

LUCY SKAER

*MONDAY 8.4.13, TUESDAY 9.4.13,
WEDNESDAY 10.4.13, THURSDAY 11.4.13,
FRIDAY 12.4.13, SATURDAY 13.4.13,
SUNDAY 14.4.13, MONDAY 15.4.13,
TUESDAY 16.4.13, WEDNESDAY 17.4.13,
THURSDAY 18.4.13, FRIDAY 19.4.13,
SATURDAY 20.4.13, SUNDAY 21.4.13,
MONDAY 22.4.13*

In April, Lucy and I went to Iowa and extracted twenty-two tons of lithographic limestone. In the quarry, it was a male curriculum: dynamite, dead deer parts, a rock crusher the size of a decent mobile home, and work that is conducted below the surface of the earth.

For 370 million years, this limestone was nothing but rocks,* and then in 1903 when Iowa was still the West, a mining engineer named Clement Webster “discovered” the lithographic qualities of the stone as equal to or better than Germany’s Solnhofen limestone, which was traditionally used for the world’s lithography. Webster wrote for the Iowa Geological Survey Annual Report of 1906:

“Enough has been done to demonstrate thoroughly the superior quality of certain of the layers for lithographic purposes. It has also been demonstrated that the lithographic stone can be obtained in large slabs practically free from fractures, calcite balls, clay seams and other imperfections. Other beds take a good polish and are of a pleasing color. They can be quarried in blocks of almost any lateral dimensions and will undoubtedly find a ready market. The waste from the quarries would make an excellent grade of crushed stone. A large area is available with almost no overburden.”

Value was suddenly conferred on the stone, and Webster created Lithograph City, Iowa—differentiated from nearby Mason City and Stone City by the specificity of its product—a buzzing quarry town in the middle of agricultural flatlands. Slabs of stone were quarried for about twenty years, and put into use bearing the impression of countless official documents, banknotes, illustrations, and deeds. The American embargo on German products during WWI boosted Lithograph City’s fortunes, while the development of metal printing plate technology devastated them. The quarries closed, and by the time of the Depression, the entire town had folded. The site is marked by rows of telegraph poles tracing a long-ago street grid in what’s now a cow pasture.

Today, nearby quarries mine the stone for its non-lithographic properties. They blast the quarry ledges into boulders which are then broken into smaller pieces with excavators, then crushed into aggregate for road-building or concrete production, or pulverized into agricultural lime. The quarry operators do not have the equipment or trained personnel to mine flat slabs suitable for printing. It is now an anachronistic—if not wholly useless—activity.

Lucy’s new sculptures are not loud talkers, as she has taken good care to see to, but they are not without information. They are perhaps overly informed. The primary materials—terra cotta and lithographic limestone—are laden with

*The limestone lies in the Cedar River Valley geological group, in the Lithograph City formation, in the Idlewild member, 20 to 30 feet below the topsoil of Floyd County, Iowa. Above it is fossiliferous limestone, and below it is oxidized dolomite, neither suitable for the purposes of lithography. It is a sedimentary stone that formed in hypersaline tidal flats during the Devonian period, a 60 million year span in the middle Paleozoic era. Other Devonian developments were the appearance of spiders, insects, amphibians, and seed ferns. The layers of lithographic stone found in the Idlewild member are extremely fine grained with almost no fossils, which indicates the absence of bioturbation in the stagnant muddy pools in which it sedimented. It is so smooth that it has an almost waxy texture, with color variations of gray from pink to blue to tan to white. It is particularly dense, weighing 174 lbs. per cubic foot. It is made up of 92.85% microscopically small calcium carbonate crystals, 5.31% magnesium carbonate, .80% iron and alumina, and 1.60% insoluble matter.

prehistories and technologic significance. They are materials that imply a certain kind of use. Most rocks can't print checks and deeds. Most rocks can't designate value. These are not the only terms in which I phrase Lucy's artwork, but if you don't understand what a material says, how can you understand what it conceals? Every logistic and object has abstract value.

Geologic time notwithstanding, the immediate future of these stones is uncertain. Here, they have the shroud of art, the support of vocabulary and architecture, a name to be held under, a little pause in the course of things, and after? Will they be sold to a collector? Destroyed in situ? Crushed into aggregate and re-sold, reinstating their previous value and reintegrating them into the commodity market? I ask the question not to foreground the endgame, but rather to insist that time is material, even for sculptures with that permanent look.

In *Basin and Range*, John McPhee writes:

“The human consciousness may have begun to leap and boil some sunny day in the Pleistocene, but the race by and large has retained the essence of its animal sense of time. People think in five generations—two ahead, two behind—with heavy concentration on the one in the middle. Possibly that is tragic, and possibly there is no choice. The human mind may not have evolved enough to be able to comprehend deep time. It may only be able to measure it. At least, that is what geologists wonder sometimes, and they have imparted the questions to me. They wonder to what extent they truly sense the passage of millions of years. They wonder to what extent it is possible to absorb a set of facts and move with them, in a sensory manner, beyond the recording intellect and into the abyssal cons. Primordial inhibition may stand in the way. On the geologic time scale,

a human lifetime is reduced to a brevity that is too inhibiting to think about. The mind blocks the information. Geologists, dealing always with deep time, find that it seeps into their beings and affects them in various ways. They see the unbelievable swiftness with which one evolving species on the earth has learned to reach into the dirt of some tropical island and fling 747s into the sky. They see the thin band in which are the all but indiscernible stratifications of Cro-Magnon, Moses, Leonardo, and now. Seeing a race unaware of its own instantaneousness in time, they can reel off all the species that have come and gone, with emphasis on those that have specialized themselves to death.”[†]

[†]John McPhee, from *Basin and Range* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981).

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Curated by Hope Svenson

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