

The Recent, curated by Tessa Giblin

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Eglė Budvytytė, Helen Cammock, Dorothy Cross, Regina de Miguel, Mikala Dwyer, Nicholas Mangan, Angelica Mesiti, Otobong Nkanga, Katie Paterson, Micol Roubini and Simon Starling

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'The Recent' is named after Scottish geologist Charles Lyell's term for the post-glacial geological epoch, which he coined in 1833. Renamed the Holocene by Paul Gervais in the 1860s, Lyell's concept is a historical

precedent of the Anthropocene defined in 2000 by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer to characterize the human as a geological agent. According to Crutzen and Stoermer, the human-determined impact on geology, begun in the eighteenth century, is the predominant force shaping the earth for the future.<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh University houses Lyell's notebooks and fossils, so it is unsurprising that the Talbot Rice Gallery would stage an exhibition inspired by his concept given its (un)timeliness and the remit of their program to use the University's collections.

Borrowing Lyell's notion of deep time, based on Scottish geologist James Hutton's perception of the seemingly infinite layers of rock strata, Tessa Giblin's curatorial essay explores philosophical concepts of long-termism and the necessity of thinking beyond the average human life span to consider the transgenerational effects of a changing climate. The role of the art in this consideration is 'to stretch the human imagination, and situate our actions and impact in a deeper, future-oriented timeframe' (Giblin 2023:1), which might in turn complement and/or activate ecological activism. This is a big ask and, given the range of artworks in 'The Recent' which aesthetically cover almost all aspects of human-determined planetary impact, viewers will likely defy the architectural logic of the curation by 'focusing attention on particular works as opposed to others' (Nash 2023: 71). For my part, I was drawn to works, especially moving image, which

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<sup>1</sup> Lyell's scientific contributions included a pioneering explanation of climate change in which shifting boundaries between oceans and continents could be used to explain long-term variations in temperature and rainfall. While some of his theories have been disproved, Crutzen and Stoermer cite Lyell's 'Recent' as a precursor to the naming of human-determined impact on geology as the Anthropocene. See P. J. Crutzen and E. F. Stoermer (2000), 'The "Anthropocene"', *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (May): 17–18. However, as Kathryn Yussof (2018) points out, this is but one anthropogenic origin story.

generated emotional intimacies between flesh and stone, between *bios* and geological rock. This review focuses on these encounters.

## EPIPHANY IN THE GALLERY

The three works in the first gallery generated a constellation of thought.

Otobong Nkanga's *Tied to the Other Side*, 2021, a large-scale tapestry straddling the wall directly opposite the gallery entrance stopped me in my tracks. Its glittering weave so captivated the eye that I barely registered the surround sound of 'rain' pervading the gallery. (The sound was part of Angelica Mesiti's adjacent installation.) Amidst the shimmery gold and tangerine marine life forms woven in the ultramarine and Prussian blues of the tapestry's weft, Nkanga's signature pattern-cut limbs litter the ocean floor. They allude to bodies lost at sea during the Atlantic slave trade (1570–1808) and to the continuous dispossession of labouring bodies by extractivist corporations in quarry and mine. A golden threaded searchlight beaming across one side of the tapestry surface could be a ray of hope or a probing of the depths for further extractivist opportunity. The tension between a reparative oceanic dream space and the toxic sheen of non-sustainable materials—yarns ranging from viscose, elirex, acrylic and mica (used in make-up)—prevents complete immersion in an Afro-aquatic futurism. Instead, the work's conflicted beauty brings to mind landfills of textile and cosmetic waste that Europe outsources to countries such as Africa in neocolonial forms of exploitation.

The title of Helen Cammock's large-scale conceptual wall painting, *If you take everything you like just because you like it, just because you want it the ghosts will have no place to play and the children no place to rest*, 2023, stretches in white text across the length of a dull cerulean blue surface. It acts as an admonition, a warning and a memorial that connects intergenerational times and spaces. Originally produced as part of Cammock's exhibition 'I Will Keep My Soul', which toured LA in 2022 and New Orleans 2023, this work derived from research in the Amistad Archives, New Orleans, a repository that documents the history of African Americans, especially the Civil Rights Movement. While this is referred to in the exhibition booklet, the statement acquires a more generic tenor in 'The Recent' that invokes the short-term greed of extractivism and urban regeneration rather than the legacies of colonial dispossession that continue to impact African American communities in the US.

