

A Story in Remnants

My current body of work addresses the Anthropocene. The term implies that our impact on our planet will be recognizable in a geological context long after we are gone. I find this a fruitful topic for my art because it is my way of confronting our hubris. Rather than presenting our ability to transform our surroundings as evidence of our might, the Anthropocene shifts the perspective of the conversation, as a vehicle to contemplate the long-term unsustainability of our actions and our misplaced sense of invincibility. Through my art, I explore our legacy in terms of the artifacts and ruins we leave behind rather than the untarnished ideals promoted by Western culture. To formulate my case, I draw from a multi-disciplinary pool of interlocutors; writers, philosophers, scientists, and artists; as well as the materiality of one metal, iron.

In his essay on “The Creative Process” the philosopher and writer James Baldwin succinctly lays out both the source of our collective denial as well as the artist’s unique role in addressing it, when he states:

The state of birth, suffering, love, and death are extreme states — extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge...A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable...

My contention is that our impact on the natural world, the injustices we inflict upon ourselves, and the hardships that we face are a result of our inability to accept our mortality or the natural forces responsible for change and impermanence. To this end, my aim is not to find a solution to our insurmountable problems but simply to make art that allows us to contemplate the source of our fears and insecurities— impermanence. In my present series on remnants, I am juxtaposing

the forces responsible for change, both man-made and natural. My aim is to show not only that change is natural and something that cannot be avoided but that our fixation with fighting impermanence has historically pitted us against nature and driven our technological progress into greater imbalance with our ecosystem. Ironically it is this ever-increasing imbalance that is accelerating the pace of unwanted change.

One scientific writer that has informed and influenced my work is Elizabeth Kolbert. Her books “Field Notes from a Catastrophe” and “The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History” offer in-depth historical and scientific insights on the irreversible impact we are having on our climate and the cumulative damage our unsustainable practices are inflicting on life on Earth. But it is her essay “Ice Memory” that offers a reverse perspective on nature’s impact on human technology. The essay discusses the ice-sheet cores collected in Greenland. By analyzing the air trapped in these ice cores, scientists are able to understand the global climate history of the past hundred thousand years. This record reveals a climate far more extreme and unstable than what we are accustomed to. As Richard Alley, a leading geophysicist in contemporary climate change puts it, “dozens of rapid changes litter the record of the last hundred thousand years. If you can possibly imagine the spectacle [of a bungee cord dangling off] the side of a moving roller-coaster car, you can begin to picture the climate.”

Astoundingly, the singular stable period during the last hundred thousand years coincides with the Neolithic Revolution, 12,000 years ago. It is during this period in our prehistory that numerous technologies responsible for the birth of civilization emerge, including the shift from hunter-gathering to agriculture, the invention of the wheel, irrigation, and writing. The implication is that while we are an exemplary animal, capable of adapting and surviving the harshest of conditions, a certain threshold of stability may be required for technology and

organized civilizations to thrive. In other words, our innate intellect and our ability to devise new technologies did not conquer or tame the fertile crescent, the fertile crescent nurtured us into a civilization.

My art explores impermanence as it relates to us, at a human time-scale and in a human context, but also in a broader context that offers glimpses of geologic timescales, microcosms and macrocosms. By deconstructing and fragmenting my artwork and subjecting my surfaces to forces that mimic the passage of time and erosion I am searching for ways to internalize and gain a more visceral understanding of the natural forces that are constantly transforming, reclaiming, and redefining matter. In this way I draw inspiration and guidance from the artistic process of Leonardo Drew, who has noted that in order to transform raw materials into the aged and fragmented building blocks for his installations, he often makes his own weather. This process of learning through the artistic process itself, of internalizing materiality through the act of art making has become part of my ritual, my meditation and my spiritual practice

Like Drew, another contemporary artist who uses the power of nature and corrosive processes to capture the charge of loss and expose the consequences of our hubris, is Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer is able to confront the enormity of our species' impact, with his large-scale works, perhaps because his artistic ambitions and his personality are equally large. I look towards his work for inspiration on how to tackle themes of great importance head on, and I ground myself in the thought that while my ego is more timid, the responsibility and gravity of our present predicament requires the courage to keep pushing forward.

One final interlocutor I would like to discuss is iron. With its unique properties, iron is able to embody two distinct materialities. One as a pure, shiny, seemingly indestructible, malleable substance that can be both flexible enough to flex under immense pressure and hard enough to

slice through most other metals. Yet in its oxidized form, rust, it embodies the very essence of impermanence and nature's ability to recycle and reclaim resources. In the form of naturally occurring ochre pigment, it is likely the first material (along with charcoal) that we used for creative expression. Later, in the Fertile Crescent, once we learned to smelt and shape it, it brought us a new confidence; a shiny mirrored surface in which we could reflect a new reality and dream of permanence and immortality, of the infinite power of technology and our ability to tame and conquer nature. Looking further back and deeper, we find that iron is the most abundant element on Earth by mass and it even runs in our veins, turning our blood red as the oxygen we breath rusts the iron in our hemoglobin. The materiality of iron and our relationship with it chronicle and mirror our increasing ambitions and their consequences on our planet, and for this reason it is the essential material for me to start a dialogue on, as Baldwin stated, accepting the inescapable. Only then can we find a sustainable path to coexist in harmony with the natural world.

Even as we seek to accept that nothing is stable, the hubris born out of our fears, is the greatest threat to our future. Baldwin himself, in the same essay where he aspired to lead us into a deeper acceptance of our selves and transcend our primal insecurities, had this to say. "But the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself...to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, ... to make the world a more human dwelling place." This language still separates us from nature and uses the imagery of conquest and war mongering as a means to assert our superiority against our perceived foe. If we are to take an honest look in the mirror, we must find the clarity to see the real threat, not nature, but our fears, or as Baldwin understood, "It goes without saying, I believe, that if we understood ourselves better, we would damage ourselves less."

Works Cited

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Kolbert, Elizabeth. “Ice Memory” *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2002 Issue