

I'm Neha Choksi, and I am 2021 C.O.L.A. Fellow.

And even earlier, going back earlier, I made a work in my first undergraduate painting class with Don Suggs at UCLA. And in 1995, I painted over a real variegated ficus plant in exact verisimilitude. So you could not make that the plant was over except under close examination. And this work got me to thinking about materiality, surface and substance, and about the quick of life in nature. And that has persisted in my work in different ways.

And it's slightly relevant. The three pieces are "The Leaf Fall" involved the denuding of a tree over the course of a single day. "Minds to Lose" required the anesthetization of four farm animals and myself. And for "Ice Boat", I rode a boat made out of ice until it melted and released me into the lake.

And these works would have set the pattern of performatively intervening in the natural world or at the very least employing its material existence in a live interaction.

I guess there are many references and sort of I guess you could call them inspirations. And a couple of them would be as a title of references "Strata Bouquet". The strata part would be the reference to geological stratas which we normally experience horizontally but which have flipped to be vertical in the sequence of canvases.

And the other point of reference would be the second part of the title, "Strata Bouquet", the bouquet part. Which is a reference to Dutch still life paintings of flowers that were gathered from different seasons and different parts of the planet that the Dutch had traveled to and colonized.

These were often impossible bouquets, embedding geography and seasons in an impossible spatially relationship within one vase. And the boulders are from different geological time frames and sourced from quarries around the country. They could not possibly be found in one place.

They embody different times of coming into being and the poured holes bored into them reflect the holes left behind on the surface of the Earth. And the stone bits extracted from the quarrying are hard ground into pigment and then covers the surface of the tile work vertical canvases. The straps are either emerging from the hole in the stone or disappearing into them. And the mirror finished steel, which is actually linking the boulders to the canvases and are flat on the ground, the mirror finish of the steel is both a formal device that extends the canvas deep into the ground, returning the pigment visually to the Earth from where it came. And it's also linking it back to the boulders.

So in some ways the weightiness of this work compared to the other rock work is altered by the addition of the vertical painted elements sort of soaring high above. And the steel mirror kind of makes the pieces less weighty by mirroring it into the ground, [INAUDIBLE] earth. So the boulders are both anchored and levitated. And as an aside, I often fancifully imagine the rock sort of rolling out of caves, even Plato's cave, to prove him wrong, to assert the materiality of the boulders. But that's just-- yeah. It's not just coming out of the earth. It's coming out of the earth rolling out of the caves.

I'm used to making pigments from rocks for many other artworks. But historically I've used a single color for a single body of work. Here, I wanted to reflect the variety of rock sources and colors that would not, could not possibly exist in a single spot akin to the flowers in the Dutch still lives.

So I mixed pulverized stone pigments into a mix, into which I had added other Earth pigments. So it's not solely the pigment sourced from the boulders. I wanted to introduce some commercially mined pigments, not the synthetic ones, but the ones coming straight out of the Earth to emphasize something less pure, signaling not merely a relationship to nature but also our relationship to culture and confusing the two.

This and other illusionary interventions are kind of to disrupt simplistic binaries. And actually the colors don't quite match the boulder deliberately. The colors of the boulders and the paintings are observed and mixed in the eyes. And I offset the bands of colors one over to not merely to keep the composition dynamic and full of contrast but to confuse the strata. Again, to disrupt the expected.

The human presence in some way is implied in that. And I'm kind of serving the rock by creating art out of it, drawing it from the Earth into the orbit of culture. And any time I'm transferring that sort of energy of the given and transforming it into the made, I'm dealing with a piece of the planet and displacing it forcibly into the realm of culture. And culture equals human, and viewership equals human.

For me, the meaning lies in the process of making it and in the viewing. Hopefully, the viewer gets a sense of the intelligence behind the work and infers a meaning that expands their experience of her relationship to the Earth and to art and to pleasure and to the violence without needing to know the exact process or reasoning or the stories behind the work.