On the adjacent wall, Mesiti's *The rain that fell in the faint light of the young Sun*, 2022, a series of acidic-monocoloured prints, each displaying a black-and-white photographic scan of a fossilized rain-imprinted specimen, initially seems at odds with human-determined damage. In a previous solo-exhibition at Talbot Rice Gallery in 2021, 'In the Round', which explored interrelations between plants, sound and people, Mesiti had chosen one of Lyell's specimens—raindrop impressions preserved in dried mud from Nova Scotia, 1849—as part of her selection of items from the University's collections. In *The rain that fell...*, the prints of Lyell's and related specimens from other collections appear as samples of 'second-nature' mimicry. While the rain impressions on Lyell's specimen were baked in mud by the sun

before the next tide could wash them away, the temporal lag due to the large tidal ranges of Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy, Mesiti's imprinting of the elemental is derived from a set of technical processes such as digital scanning, cutting and reprinting. However, a more intimate kind of human/non-human mimicry occurs in her black and white, 8-minute video *Future Perfect Continuous*, 2022. Shown in an adjacent cubicle, it demystifies the origin of the surround sound: the 'rain' derives from the finger clicking and clapping of a group of performers of different ages and backgrounds whom Mesiti had asked to reenact a children's game in which hands are used like percussion instruments to mimic the sound of rainfall. As the camera zooms in and out and around the group, the performers' gestures shift from being melancholy invocations and acquire a critical mass suggestive of collaboration *with* rather than mastery *of* the elements.

Watching the mesmerizing loop, connections emerged between the pockmarked sur-faces of the printed fossils and the scarred skin of some of the young men's faces in the video, men whose dual ancestry was apparent. Although this was not the artists' intention, the mutually-etched (sur)faces unhinged the neutrality of stone: diasporic migrations and the movement of glacial erratic rocks and boulders in deep time both bear marks that tell stories. This geo-poetic association of skin and stone reverberated back onto Nkanga's and Cammock's works like a footnote that spoke to multiple and interconnected histories of trauma and resistance.

READING LYELL WITH YUSSOF

Lyell's undeniably beautiful fossilized raindrops specimen as well as his notes on the Recent in *On Fossil Rain-marks of the Recent, Triassic, and Carboniferous Periods*, 1851, are on display in an upstairs vitrine. They look ancient, scientific and neutral. However, as Kathryn Yussof argues in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), geology as a language of rocks and deep time is not innocent but dependent on interpretations of fossils uncovered through mining. For Yussof, the idea that the human as geologic agent was born in the Anthropocene is a 'deadly erasure' (8) of a 'racialized geosocial matrix' (13) that preceded capitalist economies of extraction. Lyell's reflections on rock are undergirded by his idea that European Man is the epitome of the human species' rational and moral development, heights he believed would take aeons for other races to scale, if at all. In his *Travels in North America* (1845), chapters move between accounts of his geologic surveying of North America and speculations on race that align black people to rock strata as 'a different species in time than "the White"' (Yussof, 74), Lyell's developmental theory of racial progression situating Blackness as a belatedness that cannot arrive (Yussof, 78).

Although his ideas were perhaps more patrician than exploitative in their racism, they nonetheless link to Enlightenment classifications of Black life as the inhuman Other to the rational human as embodied by elite white men. The paradox of this rational human is that it is committed to wreaking havoc on the planet, including the destruction of life in war and genocide, due to beliefs in both the fungibility of 'inferior' classes and races and the longevity of the species Man to which these others are not considered as belonging. While the naming of the Anthropocene as an epoch of human-

determined planetary destruction has introduced the heretofore-unconscionable idea that Man might become extinct, populations of people of colour have already lived through multiple anthropocenic disasters from the 1441 Atlantic slave trade, whereby Africans were brought to Brazil to work in Portuguese mines, to the destruction and transplantation of people, flora and fauna in the 1492 and 1610 European invasions of the Caribbean and the Americas (Yussof, 32). Yussof's analysis undermines the universality of a singular future effected by climate change. Instead, the fractured timelines of colonialist and neocolonialist extractivisms raise questions about whom and for what responsibility needs to be taken. This might be a lot to lay at the door of 'The Recent', but, given that extractivist and migratory economies of minerals and labour are obliquely inferred by many of the works, some unpacking of the entwinement between geology and race in Lyell's writings would have been apropos. This is not what 'The Recent' set out to do. Nonetheless, despite the exhibition's premise of 'deep time' neutrality, a sense of how the geological might be imbued with difference emerged from some of the films.

#### REWIRING RELATIONS BETWEEN FLESH AND STONE

Projected to scale on a freestanding box-screen that reached the heights of the Georgian gallery's balcony, Dorothy Cross' *Stalactite* (2010), an image of an approximately 500,000 year-old, 7-metre, calcified formation, was sublime. Shot in a cave in the West of Ireland, the stalactite is the second largest of its kind in the world. Standing underneath it, a pre-pubescent,

bare-chested male soprano vocalised dissonant notes that resounded throughout the building, while the camera glided, slowly, speedily and occasionally pausing, up and down the multi-pronged rock protrusion. The juxtaposition of human vulnerability and non-human implacability was wondrous, yet monstrous in its reminder that planetary creativity exceeds human agency. This brought to mind Gayatri Spivak's notion of the planet as being 'in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan (2015, 291). While the stalactite will continue to drip and harden in planetary time, the boy's vitality will extinguish in a flicker. However, between these incommensurable temporalities, *Stalactite* proposes a time beyond the human in which the operatic echoes produced by the boy's voice box might continue to reverberate through the earth without us. This is humbling and can, as with other works in the exhibition, be productively thought through Spivak's notion that: 'If we imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away (2015, 292).

