I have an acute awareness of the environment and what we're doing to the environment in addition to that. I started doing pieces like *Ashes in Arcadia* in the early '80s and the mid-'80s. They were large installations about what we're doing to our environment.

**MEAKER** Has much changed since then?

**STUART** Well, it's only gotten worse. I mean, you know that and I know that.

**MEAKER** Does it seem that awareness and sensitivity has grown?

**STUART** I think the awareness has grown because of people like David Attenborough. Also, I hope that our president will be a little more aware than the last one. Because we're in danger now. We're in real danger. There's no question about it. It's manifestly clear, the danger we're in. The oceans are full of plastic. We should do without plastic completely. We should do without gas completely. And these are not difficult things to do. We could do them.

**MEAKER** There are certainly things each individual can do, small changes we can make and adapt to pretty quickly that would have a significant influence collectively.

**STUART** No question about it.

**MEAKER** Some people are more sensitive to subtle qualities around them and how they impact us. I wonder if that is a little bit of what's going on for you.

**STUART** I started thinking about it when I was six or seven. My parents and I went to Santa Catalina Island. It's a beautiful little island off the coast of California. It was a sailor's paradise, because there's a beautiful harbor. There had been an abandoned ceramics studio on the beach that closed in 1936 or '37. So, I had collected all these beautiful ceramic shards that were left behind that had gotten into the sea and then brought back on the beach by the tides. And I had a whole bag of them, but they wouldn't let me take them

back to the mainland because instead of going on a boat, we were flying on one of those pontoon planes. Remember, this is the late 1930s. I was unbelievably angered by that. These were so beautiful to me and meant so much to me about that place. And then, I wasn't able to take it back to my little room. I was always wary of authority because of this.

**MEAKER** It's so interesting that at such a young age you had the desire to collect things.

**STUART** You know, I'm a huge collector. It's all about memory, isn't it? It's all about memory, and place, and your mind retaining things that are either beautiful or important.

**MEAKER** Yes, and it's romantic to be connected to an imagined place.

**STUART** Absolutely. It's funny because it is romantic. But on the other hand, there's something very scientific about it too.

**MEAKER** One of the other things I find so interesting about your work is throughout the years and different mediums, you've switched the lens, or revised the history of the exploration of uncharted frontiers. And your work has that sense of scientific discovery and also this otherworldly quality, that memoried feeling about it.

**STUART** It's very interesting, because I was good at art and I was good at science. Those were my two favorite subjects. And I continue to be interested in both and they inspire me. I could read about science and I could think about how that affects the work and how I might get an idea from science or from literature.

**MEAKER** It's another way of experiencing different worlds. Literature is almost more cinematic than cinema somehow.

**STUART** That's exactly right. You know my recent work, I think of it as cinematic.

**MEAKER** I've been really taken with all the titles. I noticed a shift in the last few years. Sort of darker. Not visually, but the 'feeling' of the work. Almost like what you were saying earlier about how we're in acute danger now in terms of the environment.

**STUART** Also, it's coupled with the fact that there are so many things I don't understand. I thought I understood our country. I was aware of a lot of the parts of our country that needed some help [laughs]. I didn't realize what a horror story a lot of our country is and how many people need education. How many people are continuing to think very negatively about everything. Maybe that is the darkness you see in the most recent works, and I don't even realize it myself. Maybe it's just my awareness of a kind of displeasure with what we're doing to ourselves.

**MEAKER** The Trump era really shed light on the ugliness and hate that was always there, just more concealed.

**STUART** And you can't really be full of delight about everything when you're acutely aware of that. I'll give you an example. Even in high school, I was aware of the McCarthy era and I was aware of the damage it was doing, though it was not a main concern of mine. But I was extremely aware of it. I thought, *oh I've gotta get out of here*. I have that same feeling now.

**MEAKER** I imagine witnessing the cycles, small changes that continually revert back, must be incredibly discouraging.

**STUART** Some things are astounding. At this point, people ought to be aware of the fact that we're a multiracial country. If they're not aware of that by now, there's something wrong with them. And we have to just decide that we're gonna like one another, whether we want to or not. I remember, I went with some friends after we graduated from high school to El Paso. It was the first time I'd ever seen 'colored' and 'white' written on water fountains and in bathrooms. I was so shocked, I couldn't believe it. I mean it was the shock of my life.

**MEAKER** So what draws you to a particular site?

**STUART** That's a good question. Sometimes I'm drawn by the fact that there's an archaeological site there. And sometimes, it's purely nature. It's a spot that I'm either told about by somebody or I find on my own and I investigate and explore. It's amazing when we start investigating and exploring things, how they open up to the person. We go places and a lot of the time we're always in such a hurry, even when you're there to relax, you're on a schedule. And then, you miss the most wonderful places. I was telling somebody the other day that when I used to get invitations to give talks about my work, I would ask if there's anybody that wants to drive me around to see any of the local archaeological sites and I'd always get takers. There would always be takers because you're kind of a star [laughs]. And I get to see these wonderful places in the United States that I sometimes have never even heard of. Wonderful sites in Ohio, like these ancient effigy mounds, like Miamisburg Mound. Serpent Mound was on private property and somebody came along and said, "You know, you shouldn't plow on this land." So they put a word out to this society in Boston of a bunch of women who paid the farmer for the property and saved Serpent Mound.

