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SUNLIGHT AND STONES: CELEBRATING THE SUMMER SOLSTICE WITH AN EARTHWORK TIMEPIECE

By Paul Sutinen

I was out on a windy plateau overlooking the Columbia River with a rounded 60-pound stone in my hands. I was a tool for another artist. I was helping to assemble an artwork.

Michelle Stuart had come from her loft in New York at the invitation of the Portland Center for the Visual Arts to make an outdoor work. I was part of the crew building *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns*. Ever since I had seen one of Stuart's preliminary drawings for the piece a couple months earlier, I knew that I wanted to be involved in building it. I sensed there were things that could be understood only through the building process and I wanted to discover those things.

As I write, it's been a week since the work was finished. It's been almost two weeks since I first drove out to the site. Now I plough through rough notes to make sense of what I found, typing in my Northwest Portland apartment on a hot summer day.

Back then, I was with a half a dozen volunteers working with Stuart to construct a wheel-like configuration of stones on the dry, grassy land. In plan the main circle is a hundred feet in diameter. Three lines pass through the center. One is aligned with the point of the sunrise. Another is aligned with the sunset. The third marks the north-south axis. At the center meeting point is a cairn of stacked stones about three feet tall. Cairns are also placed at the ends of the stones lines that point to sunrise, sunset and north. At the opposite ends of the lines are small stone circles. You stand in those "viewing circles" and sight the point of sunrise or sunset or north by lining up the center cairn with the appropriate cairn at the opposite end of the stone line.

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Stuart's part works have involved collecting mineral and earth samples from sites and crushing and rubbing them into sheets of paper to make abstract records of the sites. Her latest works have included photographs of

prehistoric constructions by Native Americans with the rubbed records. Place and time have been important elements of her work for quite a while. But *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* is the first of its kind for her. She is placing stones directly on land, not crushing it into paper. She is making a different kind of record.

Stuart had chosen another site for the work in April, but it had become unavailable. The work ended up on privately owned ranch land. This plateau is next to the originally chosen plateau and, in the end, perhaps a better place. There is a bluff above it where you can get a view of the work.

When I drove onto the Rowena Dell site on Saturday morning, July 16, to join the weekend crew the large circle and the north-side line had been sketched out with stones. Part of the camp had already been set up. Stuart and Portland artists Carolyn Cole and Mathieu Gregoire had been working there since Wednesday. I walked out to see how the piece was going, my shoe filling with prickly seeds from the grass. I grabbed my boots out of the car and sat on the ground to put them on, until Jim Minden pointed out the clump of poison oak I was sitting in.

We pitched out tents, unloaded our supplies and set out to gather a load of rock. With a big three-quarter-ton pickup truck and a small Datsun pickup, we drove back to Hood River and headed south toward Mt. Hood. We passed a few miles of road work and rough chunks of

crushed rock. I was beginning to consider the material, the smooth stones we sought rather than craggy bulldozed boulders. It was over 30 miles from the site of the work to the source of the stone, land belonging to Jack Mills in the foothills of Mt. Hood.

The order of the day was to gather "big ones." We pulled them from the ground around a trickling stream and from the piled banks of the river. We were full of energy and our selections averaged about 30 pounds apiece. Some were closer to 100 pounds; one kidney-shaped monster must have weighed at least 200 pounds.

The round trip took nearly three hours. By the time we got back it was near midafternoon and we had only gotten one load. We dumped it; part of the crew set off for another, while I stayed to help arrange the piece.

Being a novice I asked how we were to place the stones. "Make a drawing," said Stuart. That is, mix the big ones and the small ones in the line in an interesting way. Be conscious of your task. There we were, the work gang, making small choices for Stuart, the director. The big stones looked challenging at first. Lift, plod, drop, adjust—the pace became slow, methodical and meditative. One of my early thoughts as I carried these odd-shaped 50-, 60-, 70-pound stones was that I had no hospital insurance. I got more careful.

After a while we set out the line for the solstice sunrise. Stuart had been observing sunrise and sunset for

a few days (which hadn't been easy, since the days had been partly cloudy), and she made slight compensation for the fact that the solstice was still five days away. We stretched a piece of rope from the center of the circle, let it go slack, set enough stones on it to serve as markers, removed the rope and began to fill in the gaps with stones. It was a simple process.