The abstraction of imagining ourselves as co-emergent 'planetary creatures' rather than Self/Other antinomies, was played out in Eglé Budvytytė's video *Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies, Imploding Stars*, 2020, a collaboration with Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Steponaitytė. Accompanied by a hypnotic electronic score and song about a bacterial planet that both 'holds on to you' and 'fucks your past', a troupe of Gen Zee-styled performers glide through the forests of the Curonian Spit, their clothing unravelling as a result of being previously buried and eaten away

by soil larva. While the choreography proposes a fashionable co-existence between humans and lichens,<sup>2</sup> the soundtrack's manifesto for interspecies symbiosis generates a dystopian air. As the group make their crab-like descent to the ocean, their fingernails morphing into talons, one of them, legs splayed, head cropped, sits at water's edge, a foetal-like form attached to their body by an ersatz umbilical cord. The monstrous, yet creative, mutation of this humanoid stillbirth surfaces from a speculative future.

While predominant anthropocenic debates tend to revolve around a catastrophic future that can be warded off if 'we' act now or one in which 'we' are doomed, the future-pasts of Yussuf's multiple anthropocenes provide other geologic heritages, what she calls 'the ghosts of geology's epistemic and material modes of categorization and dispossession' (xii). It is not that these other kinds of geologic timelines will save 'us' but that they hold possibilities of re-imagining relations between human and rock bodies in which multiple futures might be traced.

One such future is addressed in Micol Roubini's *The Magic Mountain*, 2023, a 4-channel video installation on a continuous, changing loop, which explores the psychic connections between an abandoned asbestos mine in Balangero in Italy and local inhabitants of the area. The striated, contaminated, mineral-stained, terraces surrounding what is now a still lake—previously, the mine's glory hole—are as much a character in the poetic documentary as the disparate group of people who, on two portrait-shaped

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<sup>2</sup> Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the film, clearly, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton University Press, 2021) is a lodestone.

central screens, recount monologues based on dream workshops Roubini held with local participants from which the performative script was generated. The collective script opened up space for unvoiced residues of community trauma to be addressed and distributed between the participants who each performatively engaged with the dream they were allocated to recount in the film. Many of the dreams referred to the white powder that would have been a toxic residue of the asbestos mining process, and the cause of lung mesotheliomas endemic to the area. But the performative dream re-enactments enabled the psychic residues of traumatic damage to humans, animals and plants to be excavated and perhaps collectively exorcised, while the 1:1 scale incorporated viewers as witnesses.

Within the film, its psycho-dramatic therapeutic is complemented by the measures recounted by one of the scientists who study the levels of poisonous waste in the area as part of a regeneration project begun in the 2000s. (The mine closed in the 1990s). He tells about how the cyanobacteria in the non-indigenous plants that were introduced (by helicopter) to stabilize the area's dumpsite are beginning to neutralize the reactive asbestos fibres that remain in the landscape. This is not a case of Gaia returning to health, but a human/nonhuman collaboration to mitigate the effects of extractivism. It will be an extremely slow and expensive process, but eventually, the area will re-open as a rewilded leisure park, a future tourist attraction. An adjacent small monitor shows silent archival footage of the opening of the mine. Be-suited businessmen and politicians, diggers and other machines invade the area in a jubilant spirit of modern technological

development, while the faded colour resolution of the blue-tinged footage eerily invokes the shroud of white dust that would damage the bodies of local land and people as well as the dissolution of progressivist dreams. Another screen shows bags of asbestos sealed and stacked in a warehouse entered by persons in protective clothing, the slow motion footage adding to the latency of threat. Apparently, these bags will be placed ‘safely’ underground, their poison inert. By contrast, in the film, the psychic poisons of the community’s memories and dreams surface in a geo-poetics that speaks to survival after disaster, after one of ‘a billion [...] anthropocenes’.

Despite its tendency to universalise the ancestral and the geopolitical, ‘The Recent’ admirably proposes the human as a steward of the planet rather than a conqueror, a visionary rather than consumer.<sup>3</sup> And for all the proximity to racist ideas in Lyell’s writings and the outdated nature of his theories, his notion of geological change as being consistently operative over epochs could also be seen as a provocative counterpoint to the pessimism or opportunism engendered by narratives of catastrophe. In contrast to the latter, the geologic strands of ‘The Recent’ propose planetary subjectivity as the intimate interconnectivity of human and nonhuman creaturely life. The question of how to act on this sensibility beyond the sphere of art and film remains an open one.

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<sup>3</sup> This was also exemplified in the exhibition in more singularly healing ways in works such as Katie Paterson’s bespoke incense *To Burn, Forest, Fire*, 2021, and Regina de Miguel watercolour votives for the sinking islands in the Tuvalu archipelago *EXVOTO/Arrecife (EXVOTO/Reef) 1-15*, 2021.

## References

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