**MEAKER** I've never seen it in person, but the photos I've seen are breathtaking.

**STUART** It's a bit manicured because they take care of it so well. They mow it [laughs]. They grow grass on it. Nevertheless it's saved and it's there for people to appreciate these effigy mounds. I did a piece about that mound and it was just acquired by a major, private contemporary art museum called Glenstone Museum. They bought this four-part piece. I only did two four-part pieces and one is at DIA. And that's the other one that I did at Serpent Mound. Serpent Mound is very important to me in terms of saying so much about the past.

**MEAKER** When making large-scale site-specific earthworks, how much time do you spend with the place before actualizing the work?

**STUART** Sometimes as much as I can, and sometimes I don't have that ability. Sometimes, I just collect the earth and take it back to the studio and sometimes I was able to work on site. It really depends on the amount of time I have in a place. For example, with [the abandoned brick quarry in] Sayreville, New Jersey, it was close enough for me to go back and forth. It's no longer there, by the way. Some developer came along and bought Sayreville. It was huge and it was gorgeous. In the 19th century a lot of this country was built with brick. The brick had different layers of earth with clay. The color of the clay was as if you were in New Mexico or Arizona. It was this earth that was as bright red as earth can be. They were manifestly visible, that's what was so interesting. The layers of strata were there and you could actually dig them out.

**MEAKER** I read in an interview that the role of photography in your work is not just documentation-based, but is also an integral part of getting to know a place. Do you find that the 'feeling' comes through?

**STUART** We hope that we're seeing something that will translate to other people.

**MEAKER** Yes. Do you feel that you've been successful in that way?

**STUART** I do feel successful. Naturally, not everybody is going to agree with that because you don't always hit the mark. But if I weren't, I don't think my work would be well-known, but if you touch a lot of people, you've got adherence. I don't try to take beautiful photographs. I just try to make a photograph. For a long time, I never called myself a photographer. That's why I called it documenting. There are so many great photographers who see in a special way, and thank god they do—it's to our delight that they do. I don't think of myself at all in their camp. I think of myself as somebody that's walking around and looking, and maybe recording.

**MEAKER** I read in another interview that you feel at home in the flat vastness of the West but find the woods discomforting. What is it about the woods?

**STUART** I think that because I'm from the West, I feel at home in the West. I feel more at home in the West than I do in Vermont. There's nothing wrong with Vermont, but I think of the West and its large, flat expanses. I'm talking about Eastern California and New Mexico. I think of it the same way I think of the sea, which I also love. It's an expanse that allows me to take in life in a way that is something big. It's hard to explain.

**MEAKER** Do you feel as though the woods by comparison are more oppressive?

**STUART** I probably feel that way, but I don't think everyone feels that way. That's because you don't know what's around the next tree. Plus, a lot of us were brought up on fairy tales in which the woods were depicted as scary.

**MEAKER** I didn't realize that you co-founded the *Heresies Journal* with Lucy Lippard. What was that like?

**STUART** Also with Joyce Kozloff, and Mary Miss, and there were a couple of others. They were certainly a group. Joyce and I were neighbors, and I was using her washing machine, and we were talking about how we should have a magazine.

**MEAKER** When was that?

**STUART** It was probably 1973. It lasted longer than a lot of magazines do considering the kind of magazine it was. It was a bit helter-skelter. I think the only copy I saved was the ecology issue.

**MEAKER** I was going to ask if your love of place made it into the magazine. I assume you had a big part in that issue.

**STUART** By that time, I wasn't really involved that much in *Heresies*, but they asked me to do something. There were different people with each issue. So you were at the mercy of whoever was editor. I was at the mercy of not a very good editor, and I did a piece on oil spills and penguins. I was very proud of the piece because I didn't fancy myself a writer and I spent a lot of time writing it. At that time, there was a marine museum in Brooklyn and they had penguins and I took the photographs that they used in the issue. And then, they edited the life out of my piece because I was very caustic about Bantry Bay and the oil ships that came in and spread oil all over there. That was one of my first forays into writing.

**MEAKER** What bit of insight would you give to artists working with the land today? Are there meaningful new questions to ask,

territory—both literally and conceptually—to explore?

**STUART** They should be original. You always find within yourself something that no one else has done. It may be using a different medium, it may be an emphasis on a way that is already available. You could use color, line, form. You could do it in so many different ways that it wouldn't be what someone else has done. You could ask a lot of questions. There are always ways you could enlarge the peripheries of what an art form is.

end

FROM TOP (1) *Night Passage Signaling Two Suns*, Noto Island, Finland, 1985.  
Elk cranium, bones, and elk fur, glacial boulders in the shape of a vessel/  
boat and constellation, earth, beeswax candles, string, pine tree, poem by  
artist, songs, 20' x 40' x 30' overall. Courtesy of the artist © Michelle Stuart  
(2) *Night...Ship Creek*, Cook Inlet, Alaska, 1986. Encaustic, pebbles, stones,  
on canvas, 55 x 88" Courtesy of the artist © Michelle Stuart