After a couple of hours, working on the piece began to gain a hold on me, demanding my concentration much as a chess board becomes the sole focus of thought for the engaged player. I was thinking about how we had gathered the stones. Three hours for a load—how many more loads? Why did we need these particular stones? The site itself was rocky enough. We could gather all the rocks we needed there. But no, the pitted, black, sharp-edged igneous rock of the plateau did not have a good "feel." The rounded river rocks were a beautiful contrast and an obvious addition to the site, not just a rearrangement of what was already there.

It still seemed like an awful lot of work. But then I thought of the prehistoric predecessors of this stone arrangement (Stonehenge being the most obvious example), and I realized how easy we had it. What those ancient people would have given for a truck, or a road!

A road—it struck me that the road was the link that made source and site all one piece. The two deep ruts

across the horse pasture in which we worked was part of a piece of road that stretched continuously to the field of stones over 30 miles away. I could consider the source as a part of the same place as the site. I was planning to consider the limits of the artwork.

It was 6 o'clock by the time the next load of stones arrived from that "far end" of the site near Mt. Hood onto our grassy plateau. Our bodies told us the day's work was over. We headed for a Mexican restaurant in Hood River for dinner.

When we got back to camp we made an old-fashioned campfire and drank brandy and talked. My mind wandered in and out of the conversation. The sky was fairly clear and I was stargazing. How long had it been since I had noticed the Big Dipper? No wonder it took a while to get used to the idea of Stuart's work with the solstice sunrise and sunset. What does the solstice mean to us? How often do we look at the sun to measure time or season? We have a digital watch for the time, the calendar on the wall for the season. In the city we don't measure the seasons by the sun. We have no crops to grow. Our crops grow magically on supermarket shelves. Summer doesn't begin with the solstice, but with the end of the public school year. It doesn't end with the autumnal equinox but with the Labor Day weekend.

We went to bed around midnight. Wild gusts of wind slapped our tent wells throughout the night.



* * *

The next morning I made breakfast for eight on a Coleman stove. It took nearly an hour to scramble a dozen eggs, fry a couple of potatoes and cook some steak. The meal wasn't great, but it fueled us for another day. We left for a load of stone.

By the time I returned Stuart had begun the north cairn and the owner of the property had lent us a wheelbarrow. A wheelbarrow is a marvelous, simple tool. The process was now: Choose stone, load stone, dump stone. Other workers would arrange the dumps. Stuart would fit the cairn together.

Three truckloads of stones arrived that day. Around 7 o'clock five of us headed back to our jobs in Portland. Cole, Gregorie and Stuart remained to work.

On Monday my hand felt permanently formed to grip wheelbarrow handles and my forearms were stiff. Tuesday showed only a little improvement. Wednesday afternoon after work I drove back out the Columbia Gorge.

There were no cars at the site when I arrived, just tents. I saw nobody, but I noticed a lot of progress. The circle was densely lined with stones. Three sturdy cairns had been built. As I walked I saw part of a fourth cairn, the sunset cairn, that had been invisible because of the rise and fall of the land. Resting as the sun beat down out of the clear sky and the everpresent wind whipped the grass.

Half a cairn was all that remained to be built in the basic configuration.

The work had created its own jargon. Stuart and Gregoire were speaking of "flats" and "rounds," the types of stones needed at certain junctures in the cairn. Stones were scattered around the base of the cairn. I began looking for appropriate flats and rounds as we began to finish this tall (nearly five-foot) cone. We carefully looked, grabbed, fitted or discarded, stone by stone. Stuart said the cairn had taken all day to build. It was no wonder. I counted part of the outer layer and estimated that over 400 stones, chosen and fitted and refitted one at a time, were in this conical stack.

Stone by stone, that's how the work had grown. Each stone had been chosen over and over again, first at the source, then from the pile dumped from the truck, then perhaps shifted in the alignment. The stones were used as is. Measured by eye and hand, there was no cutting of a two-by-four, no molding of concrete, no welding together. Choose the stone, see if it looks right in the place, see if it fits, see if it will balance to hold itself in place, work with the simple material given—that was the process.

