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**ROCKY PICTURE SHOW**

Lauren O'Neill-Butler on "Museum of Stones"



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Vintage postcards on view in "Museum of Stones," 2015, Noguchi Museum, New York. Photo: Elizabeth Felicella.

**IT'S IMPOSSIBLE** *not* to imagine a conversation between Isamu Noguchi and Jimmie Durham in "Museum of Stones." The two artists, while separated by three and a half decades, share a near-mystical affinity for ascetic, stripped-down materials—specifically, rocks. The show, which is accompanied by off-site programming at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and a book featuring portraits of visitors and works within the museum by Tina Barney and Stephen Shore, marks the thirtieth anniversary of Noguchi's namesake museum. It also fruitfully—and finally—moves beyond the occasional loan to bring a selection of contemporary art to the esteemed institution. Reflecting on Noguchi's investment in the transhistorical and transcultural—remember, he simultaneously hybridized stone culture from Japan, Mexico, China, and Italy—the exhibition considers a broad swath of diachronic points and counterpoints, ranging from the Paleolithic period (flint and jasper hand axes from Keith Sonnier's collection) to the Ming dynasty (limestone Chinese scholars' rocks and scroll paintings, on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art) to works from the present. Curiously, it is Durham, not Noguchi, who hovers as the *éminence grise* throughout.

Durham's installation *The Dangers of Petrification*, 1998–2007, installed in a vitrine-filled upstairs gallery that also includes works by Donald Burgy and Richard Long, among others, provides the show's curatorial hinge. In this propositional work, Durham-as-pseudo-scientist offers two cases of petrified rocks, each identified by a handwritten label. The specimens were selected for their verisimilitude to "a petrified slice of an apple, petrified pecorino, petrified pumpnickel, petrified cake, and various kinds of candy, among other curiosities," as the artist noted in these pages in January 2009. A sly predecessor to Durham's site-specific *Museum of Stones*, 2012 (not on view), which positions the geologic matter as a sculptural form independent of human mediation, *The Dangers of Petrification* equates rocks with provisions we identify as perishable, thus undermining the Western notion of them as "everlasting," and emphasizing their cyclical process of sedimentation, compaction, erosion, and metamorphism. The work jibes nicely with many of Noguchi's pieces, particularly his late-career raw sculptures, such as the nearby *Practice Rocks in Placement*, 1982–83, eighteen unaltered Aji granite rocks placed at random. (It's a reminder that the senior sculptor wasn't always—or maybe never was—a surface fetishist infatuated with virtuosic displays of mastery over his medium.)

For decades, Noguchi dabbled extensively in bronze, aluminum, wood, steel, and clay, but he always returned to stone, calling it "the basic element of sculpture," the "unassailable absolute." Yet he was never a Luddite; he steadfastly believed in the utopian, redemptive qualities of technology. Take, for example, his long friendship and collaborations with R. Buckminster Fuller, or his proposed (but never realized) *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars*, 1947, a massive stone face with a pyramid for a nose designed to be viewed aerially. Speaking to Calvin Tomkins in 1980, Noguchi commented, "Ultimately, I like to think, when you get to the furthest point of technology, when you get to outer space, what do you find to bring back? Rocks!"

The show presents works by Vija Celmins, Ugo Rondinone, and Dove Bradshaw—to cite just a few artists—that pick up on our fixation with stone's epic life span, something Durham has repeatedly noted in interviews. In 2009, commenting on the use of stone in his output as "antiarchitecture, antimonument," he paused: "Written in stone,' people say, intending it as a sign of permanence." By contrast, Durham

strove to foreground these forms as in flux. Yet for all his interest in stone and its material contingencies, his work elides the semantic rabbit hole of the relationship between natural *rocks* and mediated *stones* evidenced by some of the show's less convincing works. The strongest pieces (Durham's included) in "Museum of Stones" deemphasize formal presence altogether in favor of dispersal and distribution: Among these are Yoko Ono's text-based *Throwing Piece*, her 1964 proposal that her reader throw a stone high enough that it won't come back; Scott Burton's incised sierra granite *The Rock Chair*, 1981; and Mitch Epstein's 2014 photographs of erratics (rocks deposited by glaciers) around New York. And, curiously, a non-work: a presentation of more than two hundred historic postcards of famous rocks from a private collection.

Finally, a red herring. Joseph Kosuth's *Ex Libris (N.F.F.L.)*, 1991, consists of two screen prints on glass that quote (one in English, one in French) a Nietzsche aphorism: "The philosopher supposes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the structure; but posterity finds its value in the stone which he used for building, and which is used many more times after that for building—better. Thus it finds the value in the fact that the structure can be destroyed and *nevertheless* retains value as building material." It's a curious piece, teetering on reductive claims about value and time, and, in the end, a smoke screen here. For at its best, this unexpected exhibition lampoons both our obsessive ordering of things of value *and* our faith in the materials underlying such order, opening up Noguchi's works to new possibilities in both form and structure.

*"Museum of Stones" is on view through Jan. 10 at the Noguchi Museum, New York.*

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