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OPINION CULTURE

Making Art From Life

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By Alva Noë



Big Fish Petroglyph by Kevin Sudeith was created in October 2013 in Smelt Brook, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia in Canada. "All the fish on this rock are carved at life size, and most originate in the story of a local fisherman," says Sudeith.

Kevin Sudeith/Courtesy of Petroglyphist.com

Kevin Sudeith, whose work is up at the [Mike Weiss Gallery](#) in New York's Chelsea district, refers to his rock carvings as [petroglyphs](#).

His medium is an ancient, even a prehistoric one. And, like his pre-historical antecedents, Sudeith makes icons rather than pictures. A striped bass or an astronaut, for example, are presented as free-standing, devoid of context or situation, as monuments to their place in our lives.

There's something straight shooting and straight forward about Sudeith's work. The figures are intelligible and the sentiments that lie behind them are suitable for children and grandparents, downright patriotic, almost. And there's nothing wrong with that.

But spend a bit more time in the space carved out by Sudeith's work, as I have (both here and in Northern California, where I have had occasion to watch the artist at work), and the utterly *post*-modern character of his work, and its bright wit, jumps into focus.

I don't mean the obvious cross-up of using ancient means to make icons of contemporary life and culture.

As an example of what I do mean, consider the fact that Sudeith's work is not only site-specific, but that it makes unusually specific geological and cultural demands. First, you've got to find good boulders in more or less accessible locations. Second, you've got to get permission to make an art work out of them. The rocks may be on public or private land. What's required, third, is not just permission to make the work, but permission to make a work that will take months to complete and so will require the artist's long-term presence on the land and, in effect, in the community.

Upsidedown Spaceman by Kevin Sudeith was finished in July 2014 in Ingomar, Mont. "Besides being fundamentally awesome, aerospace themes exemplify human exploration, and they show the edge of humans' understanding of nature," says Sudeith.

Kevin Sudeith/Courtesy of Petroglyphist.com

The very project, then, is a social experiment; the artist works with rock and carving, but he also works with this more immaterial material of delicate social relations and community. This is no less the stuff of his art.

So Sudeith prowls the backroads of America, far from the art world and its glamorous enticements, looking not only for rocks but also for communities that will allow and enable his petroglyphic grindings.

Now the social experiment deepens. Sudeith doesn't just want to make a picture in the rock that will last the test of time. He aims, in a way, to document things that are of value for the community itself. These are not decorations, these are social interventions and documentations. The striped bass matters to the Nova Scotia fishermen whose boulders he worked.

And then there is the fact of their near permanence. They are not indestructible, but they do stand a reasonable chance of lasting something like the lifetime of a boulder itself, that is to say a long time — a geologically long stretch of time. They'll be around after we're all dead and long after Leonardo's greatest paintings have peeled and disintegrated.

Time — its different scales and our nature as creatures of time — is within the scope of Sudeith's project.

By now you may be wondering, how has he managed to bring his permanent site-specific boulder art to the project room at Mike Weiss's gallery on 24th St.?

He doesn't. What's on display in the gallery are prints, or impressions, one of kind, made using pulp and pigment at the site itself.

There is a certain irony in the fact that it is the very thing-like petroglyph in all its heavy material reality that resists commodification. It is, after all, permanently non-portable. Whereas it is the entirely immaterial social relations aspect of the work that is adequately captured in the things — the traces and impressions — that can be literally carried away from the scene and brought back to Chelsea.

[Martin Heidegger](#) contrasted mere things, like a boulder, or slab of granite, with what he called equipment, artifacts manufactured by us to serve this or that use. The work of art, he argued, was a kind of hybrid. Like equipment, and unlike granite, it is made not found. But unlike equipment, and in this respect like the granite, the artwork is autonomous of the uses to which we might put it. Heidegger also believed that artwork carries all sorts of invisible meanings and kinds of importance precisely for human beings who live in a cultural world that wouldn't be what it is if not for the existence of art.

Sudeith makes artwork that reminds us quite plainly of this hybrid, intermediate status, of the fact that they reside between granite and technology.

Works of art are not special bits of manufacture; it is rather that manufacture, in the broadest sense of making activities, is special to us. Tools, technologies, dwellings and living spaces, equipment, the stuff we make — it organizes us, fixes our habits and makes us what we are.

That is the stuff of art: the conditions of our living. And however much those conditions change and, so, however much the look and feel of our art may change, art and its place in our lives remains unchanged. We make art out of life.

This is what Kevin Sudeith is doing. He's making art from life, even if he is also making art from stone.

Alva Noë is a philosopher at the University of California, Berkeley, where he writes and teaches about perception, consciousness and art. He is the author of several books, including his latest, Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2015). You can keep up with more of what Alva is thinking on [Facebook](#) and on [Twitter](#): @alvanoë