

Stone Puzzles

Dominique Robin



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
THE ITALIAN ACADEMY
FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN AMERICA



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Exhibition

March 28 – May 8, 2019

The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University

Co-sponsors: *Aide à la création* Ministère de la Culture (France);

Bourse Actions innovantes Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine (France)

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Left: *The Hole* from the *Debris* series, Manhattan, 2019.

Stone Puzzles

Tuscany, 2016



The Puzzle of Prehistory By Maria Stavrinaki

To put a puzzle together, you first need to recognize its pieces. People long visited caves, looking at the images painted on or carved into the walls without really seeing them; for even longer, mankind lived in the world without thinking for a moment that its age could be measured by studying its mineral matter. Of course, people walking in fields after a storm were surprised that all the freshly turned up stones were more or less of the same sort. The sudden appearance of these stones and the similarity of their shapes were a cause of astonishment reflected in the name they were given: “ceraunia” or “thunderstones.” Even when science began to solve the enigma by declaring that such stones had not descended from the heavens but were chipped by men thousands of years earlier, they still remained a source of amazement. Having “fallen” from the heavens, the enigmatic stones now formed part of the history of the earth: astonishment at lightning segued into astonishment at the vastness of time prior to human history. This was the scale of time now confronting modern man, the scale now measuring their reason and imagination.

When Dominique Robin, climbing the paths of Tuscany, observes smooth stones that have clearly suffered a sudden split, he re-enacts the stupefaction that lay behind the invention of prehistory in the eighteenth century. His stone puzzles are a distillation of stupefaction as a specific psychic, gnoseological, and metaphysical condition forming the foundation of modern man. This foundation, never solidified because it is forever unknowable, is foregrounded and activated by what André Leroi-Gourhan referred to as an operational chain—a coherent sequence of technical and symbolic processes intended to guarantee mankind an effective grasp of the world. Robin observes the geological world juxtaposed with the domesticated world, recognizing stones forming a coherent whole within a shapeless whole. He collects the stones, puts the fragments back together to photograph them, or photographs and films someone else’s hands putting the puzzle together.



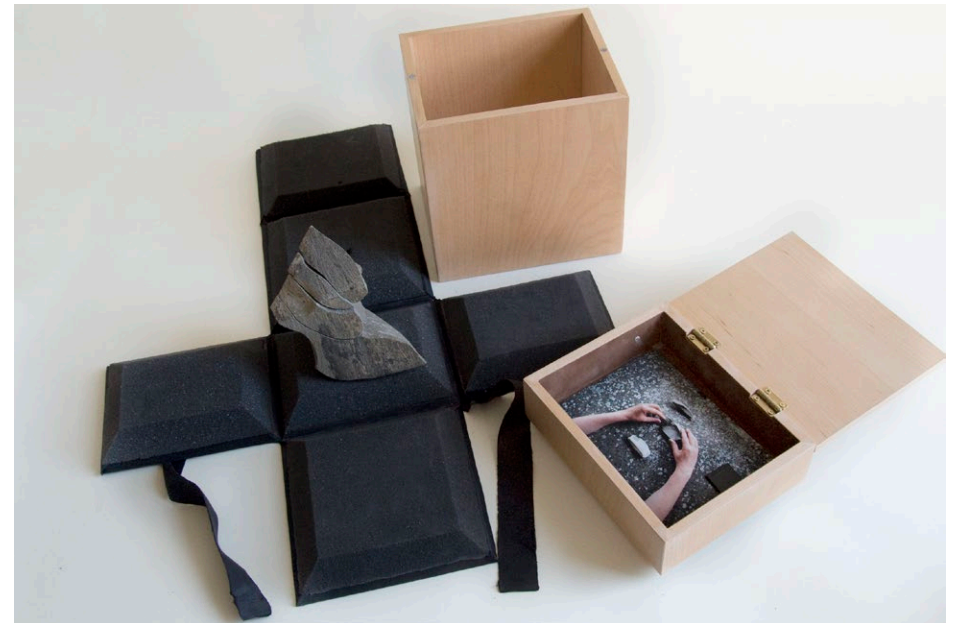
Above: *Stone Puzzles*, printed on Hahnemühle paper. 22.25 × 32 in. Ephemeral water marks on stone.
Left: *Stone Puzzles*, printed on Hahnemühle paper. 22.25 × 32 in. Mountain.

