Art Interviews

A Talk with a Modern-Day Petroglyphist

Sabine Heinlein May 29, 2013

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Kevin Sudeith, "Swordfish, Saw Blade, and Ladder, Smelt Brook Shore," Cape Breton, NS, Canada (2012) (all images courtesy the artist)

Three years ago, the artist Kevin Sudeith left New York City to create stone carvings on immovable rock outcroppings across Canada and the continental US. A modern-day petroglyphist, he has also created more than two dozens images on rocks in undisclosed locations in New York. While this isn't exactly legal, it can be viewed as a kind of thoughtful and permanent graffiti. (And speaking of illegality and disclosure: When I buried my cat Mietzi in my Queens backyard, Sudeith carved a tombstone for her.)

Sudeith's work primarily documents the lives and stories of people who live near the carving sites. Other petroglyphs pointedly contrast with the ancient subject matter of his art form by depicting satellites and space vehicles.

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In a world exceedingly characterized by high-speed technology, virtual reality, and surveillance, Sudeith's carvings of human narratives — of human struggles and rewards — unfold slowly, both in their making and in that they're meant to be discovered rather than exhibited. The narratives on stone beg to be touched and felt, but for the most part are hard to access. The relative inapproachability of the works collides with an art world that believes it can access (and acquire) everything at its fingertips.

Kevin Sudeith's first solo show of pigmented impressions of his carvings, photos, and time-lapse video opened earlier this month at 308 at 156 Project Artspace in Manhattan. I spoke with him about the exhibition and his work.

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Kevin Sudeith, "Pumping Jack and Tanker Truck," Kenmare, ND (2010) (click to enlarge)

Sabine Heinlein: *What's in your backpack?*

Kevin Sudeith: My van is one big kit. For carving, I have two backpacks: one for heavy duty tools and one for lighter power tools and hand tools, as well as chalk for drawing compositions. There is a photography kit for shooting time lapse and a big beanbag with colors, brushes, pressing tools, and an old-fashioned painters palette. I have a large and a small tent, a tub of cooking supplies, and a couple of Persian rugs because they're great for camping. Then there's the general survival kit with compasses, knives, first aid, and a gun, and the tuck sack with yogurt, homemade jerky, cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, cured meats, nuts, dried fruits, and homemade preserves from friends.

SH: *It seems like much of your work is based on narratives you discover coincidentally. How do you come up with your motifs?*

KS: I had a vague invitation to Ingomar, MT, population: 7. I was eating breakfast in the cafe when a man in his 70s barks out, "WHOSE VAN IS THAT OUT THERE!?!" I jumped up to say, "Oh, that's mine … " He bellowed, "WHAT ARE YA SELLIN'?!" I told him I'm an artist, and he looked at me real hard and said, "Are you drawing unemployment?" Surprised, I stammered, "No! I live by my own means." I showed him my portfolio, and he said, "I've got some rocks. I'll take you out there."

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He had the best rocks for 100 miles, and we became great friends. I helped him with his farming, and he let me camp and carve on his land. A few weeks later, when I was showing his son my carvings, he asked whether I could carve his grandparent's wedding photo. His grandparents were the original European settlers on the land where I was working. His grandfather had come from Czechoslovakia in 1905 and homesteaded in Montana. He wrote back to Czechoslovakia, and his village sent him a girl. They were married at the train station and a photo was taken. They were married for 50 years and had nine kids.

Another time I was making a jerky and cheese sandwich in my van when a guy in a '70s Suburban pulled up for a chat. He asked me if I do memorials or gravestones. (Oddly, this had not occurred to me.) He said a little girl was buried on his land, and he wanted to mark the spot. I thought it was his niece or granddaughter, but it turned out she'd died in 1904, as her family passed through town. No one knew her name, only that her parents were artists. As the sun set over the glacial moraine, he showed me the one big stone that seemed to adorn three graves. Before I left town I carved “Daughter of Artists 1900–1904” in the pouring rain.

Kevin Sudeith, “Original European Settlers,” Ingomar, MT (2010)

SH: *There are some motifs that are less personal and allude to the collective culture of a place, like your carving of a moose in an area in Nova Scotia known for its big game hunting or the oil pumping jacks in North Dakota. What does it mean to engrave a motif that is already etched in a place’s collective consciousness?*

KS: One time, I drove from California to Nova Scotia for a gig that didn’t pan out. I was cast adrift. I camped at the northernmost tip of the Cape Breton. I watched whales swimming off the 200-foot cliffs overhanging the water. But without someone to share such dramatic beauty it’s nothing but geology. On my way back, when I stopped to consult the map, I saw two men drinking an afternoon beer on their deck. The big guy, Ray, asked, “So, you’re lost?” I responded, “I know where I am on the map, but philosophically, yes, I’m terribly lost.” He laughed, and I showed him my portfolio. Ray wanted me to carve a rock in his yard, and we had a debate about imagery and settled on a bull moose facing the house and lobster boats facing the road. One afternoon a truck stopped to look at the boats, and the driver said, “That’s my boat there.” It was a different boat, but he and other fishermen in the community saw themselves represented in the boats. Images may come from an individual’s story, but a particular story can invoke a broader communion between people.