MOON CRATER

The last small stones arrived in Rob Range's Volkswagen bus. The truck had just been returned. We set about arranging the load.

Michelle Stuart

Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns, Rowena Plateau, Columbia River
Gorge, Oregon

Then.

Black lichen covered basalt.. acres of low grasses.. an occasional butterfly.. Killdeer nest and rattlesnake hole... an undulating plateau... in the distance the Klickitat Mountains against the sky. Below the stately Columbia moving in unison with the wind.. a big clean space... East Columbia River Gorge near Rowena.

Somewhere between Hood River and the Dalles... old Fort Dalles.. early Portage... land end of the Oregon Trail.. the rest of the weary journey on rafts... it was a mighty flow then...

Lewis and Clark traded blue beads for five dogs.. which they found very tasty.. they camped under the scrub oaks.. noting the Indian burial vaults on Menalooza Island and the beacon fire...

Lot Mitcomb.. Terry Quint's great great grandfather built Milwaukee City on the river.. supposing it would become Portland... while in fact Stumptown.. as unromantic as its name..grew into the city of roses...or so they say. but Lot also built the elegant steamboat Independence.. white lady of her time... conquering the Willamette and bringing five card draw up the river.

Down the river near Walla Walla the missionary Marcus Whitman returned to find his wife and child massacred by the Indians..change comes hard... a wagon train was a week away.. there wasn't to be settling yet in Was Perce land... the great Chief Joseph negotiated treaties only to see them broken... to see himself broken after the long walk through the Bitterroot Mountains.. his braves finally chose Sitting Bull.. he died on the Colville Reservation...or so they say..

Now.

After the Appaloosa and two wooden gates..a mile or so of scrub oak and pine lined with blue and violet cornflowers... or was it ballhead waterleaf or gorman's lovas...balsam root or yellowbells.. poison oak or the wild rose... there stands a lone pear tree by a basalt mount..entry marking entry to the sweeping plateau.

Farther on lies George Salfridgen's farm house.. the sanctuary of a kerosene lamp in the dark...black night birds and crickets encircling our fire ~~untill~~ dawn.

(cont.)

