

MODERN PETROGLYPHS

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All photos by [JAMES WOODCOCK](#)/Gazette Staff



Petroglyph artist Kevin Sudeith paints an image of a bride and groom carved into a cliff between Ingomar and Sumatra. The couple is the parents of a rancher who hired Sudeith to make several petroglyphs on his property.

Kevin Sudeith sculpts and paints the Montana landscape — literally.

The Minnesota-born artist has been scratching pictures onto Montana cliffs and painting them for parts of two years.

As artists did thousands of years ago, Sudeith creates petroglyphs.

Petroglyphs are carvings on rock as opposed to pictographs, which are painted images on rock. Sudeith does both.

Like the ancients, Sudeith makes art of things he sees around him and things that interest him.

On private property near Ingomar, he has carved into rock images of three pickups, two tractors, a cowboy, a space observatory and a bride and groom on their wedding day.



Sudeith's seriousness about his art and his respect for the rancher who commissioned the carvings quickly dispel a first impression that a project like this might inch into the realm of the odd.

A tall, lanky man with close-cropped hair, Sudeith, 45, wears a battered brown felt cowboy hat, western plaid shirt, tan pants, hiking boots and kneepads to protect him as he kneels on stony surfaces. Not even Hollywood could conjure up an image like Sudeith holding an artist's palette spotted with color and standing on a cliff with the vast Montana prairie rolling out beneath him.

Friendly and personable, he eagerly talks what led him to carve rock under a blazing mid-summer sun. The first petroglyph Sudeith ever saw didn't make much of an impression on him.

During a canoe trip into Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area when he was 14, he saw American Indian petroglyphs.

But it wasn't until he was 21 and saw ancient and contemporary aboriginal rock carvings in Northwest Australia that he was inspired to do it himself.

After getting a degree from the San Francisco Art Institute, he went to New York School for Visual Arts for a master's degree in painting.

He's continued to live in New York, where he has painted and started a business importing rugs from Pakistan and Afghanistan. He also works trade shows representing a sporting goods company.

A few years ago, he started making art on rocks, first with charcoal and then carving into the rock to make the image more permanent.

In April 2010, he headed west to find suitable places to make petroglyphs.

Through friends in Minnesota, he met a landowner in North Dakota who invited him to her property to do rock art.

There, he carved on granite iconic symbols of present-day North Dakota — farm equipment, a pumping

oil derrick, oil tanker trucks and B-52 planes from the Minot airbase.

In early September he arrived in Ingomar, where a friend lives.

Sudeith was sitting in the Jersey Lilly restaurant when a local rancher walked in and said in a booming voice, "Whose van is that outside?"

When Sudeith claimed ownership, the rancher asked if he wanted to sell it.

Sudeith said no.

In answer to another question, Sudeith said he was an artist.

"Are you drawing unemployment?" the rancher asked.

Only later did Sudeith get the joke in the rancher's question.

When Sudeith told the rancher he was looking for rocks to carve, the rancher invited him to look at the rocks at his ranch west of Ingomar.

Scouting the place, Sudeith found ideal carving surfaces where sagebrush and yucca grassland gave way to narrow gullies dropping over high cliffs.

He picked dark reddish-brown capstone for the project and went to work.

From early September into November, Sudeith carved several images, usually working from dawn to dark.

He carved the rancher driving a John Deere tractor. The rancher's son is behind the wheel of another John Deere pulling a seeder.

On a long, narrow rock about the size of a small boat, he carved a cowboy on a red horse herding two cattle through prairie grass. Based on a real Ingomar-area resident, the cowboy wearing a blue jacket sits in a contemplative pose, his hands on the saddle horn. Sudeith chiseled details of his chaps, bridle, saddle with rain slicker tied on the back and his cowboy boot in the stirrup.

On the same rock is an antelope, its head turning to look behind it, and the Chandra X-Ray Observatory, with a band of real gold leaf.

On another rock, he carved a white 1982 Ford pickup, a red Toyota pickup and a 1957 blue Chevy pickup, the landowner's favorite vehicles.



Not far away, Sudeith has carved his own signature emblem, several vaguely human faces surrounded by rays and a circle.

But the most unexpected is an image copied from the wedding photo of the landowner's parents, who homesteaded the land that can be seen from the cliff.

The couple looks happy and lean into each other, hints of the long life and many children they shared. The new bride holds her husband's hand with one hand and clutches her skirt with the other, which Sudeith suggests is a sign of nerves.

The couple married not long after the young woman arrived in Montana by train.

As butterflies flit around him, Sudeith paints a red sash around the waist of her deep blue dress. The groom wears a greenish blue suit with a white shirt and tie.

Slight, natural fracturing of the rock comes through a several places adding texture to the figures.

After he's done painting an image, he soaks a sheet of archival paper in water then presses it onto the rock carving, essentially creating a print of the petroglyph.

"It's a way to bring the art to town," he said.

Sudeith sometimes has helped with ranch work, building fences, replacing a cattle guard and loading grain.

"I like being useful and it's been a super education to see how winter wheat works," Sudeith said about the crop that's planted in the fall and harvested the next summer.

Sudeith did most of the carving last year, returning this summer for a week to finish up the project.

Sudeith camped out at the site, sleeping outside until ticks and mosquitoes drove him to sleep in his van.

He doesn't know what people will think of his art 50, 100, or 1,000 years from now.

But he's impressed with modern farm equipment and the people who operate them and thinks that in the future, people will too.

"The tractors they drive are awesome," he said.

How does he do it?

Kevin Sudeith starts a petroglyph by making a drawing of the image he later will carve into rock.

He transfers the drawing to stone by one of several ways, including a way he developed and considers a trade secret.

Then, he sculpts the image into the rock, sinking the whole image into the stone, so the surrounding rock is at a slightly higher relief.

He uses artist's hand tools as well as battery-powered tools such as grinders to carve the stone.

After the carving is done, he paints it with high-quality water colors that soak into the rock, permanently staining it.

Sudeith will show the Ingomar petroglyphs by appointment, although he won't be able to do it right away. He's on his way to Nova Scotia to carve more rocks there.

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