SH: *I find it interesting how the freedom of dropping out and drifting from place to place juxtaposes with your exacting work ethics, careful preparation, and the endurance required to create petroglyphs. What does this tell us about your character?*

KS: As a kid I did wilderness camping, and as a young adult I spent extended periods of time alone in the desert. I knew from experience that times of isolation, an austere lifestyle, and physical challenge are transformative. I’ve pursued being an artist since I was a teenager and was prepared to commit fully to this project. New York offers limited opportunities for a petroglyphist, and its high overhead made hitting the road a good solution. The experience transformed my identity, built my confidence, and epitomizes what is important to me. It’s changed how I interact with people and loved ones.

SH: *Can you talk a little bit about the harsh conditions and adverse circumstances you encounter? It seems like your carving spots are often hidden in desolate areas.*

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KS: It’s funny but contending with the elements can be the hardest. When the

wind shreds my tent or tears my work paper, I'm reminded that it's my natural enemy. Carving in the rain is okay, but being soaked for days or weeks is dreary. I weathered a Sandy-like "weather bomb" at Smelt Brook Shore in Novia Scotia in my shaking van. Keeping a supply of drinking water is imperative. The short days in the winter leave long chunks where I can't work, and there's nothing else to do. At my camp in tornado-prone Dakota the only shelter was under the outhouse. Ignorance can be deadly when traveling alone in strange places. Driving Last Dollar Road into Telluride during a monsoon was idiotic and one of the most dangerous things I've ever done.

A sign for a carving at Smelt Brook Shore, Cape Breton, NS, Canada (2011)

SH: *What keeps you going?*

KS: I am very grateful to lead a wandering life, so I strive to make the most of it. The honor of making a contemporary yet permanent historical document is an ongoing motivation. As I mounted my bike leaving my first big petroglyph one evening, it hit me that regardless of my "career" the work will persevere. This realization was distinctly satisfying.

Some of my motivation is social, like the positive feedback from the community. When people identify with my work, I feel like am succeeding in the archetypal role of the artist.

SH: *You have an MFA, yet for the most part you've turned your back on New York's frantic and consumption–driven art scene. Do you think of yourself as an outsider (or folk) artist?*

KS: Peter Dykhuis of Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax was the first to suggest that I was a folk artist, which is honorable. The categorization of the work is someone else's job, so I'm not going to sweat the labels. But I did have to unlearn most of what I learned in art school. Identifying what deeply interests me and pursuing it has been more important than anything I learned in school.

SH: *Was it hard to go back to that "raw" perception after having lived in New York City as an artist for 17 years?*

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KS: For the first few months on the road I was amazed to have liberated myself from my personal property. Leaving New York's pleasures, stresses, and hustles seemed impossible, but then, as I watched the sun set over the open prairie, I was exhilarated. Yet after a few months the loneliness became deafening. I was in places where I knew no one, doing work people didn't understand. Then I discovered that old fashioned "visiting" is still a viable custom. So I would knock on people's doors on Sunday afternoons; their

hospitality — and the occasional hot meal — was an invaluable boon.

***SH:** What made you decide to return to New York and offer impressions and photographs for sale in a commercial gallery? How else do you make your work "accessible" to the public?*

Kevin Sudeith, "SpaceX Dragon" (April 2013) (click to enlarge)

KS: One benefit of having a show in New York is that I can get expert critical feedback. Bringing the work to town gives me an opportunity to see how it functions for people outside of the petroglyphs' communities. While we city folk are not farmers or ranchers, our bread and steak comes from their work. By showing their narratives outside of "their" community, I hope to soften society's boundaries between "us" and "them."

I've also made Google maps of the petroglyphs' locations and actual signs directing people to my work. If someone wants to see any particular petroglyph, I will make arrangements.

In addition, I've built a relational database that indexes all the images, carving locations, and impressions. But digital work is ephemeral (think VHS); if no one can read or update the database, this unique index is lost. In the future, people may stumble upon a random petroglyph and never know that there's a whole network of works around the country. So the actual carving site will always remain the most important part.

Kevin Sudeith's Modern Petroglyphs *is on view at 308 at 156 Project Artspace (156 Fifth Avenue, Suite 308, Flatiron District, Manhattan) through June 14.*

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Sabine Heinlein

Sabine is the author of the forthcoming book of narrative nonfiction Among Murderers. Her podcasts, photographs, and stories have appeared in German, American, and British publications, among them Die... More by Sabine Heinlein

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