

**Artforum**

**Michelle Stuart, Galerie Lelong & Co.**

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Michelle Stuart, *Area-Sayreville, New Jersey 40-30 Latitude 74-30 Longitude Specimen Fragment Sample of Earth Showing Impression of Rock Forms, Location-Views of Northwest Section of Quarry Site, Date-July 26th, 1976, 1 PM*, earth on muslin-mounted rag paper, color-coupler photographs, pencil on mounted rag paper, 22 × 30".

When Michelle Stuart inaugurated her studio practice in the late 1960s, feminism and art had barely discovered one another. An expanding interest in ecosystems was just beginning to take root in Conceptualism, and the nascent Land art movement was being served up with extra helpings of machismo. Many artists engaged in forms of “field work.” Among them was Stuart, who never fully identified as a maker of feminist art, reluctantly staked her claim as an environmental artist, and avoided presenting her work as being solely systems oriented—indeed, she consistently operated somewhere in between. Yet today it’s clear that her art forges vital links that unify aspects of Minimalism, feminism, and ecology.

Whether making marks in the earth or digging it up and taking it back to the studio, environmentally inclined artists of the '60s and '70s felt it was important to be out there—mapping terrain, collecting samples, photographing the spectacular sites that served as points of deep contact with the natural world. Stuart holds a special place in this milieu. Her relationship to the landscape dates back to her childhood, when she accompanied her engineer father on surveying expeditions in the California desert. A retrospective exhibition at Galerie Lelong & Co., “The Imprints of Time: 1969–2021,” showcased the rich, raw materiality that became the basis of Stuart’s art, wrought from rock, soil, and mineral deposits sourced on travels to New York’s Hudson Valley and New Jersey, to Guatemala and Peru, and well beyond.

The stars of the show were works comprising organic substances rubbed into thick rag paper backed with muslin. In *El Florido*, 1978–79, a pair of “scrolls” that measure almost nine feet long and hang loosely on the wall, Stuart so vigorously ground graphite (from a quarry in Guatemala) into the paper that the two elements appear to have fused alchemically, forming a resplendent surface that imparts a metallic shimmer. In *El Florido Chart*, 1980, natural graphite from the same site is forcefully worked into the toothy substrate, which is cut into squares and presented as a darkly radiant, steel-gray grid. A similar transformation occurs in *Strata Series: Jocotan*, 1979. Stuart, with her own sweat equity, rubbed soil into the paper so aggressively that she burnished its surface to a dull chocolaty sheen.

A starchy yellow-orange-red palette characterizes works produced in the Sayreville, New Jersey, quarry—a place that, for some, epitomizes the ruinous postindustrial landscape. Lucy Lippard and Charles Simonds introduced Stuart to this lunar place, and she immediately responded to the multicolored geologic strata revealed in the mine’s walls. Working on-site, she chiseled rock, first pulverizing it and then grinding it into a type of thick paper that she frequently used. Some of these earthy palimpsests were paired with photographs documenting the vista and included penciled titles that recorded logistical information, such as *Area-Sayreville, New Jersey 40-30 Latitude 74-30 Longitude Specimen Fragment Sample of Earth Showing Impression of Rock Forms, Location-Views of Northwest Section of Quarry Site, Date-July 26th, 1976, 1 PM*.

Stuart’s physically intensive methods of production imbue her work with a palpable physicality: We encounter and must account for her body, her muscle, her endurance—elements that she almost certainly combined with a deeply meditative focus. She is on record as having said she wanted to take herself out of the picture, but there’s no denying the importance of her labor. Back in the day, her strength might even have been seen to mirror nature as a protean, regenerative, and inexhaustible force.

Stuart’s art apparently shifts in the '90s, to emphasize intimate arrangements of seeds, pods, stones, dried flowers, and leaves—mementos one might collect along a walk. Photographs document the outside world, and presentational devices are key to the work’s efficacy: small bowls, bound books, low benches, and simple tables lend a ceremonial quality to these objects and images. In *Extinct*, 1992, natural materials, carefully preserved and wrapped in archival paper, are arranged in a grid, with notational writing that spells out the work’s title. No celebration here, but rather a mournful tone that is as much incantatory lament as devotional hymn. What could be more fitting for these times?