M. Stuart

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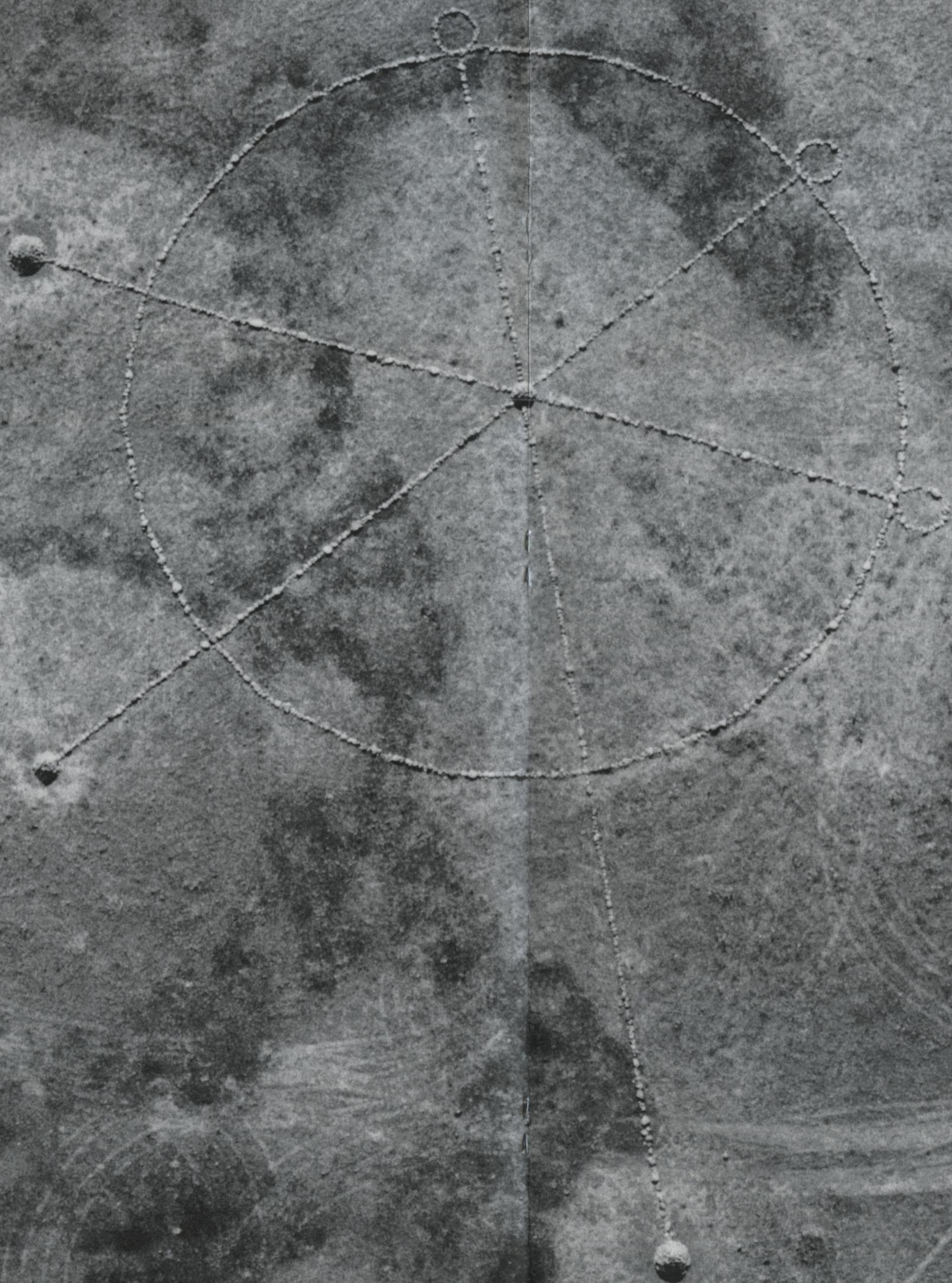
I stand in the wind at four AM every morning to see which notch or triangle on the mountains the rising sun will crown... the same each evening as the sun rests on clouds over toward the coast..canceled only by the Cascades.

Now on the plateau face to the sky stands Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns... Moon Crater and Aura to the south east... the round light stones and boulders came from Hood River at the base of Mount Hood forty miles south...they were chosen both to contrast with the dark indigenous basalt and to bring the mountain to the river...a form of ritual passage.. the transition of spring to summer..marked by water. Solstice...this cycle in time pattered by time...rocks..records from native american sites are buried under the central cairn..a poem by Han-shan...a line from Kiplings' Song to Mithras the Sun God..."many roads thou hath fashioned: all of them lead to the light"...later I learned that Mithras was born out of a rock..which breaking open permitted him to emerge...

The north cairn..the sunrise cairn..the sunset cairn are built on mounds..they form equal angles within the hundred foot circle.. they align with the sunrise and sunset on June 21,1979...Sunset cairn also aligns with a beacon on Menalooza Island in the river...it was not determined..I believe it was not by chance.

Indiana called Rowena...the place where the sun meets the rain...each day clouds hung low over the mountains during the sun's passage.. on the twentieth of June it was clear to project the exact orbit...the moon embraced the sun as it rose in the white fire dawn...on the Solstice from beneath a rock and a flower..hugging the Moon Crater.. four Killdeer were born in a small woven nest...they emerged like Mithras himself....

Journey in time..sensuous mounds..rounded earth base topped with cairns...flat stones..oval stones..shape matching shape..joined to link the dreamer to the horizon sealed by the sun...a circle of Midsummer light drawing the shadow of a small bird over the silent garden....



Stuart had been observing the undulating plateau from the bluff maybe 50 feet above the site. Her latest observations had led to a couple of additions. On the bluff the wavy, indefinite contours of the land could be clearly seen as mounds. At one point there's a mound with a broad recess in it. This was now to be the "Moon Crater," a poetic addition that called attention to the topography of the site. Near the Moon Crater was another mound pushing up through a ring of widely spaced stones. This was called the "Moon Aura," a part complementary to the Moon Crater.

In the Moon Crater we completed a broad disk of stones. The kidney-shaped monster had found its place at the center of this grouping. As the disk grew outwards the stones diminished in size.

