

How to See Eternity in a Pile of Rocks

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“We use stone to pretend that we can defend ourselves against time and nature, and each other.”



“Rock in the Form of a Fantastic Mountain,” Lingbi limestone, 18th century.
CreditRichard Perry/The New York Times

Water and rock have a complex relationship.

That becomes clear immediately upon entering “[Museum of Stones](#),” an exhibition at the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City.

Imagine a wave crashing on a jagged cliff, sending spray into the air in fleeting, elaborate formations.

“You take a snapshot, and rock is the sculptor, and water is the material,” said Dakin Hart, senior curator at the museum.

“But over the long term, of course, water wins.”



Richard Perry/The New York Times

The exhibition incorporates dozens of contemporary and historic artworks and objects among the museum's permanent collection of works by Isamu Noguchi, the artist and designer who founded the museum in 1985.

Above, a "scholar's rock" from China's Qing dynasty period, mounted on a carved wooden base. Rocks like these, harvested from rivers, were prized as aids to meditation.

"This is like having a little chunk of the universe on your work table," Mr. Hart said.



Noguchi in 1985, three years before his death.
Credit Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

"He didn't really have much time for theories of art," Mr. Hart said, "but he had an infinite amount of time for all of the ways that human ingenuity has marked materials."

Several works by Dove Bradshaw are on view in the museum's garden. In "Waterstone," a limestone block is gently eroded by drops of water. Much of her work brings the normally invisible processes of erosion to the forefront.

"We use stone to pretend that we can defend ourselves against time and nature, and each other," Mr. Hart said.



Dove Bradshaw, "Waterstone" (1996).
CreditRichard Perry/The New York Times



A view of Noguchi's Chase Manhattan Plaza work in 1964.
CreditSam Falk/The New York Times

In addition to his sculptures and designs, Noguchi is known for his installation at 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza.



Richard Perry/The New York Times

The curator draws a distinction in the show between rocks (something you might find on the ground) and stones (shaped or put to use by humans). These Paleolithic handaxes date from about 250,000 B.C. to 750,000 B.C., predating Homo sapiens.



Tom Sachs, "Mars Rocks" (2012).
Credit: Richard Perry/The New York Times

Nearby, a sly work by Tom Sachs satirizes scientific authority and the impulse to categorize. It presents dozens of carefully labeled "Mars Rocks," which actually come from the artist's "Space Program: Mars" installation at the Park Avenue Armory.



Rupert Norfolk, "Wall No. 2" (2006).
Credit: Richard Perry/The New York Times

Another theme is stone's use as a building material. Carefully transported across the country from its owner's residence, and faithfully reinstalled here, Rupert

Norfolk's "Wall No. 2" includes 125 stones. Each one has been carved to be bilaterally symmetrical.



"Every rock in this wall is half rock and half stone," Mr. Hart said, "using our nomenclature. The symmetry is less visible in some of the pieces on top, which have been weathered by rain, regaining some of their rockness.



Isamu Noguchi, "To Bring to Life" (1979).
Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

A basalt column, broken by Japanese masons into six pieces, reassembled by Noguchi in a late work, "To Bring to Life," which is part of the museum's permanent installation. (This piece is both heavy and fragile; when the building was renovated, it stayed in its place, protected by plywood, while work proceeded around it.)



Richard Perry/The New York Times

In traditional Japanese masonry, basalt columns like this, which are eroded from cliffs, are first drilled with hand tools. Then bamboo is inserted into the holes and water is poured in. As the bamboo swells, the stone splits. In addition to fitting the pieces together, Noguchi carved and polished portions of the stone, evoking the flowing curves of the river rocks seen elsewhere in the exhibition.



Noguchi's "Young Mountain" (1970), Aji granite.
Credit Richard Perry/The New York Times

Another reassembled work, “Young Mountain,” is smaller in scale, addressing the untenable distinction between the ideals of the natural world and the human-made one.



Richard Perry/The New York Times

“The goal was really to draw out how much Conceptualism, for lack of a better word, there is in Noguchi’s work,” Mr. Hart said. He added, “Stone is the core, it’s the most basic. It was the most important material to him. For him it was working directly with the universe, and with the Earth.”

“Museum of Stones” [runs at the Noguchi Museum](#) in Long Island City through Jan. 10.