

ARTFORUM

By Ronald Jones

2008

Helen Mirra GALERIE NORDENHAKE

In her installation *Quarry* (all works 2007), Helen Mirra uses her laconic touch to map a phenomenal expedition across time. Her means are modest: Handsome chunks of breccia, amphibolite, and serpentine rocks, collected above the Arctic Circle, nest on the artist's own folded clothing. Dotting the gallery floor, like a sparse archipelago, the stones—mottled with living moss and lichens—seemed like an extemporized display of some naturalist's homemade collection. Regarding past work such as the floor sculpture *Sky-Wreck*, 2001, critics have mentioned that Mirra owes a debt to Minimalism; perhaps, but this installation, with its air of inscrutability, is nowhere near as visually conspicuous or imposing as that suggestion implies. Instead, it might be helpful to think of Mirra as rebridging the dialectic between chaos and order that sustained Robert Smithson's notion of "site" and "non-site." Or, if you prefer a more free-thinking interpretation, imagine Mark Dion turned elegiac.

Mirra's titles and lists of materials, like scientific inventories, cut no corners; *Mantle* is unambiguously described as "cotton (corduroy shirt), serpentinite rock with hematite, casein-painted magnesite, and Lilidea S. Lat or Buellia lichen." Such cataloguing obliges you to go forensic; otherwise, what you have is a rock on a shirt. Serpentine loosely refers to weathered ultramafic rocks from the earth's mantle. These rocks vary in age, although they are particularly associated with the Ordovician period, when the earth experienced high sea levels and intense volcanic activity—perfect conditions for creating serpentinite rock. The Ordovician period began around 490 million years ago and spanned nearly 70 million years; this knowledge opens the door to Mirra's time narratives, where order and chaos play their parts.

Beneath the serpentinite rock, a shard from the earth's vast prehistory, Mirra places her corduroy shirt, a splinter shaved off the human scale of time. If the rock and the shirt are unimpeachable witnesses to

epic and individual measures of past and present, the lichens that cling to the serpentinite delicately interpose the inscrutable future—lichens from the alpine-arctic region can live more than four thousand years, and the ones on these rocks are up to five hundred years old. Ultimately, Mirra's medium, like that of Charles and Ray Eames's *Powers of Ten*, 1977, is magnification, which switches

Helen Mirra, *Mantle*, 2007, cotton (corduroy shirt), serpentinite rock with hematite, casein-painted magnesite, and Lilidea S. Lat or Buellia lichen, 6 x 9 7/8 x 14 1/2".



her language-based art into experiences beyond words. The ineffable, drummed toward extinction since the age of modern science commenced, is Mirra's Xanadu. Six other rocks, resting on tidy pieces of cloth, reiterate similar time narratives, but repetition becomes the enticement to linger in meditation on the immensity of time.

As background to all this, Mirra presented a herbarium: sixteen pairs of pressed plants from the Arctic Circle. The materials in each *Herbarium Constituent* are listed in Mirra's nerdy but unequivocal language: "Equisetum arvense & Equisetum pratense (Field horsetail & Shady horsetail)," for instance. The paired specimens are generally hybrid species of one genus, a taxonomic rank of organisms; the field and shady horsetails are two species of the genus *Equisetum*, a vascular form of plant life that reproduces by spores, not seeds. Literal proof of evolution, hybrids testify to an expanse of time beyond human conception. Mirra's art is in representing this cosmic order of time, begging description, which, in due course, strands us at the outskirts of comprehension; from here we may even feel wonderment in the knowledge that the little we know means there must be more.

—Ronald Jones