At about 7 o'clock we had finished this last task, but we weren't ready to appreciate it.

The people living a few hundred yards up the rutted road had finally introduced themselves after observing our work for a week. George is a boatbuilder in Mosier. His wife is a nurse. They've renovated an 1880 farm shack in a wonderfully cozy home filled with well-cared-for antiques. There is no electricity, but the hot-water tank heated by the woodstove provided welcome hot baths for Michelle Stuart and Mary Beebe, PCVA's director, who had also been out hauling rock. We had a lush, lazy evening. We knew the work

was done and the solstice sunrise was the next morning.

At 4:30 am I woke and saw a thin crescent moon just above the light, orange-pink, glowing horizon. It was time to get up. Maybe I could get a photograph. I struggled into my clothes, brushed my teeth and splashed water on my face, grabbed my camera and walked through the quiet camp. An owl hooted in the trees behind me. The wind was chilly.

MIDSUMMER DAYDREAM

It was about a hundred yards from the camp to the big circle. The cairns were fat, dark silhouettes. Still half in dreams, I imagined groups of primeval people walking silently to their stone monuments to await the signal of the summer solstice. I sat in the solstice sunrise viewing circle and braced my camera on my knees. You never know if you can hand hold a quarter-second exposure unless you try. That was my last picture. My camera jammed.

The alarm clack went off back in camp. I went back to see who was up and heard stirrings in Stuart's tent. She suggested I start some hot water for coffee.

By the time the coffee was ready, the sky was getting brighter. Soon we were all standing in the viewing circle. The horizon was getting bright orange. "There it is!" we said almost in unison. The red disk appeared over the hilltops and grew until it sat on the peaks. The sun was

over the cairn, the sky was clear and blue; there could have been no better beginning for that day.

Beebe went back to sleep. Stuart, Gregoire and I walked around the work, talking and drinking cold coffee. It was too early. I went back to sleep in the back of my bus.

HIGH IN THE SKY

When I finally rose it was past 10. Breakfast was in progress. It was a rudimentary affair of bacon, eggs and hotcakes, and fitted the occasion perfectly.

The day was for musing about just exactly what it was we'd done. There wasn't much else to do before the celebration that was to occur at 4:56 that afternoon, the exact time of the summer solstice.

What is a solstice? None of us had clear answer for that. Later, I looked it up. At the summer solstice the Northern Hemisphere is at the point of its greatest tilt towards the sun, so that the sun appears to be at its highest in the sky.

* * *

I went out to count the stones. Everyone thought that strange, but I was fascinated by the task now finished. I counted a hundred stones in the main circle and paced the distance that they stretched. I paced off half the main circle and doubled it. Forty-six paces at nine stones per step

equalled 414 stones. I paced the radial lines, estimated the dense cairns, counted the viewing circles, counted the Moon Aura, estimated the Moon Crater, went back to camp and did some figuring. The total comes close to 3,100 stones. Gregoire estimates the weight (by counting truckloads) at 12 to 15 tons.

It amazes me, but the effort is really puny. We've had trucks and roads and we've only made a piece a couple of hundred feet across. By weight we've moved the equivalent of half of one of the huge stones at Stonehenge. We haven't made lines miles long as the Nazca Indians did 2,000 years ago in Peru. This work is no Egyptian or Mexican pyramid.

But monumentality really hasn't much to do with this piece. What amazes me about this process is that this group of essentially urban people has spent days carrying river rocks to a barren plateau. This is no quasi-religious monument. It is an artwork. We were constructing an artwork designed by an artist fully aware of the state of art in the fourth quarter of the 20th century. *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* is a drawn plan that makes you feel the relationship of your self to the earth and sky.

As a drawing in stone, the work fits the scale of the site. That was made especially clear when we drove onto the bluff overlooking the plateau. Just past a sign saying "Judi Lee's Little World of Dolls and Miniatures," we pulled into a long driveway paved with



crushed rock. The people were home and we said hello before going out to look over the edge.

