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Art That Rocks

Ralph Gardner Jr. on a Petroglyphist **A20**

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

Rolling in Search of Rock



It's a question that obsesses artists, and many of the rest of us for that matter: how to make something that will endure, that will outlast the creator, that will keep his or her name on people's lips for years, perhaps generations, to come?

Kevin Sudeith may have come up with the answer: Create your project out of rock.

Enlarge Image



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal

Petroglyphist Kevin Sudeith discussing his show 'Modern Petroglyphs' running through June 14 at 308at156 Project Artspace in Manhattan.

Enlarge Image



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One of petroglyphist Kevin Sudeith's works.

"I was interested in making archival art," explained the petroglyphist—that's someone who paints and carves rock. "I used to make egg tempera paintings because they lasted longer." But nothing lasts as long as schist, etc. So in 2010, inspired by prehistoric petroglyphs he'd seen in Australia, Mr. Sudeith gave up his Queens apartment, loaded his hammer, chisel and power tools into his van and hit the road. He's basically been on it ever since, carving everything from tractors and NASA spacecraft in Montana to documenting the catch of the day—be that lobster or halibut—on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. All in rock.

A show of his work, "Modern Petroglyphs," is on view at the 308at156 Project Artspace, on Fifth Avenue and 20th Street, through June 14. It's not the stone carvings themselves, which would be prohibitively expensive to relocate, but prints made by painting the carvings with pigmented ink and then applying wet paper to the carvings, the paper absorbing the ink.

The artist also has a website, Petroglyphist.com, which includes videos of his en plein rock

process.

"I'm going back out as soon as the show comes down," Mr. Sudeith reported. "I'm headed to Nova Scotia to keep working on the different species of fish."

As impressive as some of the works on paper are—in my humble opinion, if you can paint a lobster you can paint anything, and the artist paints a hell of a lobster—I suspect they can't do justice to the actual works. For starters, that's because were you to stumble upon a carving of, for example, the Chandra spacecraft in the wild—on a vast remote Montana property, it's gilded in two-tone 22- and 23-carat gold—you might believe it the work of extraterrestrials.

By the way, the Chandra is an X-ray observatory. Why carve a spacecraft in the middle of Montana—the nearest freeway is 70 miles away, Mr. Sudeith said—rather than something more characteristic, like a cowboy? Actually, there is an elegant carving of a cowboy on horseback in the show, though I'm not entirely clear whether it's in the same spot as the satellite or elsewhere.

"The space stuff interests me because it exemplifies human adventure," explained the artist, who grew up in Minnesota but has lived in New York for the last 20 years, at least when he's not on the road. "It also shows the limits of our understanding of nature. The Chandra is changing how we understand the early history of the universe."

Not being able to see the carving in the flesh, or rather in the rock, is a deterrent to its unbridled appreciation. Another is that most of these works are inseparable from their stories—namely, how Mr. Sudeith convinced people to let him illustrate their rocks, and simultaneously to persuade them that he wasn't slightly off his own rocker.

He doesn't seem to be, at all. Indeed, he has an appealing, open, self-effacing manner—"One of the great things about this project is that it's not about me," he stated—that one suspects would put people, whether Montana ranchers or Brooklyn hipsters, quickly at their ease.

He said he met Joe Kanta, the farmer who allowed him to carve the Chandra on his property, at an Ingomar cafe—I suspect the only one in town, since Ingomar has a population estimated as low as eight.

Mr. Kanta asked, "Whose van is that out there?" In a community that small, unidentified vehicles stir excitement.

Mr. Sudeith introduced himself.

"What are you selling?" Mr. Kanta wanted to know.

"I said, 'I'm not selling anything. I'm an artist.'"

"Are you drawing unemployment?"

Mr. Sudeith said it took him a while to get the pun. "I took out my portfolio and showed him what I'm doing," the petroglyphist continued. "He said, 'I've got some rocks out at my place. I'm going to deliver the mail now and meet you back here at noon.'"

In characterizing his property's abundance, Mr. Kanta was being modest. Ingomar apparently isn't particularly good for farming—it's been in decline since the 1920s, and the railroad that once ran through the town no longer does so—but one thing it does have is lots of rocks. Indeed, based on a photograph of the Chandra carving in the show, the background more closely resembles Mars than Earth.

"He gave me carte blanche," Mr. Sudeith said. "He thought the whole thing was a little crazy."

Nonetheless, Mr. Kanta widened the road for the artist.

Mr. Sudeith confessed that there are no signs leading to the place, lest readers passing through Ingomar try to find the installation. "They don't want people going out there and breaking their neck and suing them," he explained. "Once you get to the site, I made some

markers so you know where to look."

Which raises the question of whether something is art if nobody sees it. But I was too polite to ask. Also, Mr. Sudeith is thinking long term. In 5,000 or 50,000 years from now, Ingomar may be the Hamptons. "I think of things like the library in Alexandria that was erased," he confided. " So much of our wondrous inventions—cars, airplanes—are ephemeral. Leave it in a field long enough, it turns into a pile of rust. I'm trying to document it in a way that makes a little bit of sense."

The enterprise also seems to turn on a certain amount of serendipity. The artist's first van broke down a month into his adventure. Then his cooler was stolen in North Dakota. The thief left behind his beer, but it was warm. "All my winter clothes had been in the cooler," Mr. Sudeith remembered. "That was the worst part of the loss."

He still hasn't replaced the cooler 55,000 miles later. He doesn't seem to miss it, though. "I eat mostly cold food," he said. "My staple is plain yogurt. It will keep for weeks."

I'll take his word.

Another example of the artist's adaptability came when he traveled all the way from Santa Barbara, Calif., to Halifax, Nova Scotia, because he heard of somebody there—through "a friend of a friend"—with "loads of rocks."

To say he was underwhelmed by the location really doesn't do his disappointment justice.

"They were way out in the swamp," Mr. Sudeith reported. "If the sea water goes up one meter, no one would ever see them. I was pretty bummed out."

But the beauty of the itinerant lifestyle, as I discovered hitchhiking around Scandinavia in my youth, is that great highs often follow terrible lows. A gentleman sitting on a porch, from whom Mr. Sudeith asked directions, invited him to check out a rock in his backyard. It became the location for a masterful carving of a moose.

Mr. Sudeith said he was inspired to paint the animal's portrait as a tribute both to Canadian wildlife and the local diet. "Moose is one of the main foodstuffs," he explained. "People prefer moose to fish. In Montana, we had antelope. That is gross. But moose is very delicious."

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