HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews Weekend

# Martha Tuttle's Sentient Stones at Storm King

When used as wayfinding landmarks or burial mounds, piles of stones can have an air of mystery about them.

Louis Bury September 5, 2020

Martha Tuttle, "A stone that thinks of Enceladus" (2020), installation image (all images courtesy the artist and Storm King Art Center; all photos by Jeffrey Jenkins)

From the gravel road nearby, a sunny grass clearing evokes a golf green surrounded by tawny rough. The boulders haphazardly situated inside the clearing, most of them perfectly sized for sitting, appear at first as indistinct specks, then come into focus as the viewer approaches. The boulders' light- and mid-gray surfaces seem flecked with white dots that eventually cohere as sculptures of small stones, stacked atop the boulders to form mysterious cairns. The sculptures

play with the sunlight in a way that is akin to Enceladus, an ice-covered moon of Saturn that, the exhibition plaque explains, is the most reflective surface in our solar system.

The unassuming installation, Martha Tuttle's ***A stone that thinks of Enceladus***, at Storm King Art Center, keeps its feet on the ground even as its head reaches for the clouds. The entryway plaque's well-honed text — a lyric catalog of 23 questions and propositions about topics such as geological history, Greek mythology, and philosophical ontology, authored by the artist — sets a ruminative tone. "What does a stone think about?" wonders Tuttle in one, "Does it find itself beautiful?" "I have held onto stones for years before finding the opportunity to get back to the place from where I took them," she muses in another, "I see this as a conversation." The catalog does a lovely job sounding out the exhibition's themes without the didacticism of many institutional wall texts.

Martha Tuttle, "A stone that thinks of Enceladus" (2020), installation image

However, the very nature of those themes renders the installation's sculptural component reliant on its accompanying text. Several of the catalog entries, such as its adroit closing question — "What does a stone think we think about?" — address aspects of object-oriented ontology, a recent school of philosophical thought that puts nonhuman entities on an equal footing with human ones. It's a rich avenue of inquiry, with considerable influence on artists this past decade,

but, in ways both apt to the artwork and abstruse, Tuttle's sculptural amalgams are less forthcoming than her textual meditations.

In particular, it's not readily apparent why the cairns are constructed with a combination of found and fabricated stones. Hoary, besmirched boulders, gathered from Storm King's grounds, serve as the ample bases upon which the smaller, fabricated stones have been stacked. Both object types share the achromatic color palette of Tuttle's exquisite geometric textile wall hangings, the body of work for which she's best known at this early career stage. The fabricated stones, molded from opaque glass or carved from chalky marble, have beautifully rendered textures and delicate sheens. Yet their pale surfaces look strangely innocent, unworn, alongside the boulders' lichenous splotches and weather-stained crags. The contrast is as stark as that between the skin elasticities of an elderly person and an infant.

Martha Tuttle, "A stone that thinks of Enceladus" (2020), installation image

This juxtaposition makes it hard to pin down Tuttle's stance on the categories of the ersatz and the real, particularly in comparison to similar artworks. With her classic work "To Fix the Image in Memory" (1977–82), for example, Vija Celmins strove to pass off sculptural stones as actual ones by painting bronze casts to be visually indistinguishable from their originals and displaying the two side by side. Other rock sculptures own their artifice: David Brooks's sly *Permanent Field Observations* (2018), installed on Storm King's wooded trails, places bronze casts near the

originals to highlight the pairing's subtle dissonance. Woomin Kim's delightful *Minerals in Use* series (2018) fuses household goods and craft supplies into colorful Frankenstein compounds that evoke geodes but don't try to pass themselves off as natural.

In Tuttle's cairns, the fabricated stones appear realistic in their own right yet unrealistic, almost otherworldly, next to the actual boulders. This ambiguity is ultimately less about whether a sculptural stone can pass as an actual one and more about questioning the distinction's significance. As objects, both seem equally capable of "thought" in the sense Tuttle references in the exhibition title. If anything, the title suggests that the lustrous sculptures, rather than the matte boulders, are the stones thinking about shiny Enceladus. Of course, whether a stone's capacity for thought should be understood literally or metaphorically is yet another sphinx-like question the exhibition raises.

What's clear is that these aesthetic and philosophical ambiguities mirror the ambiguity of cairns as objects. Piles of stones that can be teensy or massive, used as wayfinding landmarks or burial mounds, cairns have an air of tight-lipped mystery about them. If you encounter a cairn without knowing its function or intent, you have to fall back on guesswork or projection. Even with the context provided by its accompanying text, *A stone that thinks of Enceladus* puts the viewer in a similar position. Why is the occasional charcoal-colored sculptural stone included among the cairns? What might it mean that the cairns are scattered around the grass field like islands in an archipelago? That a sinuous boundary line has been mown into the field? Or that some sculptures have been stacked and others scattered atop the boulders?

Tuttle lets the installation stand as the answer to its own questions, even if it can feel that much is left unsaid. It's tempting to put a bow on such questions and call *A stone that thinks of Enceladus* an allegory for Storm King itself — that is, a plot of land demarcated to showcase pleasing human-made and -arranged objects. But allegory is too removed from the objects' specificities. Better to acknowledge that part of every object's reality remains unavailable — incommunicable — to others, what object-oriented philosophers call an object's "withdrawal." Tuttle's work turns that withdrawal into an art.

**Martha Tuttle: A stone that thinks of Enceladus** *continues at Storm King Art Center (1 Museum Rd, New Windsor, New York ) through November 9.*

---