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A CONVERSATION: SARANOA MARK & ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ELIZABETH LALLEY

EL: Regarding your practice, you've spoken before about being in conversation with the deep past and with ancient objects that have survived time. I'm wondering where this connection to ancient history—to cuneiform tablets and archaeological ruins, for instance—began for you. In your work, it seems like you feel an intimate relationship with time, as though the distance between you and the past has been compressed. Can you speak more about that?

SM: Activating memory is a daily ritual of Jewish practice. On Passover, the act of remembering is taken a step further. We read a text that instructs individuals in each generation to see themselves as if they left Egypt. To experience ourselves as having left a biblical Egypt - whether you conceive of Egypt as a physical or psychological location- means that the foundation of my imagination is shaped by a tradition in which deep time and the present moment coexist simultaneously. Conceptually inhabiting such a consciousness invites a creative closeness with the ancient past.

Visually, once I began working primarily with carving tools to draw into paper, clay, and stone I found myself looking to other carved works, to Assyrian reliefs, cuneiform tablets, foundation deposits: fragments carved by time. I fell in love with these works admiring their sensitivity to material, attention to intricate detail, and their physical presence. Wishing to spend extended time looking at relief carvings led me to take a job as a museum guard at the Oriental Institute in Chicago. When I worked the overnight shift I was the only one in the museum. This experience created an incredibly intimate relationship with objects made in a context far separated by time from our own.

EL: This might be a very basic question in some sense, but I'm curious: when you're looking at ancient objects, what kinds of things are you thinking about? What do the objects seem to "tell" you?

SM: I look at ancient objects that grip my attention; I try to decipher from a formal perspective what about the object is visually entrancing. I wonder how, through my own artistic production, can I enter a dialogue with the object? I think about how the most beautiful objects were created to perform rituals, as living objects!!

SaraNoa Mark, "Miscellaneous Utensils in an Orange Grove" installation view.

I think about the ways objects are shaped by time. The ways we task objects with surviving time, with recording what memory cannot retain. Objects outlive their makers. What are the elements of style, monumentality, time period, and geography of the object that it is able to avoid destruction and is deemed worthy of "preservation"? What propels people to dig deep into the earth? What are we trying to discover? When, how, and by whom was the object excavated?

I think about the object being the color of the earth from the place where it was produced and if I am encountering the object in a museum I think about the distance the item traveled, and how it was transported, and if the object exerted resistance. How does the experience of the object change when it is taken from its original context and put into a museum? What are the kinds of architecture built for the purposes of display? What narrative is being propelled through the display of the object? Alternatively, if I am viewing a carving in situ I ask why and how it continues to exist in collective memory? What about it attracts pilgrimage? How do we interact with it today? Is there water or other notable geographical features nearby? Or if I am visiting an abandoned or forgotten carving I wonder why it has been forgotten? Is it too far inland?

I listen to the sounds. I trace its shape with my fingers. I rest against its surface.

I think about how this stone has been sitting under the sky absorbing wind, rain, and touch.

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SaraNoa Mark, *Remnants of a Sandy Substance*, (detail), 2021, carved ceramic.

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Cuneiform tablet: hymn to Marduk, 1st millennium B.C.

Cuneiform tablet: caravan account, ca. 20th–19th century B.C.

EL: Your practice of carving clay is rooted in an "alphabet" of shapes that you've developed, with the tools you're using. The carved works feel like they're communicating with us in a language we have to decipher for ourselves, and I'm always struck by the way these pieces remind me of communication beyond speech—through sight, bodily sensations, patience, stillness, etc. How do you think about language and communication, written and otherwise?

SM: I really appreciate hearing these reflections. I view the world as a drawing continuously being carved by environmental and human gestures. I think about drawing as a language that documents moments in time. Every gesture has its own language. There is the continuous drip of the stalactite building one line over 8,000 years; the spiraling shape of the way an ant draws through wood; a drawn curved line where water meets the shore; patterns seen in aerial images of farm lands; geometric hollowed spaces that are the subways underground. Existence itself is a drawn language.

These drawings communicate evidence of geological events. I am interested in the inadvertent traces left behind, and the highly conscious effort to write and archive presence. Yet we are gifted permission to forget once we have recorded memory. Observing a drawing practice renders thoughts visible that would otherwise disappear. I am interested in the fine line between drawing and writing.

I look at text as I prepare to make pictures. I am intrigued by systems composed of countless small parts that come together to create infinite forms. I rely greatly on formal elements such as repetition, texture, and line weight to convey an emotional experience. I am always struck by the sensitivity of visual language -- the slight shift in pressure or the angle of a gesture results in communicating through non-verbal experience.

EL: Before Covid hit, you were in Turkey, for a Fulbright research project, exploring living rock monuments carved into the landscape. Can you talk a bit about the significance of Turkey, and the regions you explored there, in relation to your own ideas about place and history?

SM: I am interested in the ways humans transform our physical environments and where the impulse to mark place with picture begins. Using large-scale machinery on existing geography the American Land Art movement ceased, to a great extent, over concern for the destructive effect of these works on ecosystems. In Anatolia, however, the production of hand-carved, place-based artworks was sustained for millennia. Hittite, Neo-Hittite, Phrygian, Lycian, Roman, and Byzantine empires each were compelled to carve into living rock. Years later, these ancient monuments continue to impact collective imagination.

Turkey is covered in carved rock monuments, and visiting these monuments is a way to witness how the relationship to place-based artworks shift over time. Each empire's carvings climb higher up the mountains. Despite their differing content the monuments begin as being purposefully situated in place, but by the time the Romans constructed their monuments that relationship to place specificity seems to have been lost. Their structures, though extremely awe inspiring, become formulaic.