The seventy-million-year-old stones gathered by Robin split suddenly, as if to marry two theories believed by nineteenth-century geologists to be incompatible: Charles Lyell’s theory of the imperceptible slowness of geological movement and Georges Cuvier’s catastrophism, which posited rapid geological change. Slow and sudden at the same time: the formation, erosion, and splitting of the stones summarizes not only geological processes, but also the paths taken by modern thought as it sought to understand geology—scientific hypotheses, religious beliefs and human experiences projected onto the inhuman scale of geology, and above all the need to “tame” a world indifferent to mankind by imbuing it with meaning. The stones, split and scattered, are strikingly so for anyone sensitive to the moment of splitting, eager to project their emotions onto the blind behaviors of minerals to humanize their radical otherness and contrarily to “make wild” the tamely familiar. When hesitant hands, filmed by the artist, set about the puzzle, they in turn re-enact the invention of prehistory, expressing the same stupefaction at accidental shapes that can generate an image, then draw on that sense of stupefaction to turn obtuse stones into the pieces of a puzzle.

Maria Stavrinaki is a habilitated Associate Professor in history of contemporary art at the Université Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne.



Stone Puzzles, wooden box (maple) with two postcards and a video file. This box was created specifically for this stone.





Stone Puzzles—The Film (Almost a Review) *By Michele Tavola*

Main actresses: the protagonists are sixteen stones collected by Dominique Robin during walks that might have seemed like just pleasant strolls in the mountains, but which were actually casting sessions for his film. As is usually the case with films in which human beings perform, the choice is not made randomly by putting in front of the camera the first person you pass on the street. The selection is careful and meticulous: you need the right personalities for the script, the right faces for the role. Likewise, our artist-director does not pick up the first stone he finds on the path, but goes in search of the perfect subject to give shape to his project. As Dominique himself explained, “we are dealing with stones polished and fractured by time, whose pieces have not yet been dispersed; ancestral forms modified by the rain, the sun, or perhaps by the passage of a heavy animal.” As beguiling as the divas of cinema, they do not reveal their exact age, but they are about seventy million years old.

Supporting actors and actresses: the hands of nine actors and actresses who interact with the stones, assembling the individual fragments to recompose the original form. Some are quick and agitated; others linger, hesitant. Some, after finishing their work, brandish the recomposed puzzle like a trophy, a symbol of success. Still others, having completed the task, rest symmetrically on the marble table before leaving the camera’s frame, as if exiting with a bow like the respectful salute of a martial-arts practitioner at the end of a fight. Their movements are embodied thoughts and, if we observe attentively, we can reconstruct the personality, psychology, and character of the people to whom they belong.

Scenery: marble tables shot from above through a frame that allows no glimpse of the edges and that insinuates in the viewer the sensation that the surface is infinite. The stone protagonists rest on other fragments of rock, smooth and perfectly cut, which present fascinating textures, as visually powerful as the most successful compositions in the history of informal painting. The twins of these tables probably worked as models for Jean Dubuffet between 1958 and 1962, when the French artist created the *Phénomènes* series.

Screenplay: first frame: the decomposed fragments of rock rest on the table, arranged randomly. Last frame: the stone is shown perfectly recomposed. Between the first and the last image, the hands make the puzzle.



Stone Puzzles, printed on Hahnemühle paper, 22.25 × 32 in.

Plot: sixteen episodes, one for each stone protagonist. In the course of each episode, the hands, starting from the individual fragments of rock, are dedicated to restoring shape to the stone. They all begin and end in the same way, like life, which begins with birth and ends with death. Like the episodes in the film, some existences are simpler, others more complex, some shorter, others longer. One could bet that the critics (more or less militant), will produce multiple exegetical interpretations, propose different readings, some symbolic and some literal, analyzing the meaning of the film in varied and surprising ways. Like all great works, Robin’s work cannot be interpreted in a single, unambiguous way—it is destined to be misunderstood and distorted.

Photography: deserves an Oscar nomination.