The work spread out like a huge six-legged spider hugging the land. The stone disk in the Moon Crater looked perfectly round. The mounds of the landscape look domelike and cover the field like blisters. This vantage made me consider the work anew. The configuration I now viewed on the plateau below seemed somehow different from the lines of cobbles we'd been tending. It was as if someone else had made it and I was visiting for the first time.

The radiating line stretched to fill the plateau up to comfortable margins. The cairns were weighty markers. I saw the deep-blue Columbia far below them.

TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE

There on the bluff I could clearly see what was only in my mind's eye before. Stuart said she had slightly adjusted her planned arrangement to fit the site. "The piece was dictated by the terrain, not by me really," she said later.

Though she came to the site with a drawn plan for the work, Stuart said, "I got up there on top and I saw that there were three mounds and I've always wanted to do a piece with mounds in it. I realized that these mounds were aligned in a circular conformation so the I chose that one that appeared to be due north it dictated [an axis on which the center was placed]. The circumference of the circle was dictated by those mounds... I let that

happen. I could have forced it into something else, but I think it's really beautiful that something like that can happen."

This contemporary landscape artist is not a painter of landscapes but a worker with landscape. She has modified her ideal plan for placement on the real site. She has not taken a real view and modified it into an ideal scene on canvas.

Stuart's piece is like a lens gathering many things into focus. It makes me think about the undulating land because of the careful placement of the configuration. The choice of materials and construction leads you to notice other aspects. For instance, the layering of the cairns mimics the stratification of the land forms and their triangular profiles resemble the trees and power line towers across the river. The form is harmonious with the preexisting elements of the area.

History is also present. Stuart has chosen ancient forms and methods for her construction. Walking over the site, you come across rusted metal, broken fences, and cattle bones. These are records of history.

There is an island in the river to the West. We learned that it is an Indian burial ground. Mysteriously it lines up with the sunset cairn.

This piece we have built is a record of thought and work that should last for centuries (unless it succumbs to the building boom going on close by). Stuart alludes to land as a record in a short book she wrote

in 1976. It begins, "In that time the keeping of records reached such fervor that the history of one state alone took up the whole of a city and the history of a country the whole of a state. As time passes those records were not enough and the professors wrote a history book which was the size of the country itself and its edges coincided with its borders." The site is a record of its history if we know how to read it.

Why does this work conjure up history more than the bare land itself? I think it's because the piece is about time. The work's a clock that lets you know how close or how far you are from the solstice. We consider the sun not because Stuart has asserted domination over it, but because the work reminds us of our place in the infinite system.

* * *

From the bluff we saw the first arrivals for the celebration. Within an hour four or five dozen people were roaming the site like tourist art Stonehenge, eating chili and drinking cool white or red wine.

Later in twilight the sunset-viewing circle was full of lookers. The event was seen by people new to the work, people in a sense just seeing a happening.

But how could they get more? And what of the viewer of the future traveling up to the site? Says Stuart, "They'll find what they bring to it,

partially... If they come in the early morning or at sundown they'll have something of an experience of that light does to the piece... the shadows themselves will be like a clock or a gigantic calendar."

* * *

Now *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* is an art attraction fitting in somewhere with pieces by other contemporary artists in the deserts of Nevada and Utah, Michigan, Maine, and the perennial Artpark in upstate New York. It will be talked about most often by people who have never been to the site, but have looked at photographs instead. The dry wind,

the magnificent view up and down the river and the sun itself will be absent from the photos. Now that the work is built it will revert to being a plan, not drawn, but photographed. But if people go to the piece they should avoid going in groups and should spend time quietly there, walking around or sitting on the earth.

When I visit the work again, what will have grown up around it? Will some of the stones be displaced? What animals will have made their homes there? How will it have changed?

The sun will still rise and set on the solstice. I think that will remain constant.

"Sunlight and Stones: Celebrating the summer solstice with an earthwork time-piece" by Paul Sutinen was published on July 30, 1979, in the *Willamette Week* and is reprinted here in an edition of 35 on the occasion of the event:

SOLSTICE ALIGNMENT QUEST
June 21, 2011

Images courtesy the Portland Art Museum, Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive
Typewritten text © Michelle Stuart

*YU would like to thank researchers Lisa Radon and Hope Svenson, as well as James and Lisa Matthisen on whose land *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* currently sits.

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