This makes sense that imperialist expansion would result in a distancing from place sensitivity. The width of the Roman chariot turned into the width of the Transcontinental Railroads, introducing an ability to transport people and materials at distances and speeds that challenged our intimacy with locality. When railroads, seaways, and highways have been used to transport these monuments, it has become evident that we distinguish artwork solely as picture, or carved text, rather than by their connection to any individuating aspects of place.

Artworks were first painted and carved into place, and from my perspective they remain inextricable from place. After spending time making work centered on removal I am thinking about what it means to create place-sensitive artworks.

EL: This exhibition includes a selection of stone pieces that you salvaged from quarries and rubble piles in Turkey. In these works, the marks made by you exist as carved, and even gouged, responses to manufactured carved patterns that already exist on the tiles. You describe these works as "less touched" by you, as your interventions on the surfaces are fairly minimal. How did this new direction come about? How do you see the relationship between these pieces and your carved clay tablets?

After Antep, 2021, carved stone.

A City Unaware of its Own Existence, 2021, carved clay.

SM: The carved clay and stone works are parts of the same exploration of entirely transforming my materials by strictly reworking that which already exists. If I want to work with a color I seek to find a pink stone, or chocolate-colored clay. The clay works are more of a blank slate, they are wet and therefore more receptive to mark-making. Making methodically carved works is a way for me to feel inside time. I aspire to create visual encounters and embed the works with traces of presence, an energy I have at times believed is stronger the longer I have spent shaping a piece.

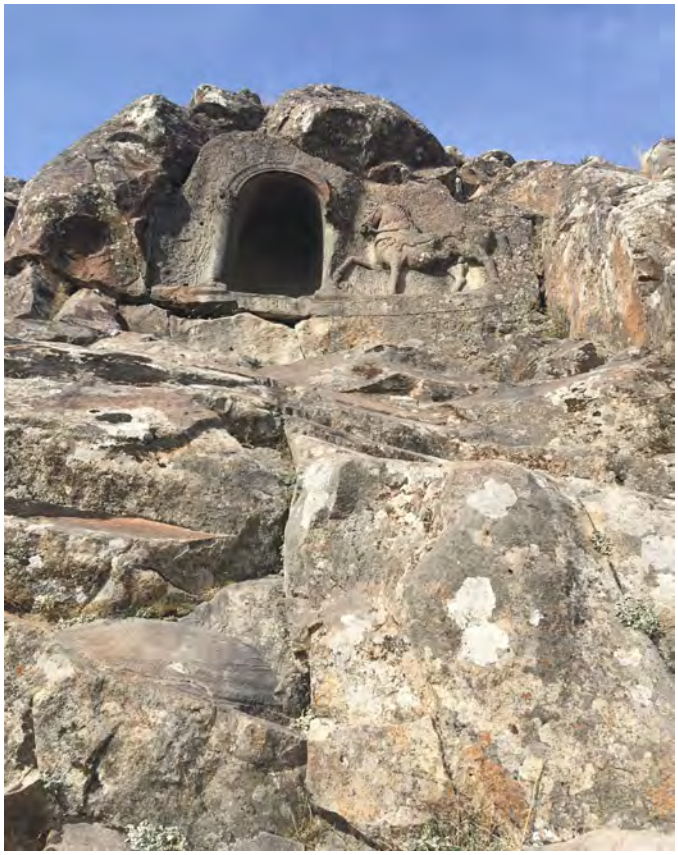
There is a range within the stone carvings; the works titled *Yazilikaya* are more touched then *After Antep*. The latter are built of larger moves and for this reason they are more graphic. As a whole the stones are less touched, they have undergone metamorphism and have been in the process of being drawn for as long as it takes for a vein to appear in marble. Then the rocks are quarried and cut by industrial manufactures.

By the time I collect a discarded stone the piece has been thoroughly worked and there is less I feel I need to do. I try to respond to the geological and industrial marks, working with them. My own marks are fewer and more considered.

EL: Your background is in observational painting, and I remember being surprised when I first learned this—but the more time I've spent with your work, the more it makes sense to me. Your work is slow and layered, as you spend a long time experiencing places in different elements, different lights, etc. There is also an element of excavation that occurs, both conceptually and in the materials, a building up and taking away. How has this background informed the work you make now?

SM: Observational painting is a practice rooted in patience, in looking and recording what you see, fitting together specific shapes to orchestrate visual narrative. My practice is situated in observation and rooted in fieldwork. Built into my studio practice are periods where I am not strictly producing, but rather situating myself within place. Core to my process is the idea that authentic work is achieved through sustained interaction, reading place as an intersection of ecosystems, a story revealed through multiple encounters.

As you mention, when I am visiting living rock monuments, I try to observe the carving under every light condition, under sun, rain, and snow, from daybreak to nightfall. I was researching living rock monuments created over three millennia. Existing under the elements for so many years, parts of the picture recede back into rock. This was especially true visiting Phrygian monuments where certain reliefs are only visible at specific times of day. I experienced this while staying with a landscape archaeologist, Ben Claasz Coockson, who would question what I saw at the end of each day and then offer specific times of day where disappearing carvings had greater visibility. When the sun momentarily passed over the rocks I became aware of all that is present yet invisible. It is during these extended periods of observation when I arrive at questions that I carry back into the studio. I am devoted to using my hands to ask questions, and working with materials to tell stories.



"The Roman monument cut into the rock near the Hittite quarry locally called Atlıkaya- Rock of the Horseman. It was made for some Lucianus a successful horse-sportsman according to Greek inscription." --SaraNoa Mark