Soundtrack: the sounds of nature in the Tuscan countryside, the singing of birds in the background, and the sound of stones tapping together—all this placidly accompanies the rhythm of the images.

Duration: twenty-four minutes, during which time is suspended; it ceases to be a determining element for the development of the action and is replaced by the poetry of the forms that are gradually composed.

The screening: the run at the Italian Academy in New York is not a first: the film has already been presented in Montalcino, Tuscany, and in Venice and Milan. But as almost always happens, the protagonists, following the custom of stars who always appear on special occasions such as Oscar Night or the Venice Film Festival, have shown up, punctual and flinty. The stones, in addition to being on screen, are presented physically as sculptures, in photography, in drawings inspired by them, and in an artist’s book of 164 pages. In addition, for guests who want to try their hand at the stone puzzle, there is the opportunity to play with the re-composition of fragments of a stone, experiencing first-hand what the artist did and then communicated in his film: it is an opportunity to understand the feelings and emotions from which the whole project was born.

Michele Tavola is a curator at the Gallerie dell’Accademia di Venezia.

Debris

Hudson Valley, 2019

The Bad Genie By Dominique Robin

I picked up some stones in the Hudson Valley—as I had done in Tuscany—always with the same impulse: that I can hold them in my hand, and that they are beautiful. Some came from an old quarry in Cold Spring in upstate New York, others were removed from a construction site in Manhattan. The former appear to be pegmatite, i.e., “composite” granites (in Latin, “*pegma*” means “to assemble”), which have rich black spots—like charcoal—that stimulate the imagination. The latter group of stones has green reflective surfaces, flecks of glittery silver, and is mostly composed of iron, which makes them ferromagnetic. Unlike my Tuscan rocks, the rocks of the Hudson Valley were separated from the earth’s crust not by time but by dynamite and jackhammer.

I assemble this debris in twos or threes and then make sculptures (although this word is a bit exaggerated, for such simple assemblages). It is the sort of “drawing” that one makes absentmindedly and playfully while walking or sitting on a river bank and with which one can pleurably spend an entire afternoon. Sometimes I add polished glass found in the river, or a piece of dirty cardboard, to these creations. Ultimately, I decide that each assemblage will have at least one anthropomorphic stone. My purpose is not to show faces in the shape of stones but rather try to point out my own pareidolia: that human tendency to interpret faces—and, more specifically, to see eyes in inanimate objects or in natural phenomena—which is a genetic trait, written in our body like software, scientists say. “Human brains are exquisitely attuned to perceiving faces. These sophisticated detection skills combined with our brain’s compulsion to extract meaning from the sensory chaos that surrounds us, is why we see faces where there aren’t any.”* From my point of view, pareidolia is a problematic aspect of human perception because it testifies to our desire to see ourselves as constantly present, especially in nature. From there it is only one step from perceiving an image to interpreting that image as a sign from the gods. This tendency can spread like an oil slick during a spill. If the clouds and the stones have eyes, people say, obviously it is because gods are watching us.



Manhattan Hole, printed on Epson Hot Press Natural paper, 20 × 13.35 in.

Sometimes I think that “pareidolia is a bad genie of the Anthropocene.” I like to articulate this sentence because while it seems pedantic or meaningless, it has a deeper meaning: I mean “bad genie” in the sense that it has the power to grant wishes, but it brings only bad magic. The phrase describes the symptom of a fight that’s already lost, because of genetic factors. Like all *Homo sapiens*, I project myself into the landscape and the animals. Despite my awareness of this, I keep doing it in my art.

We could repeat the same sentence with the word “prosopopoeia” (the personification of an object) in place of “pareidolia.” Prosopopoeia is also a bad genie of the Anthropocene. To put it in provocative terms: it is high time to kill Mickey Mouse, to stop talking animals, to no longer see smoking monsters in the cumulonimbus, and to finally close the eyes of the gods. In short, let’s try to not see our presence everywhere, even if we are now the cause of everything from the shape of the clouds to the silhouette of the trees. A stone, good heavens, is a stone. The future is tautological.

Can I manage in my formal work to resist my own tendency to project myself into the landscape? In reality, it is a balancing act. I do not know if I am acting as a worried intellectual or simply as a child making art. As far as I can see, I like stones that look like the heads of people. I assemble them for the beauty of the gesture. I am happy to pay tribute to these simple shapes and I enjoy creating showcases, expensive printed photos and charcoal drawings to tell a little of their story. I gather scientific knowledge as I can and create science fiction with carbon and ghosts of the landscape: once upon a time, there was a time-space that had waves going through a rocky peak; then, suddenly, the jackhammers came and the stone creatures sprang up.

* “The Fascinating Science Behind Why We See ‘Faces’ In Objects” from mentalfloss.com/article/538524/science-behind-pareidolia. For further information, read “Seeing Jesus in Toast: Neural and Behavioral Correlates of Face Pareidolia” in the journal *Cortex*: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3980010/>



Carry, printed on Epson Hot Press Natural paper, 20 × 13.35 in.



Mahicantuck, charcoal on paper and stone sculptures, 20.5 × 26.5 in.



Rock-bottom, charcoal on paper and stone sculptures with magnet and cardboard, 20.5 × 26.5 in.





Loose rock, charcoal on paper and stone sculptures, 20.5 x 26.5 in.



Secret Words, installation, 144 x 40 in.

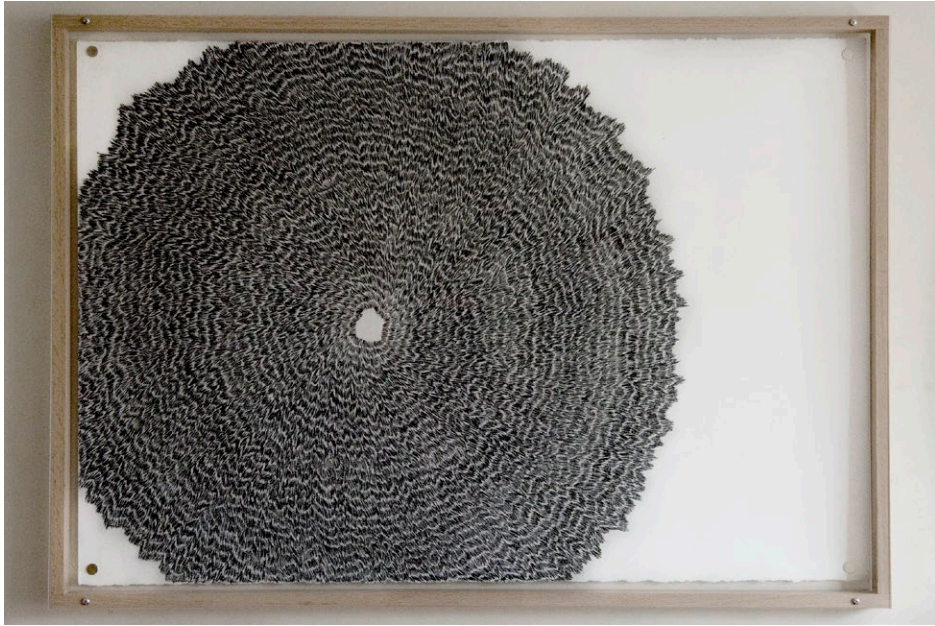
This installation will be created during the exhibition. "Secret Words" is made with audience collaboration: a series of secrets are written by the visitors and obliterated with graphite penciling, leaving just one remaining word. Among the mineral forms, then, a wall progressively displays illegible words with occasional fragments of secret thoughts.

Instructions for the creation of "Secret Words"

1. Choose a stone on the table. All the stones are from the Hudson Valley.
2. Find the shape of your stone on the wall.
3. Write a secret, or a wish, inside the shape of the stone. Use the red pencil and please do not write outside the outline!
4. Make your text illegible: cross out all the words except for one.
5. Write your first name and the date and put the secret up on the wall.
6. Wrap your "secret stone" in its plastic bag and take it home with you.

Carbon Flowers

New York, 2019

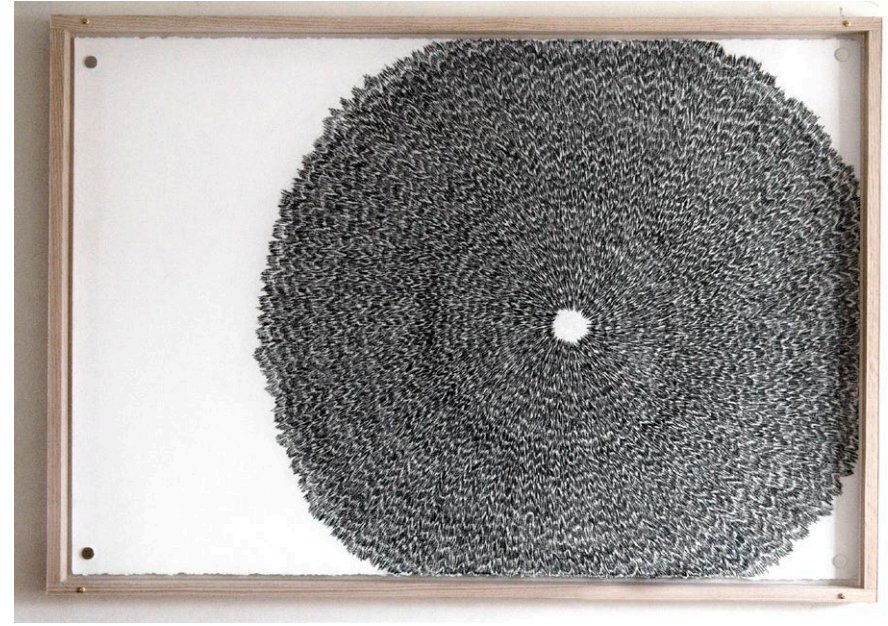


Perpetual Blast By *Dominique Robin*

“Born in stars, carbon catalyzes nuclear fusion reactions by which the sun converts hydrogen into helium. It is through it that the sun shines. With carbon, our body goes to the stars, and the stars to our body, because this element, present from the beginning of the solar system, is also the chemical base—the molecular skeleton—of all known life.”* Carbon is the key component of my “Oil” series (photos made with petroleum), and of “Motor Oil Drawings,” and the primary element of “Stone Puzzles.”

For this reason I chose to work with graphite, a classical art medium made entirely of carbon. I created the entire series with a graphite pencil and... a *lot* of patience. These drawings are a kind of meditative practice. The creation of these “carbon flowers,” made with repetitive lines, requires a lot of concentration, but the act of drawing them mimics the formation of growth rings in a tree stump, or a primeval big blast. I tried to draw the event as I imagine it: an empty space at the center, with a fantastic energy all around it, like a perpetual blast, or a moment in time that is suspended forever.

* *Carbone, ses vies ses œuvres*, by Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and Sacha Loeve (Seuil, 2018)



Carbon Flowers, drawings, graphite on paper, 46 × 32.5 in.

Oil

In a French Garden, 2015–2017



From the *Oil* series, printed on Hahnemühle paper, 38 × 26 in. Reflection effects on motor oil.

Oil Mirrors By Diane Bodart

The work of Dominique Robin is particularly fascinating in that it manages to condense by a new medium—oil photography—several optical effects that are specific to different traditional mirroring instruments: first, the delimited and life-size reflection one would see in a flat mirror, on the surface of his basin of oil; second, the focusing that comes from reducing the luminous intensity (an effect one can get from a “black mirror” or “Claude glass,” a darkened convex mirror used by Claude Lorrain and other painters), in the blackness of his drain oil; and, finally, the optical reduction one would see in a convex mirror, in the fortuitous bubbles created by the density of his oil. Through these fragile little spheres, these barely perceptible bubbles, the artist and his landscape are secretly inscribed *en abyme* (that is, a process of repetition and reduction of an image within an image) at the heart of the work, surprising the attentive viewer by revealing the scenario of the work’s production.

Diane Bodart is the David Rosand Assistant Professor of art history, Columbia University.

Organization: Allison Jeffrey, Barron K. Preston, Simon Griffee, Nancy Hwang, Abigail Asher; Thanks to Cleo Malca Nisse, Edward Perez, Óskar Arnórsson, Susan Pickford. All the frames in the exhibition: Dominique Robin (assistant: Aaron Yule). Print: Sylvain Durand, New York. Graphic design: Dominique Robin.



