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LEAVES OF GRASS

Mira Dayal on Michelle Stuart's books

SCROLL WAS FIRST USED AS A VERB in the 1600s to describe a particular method of writing. Its current definition, having more to do with the navigation of text than with its creation, was introduced in the early 1970s, at the same time that Michelle Stuart finished her first banner-like frottage of a patch of ground—in this case, in Woodstock, New York. In the contemporary context, scrolling is so effortless—requiring just the touch of a finger to touch pad or screen—that it hardly seems to qualify as an action. But centuries ago, it might have involved slowly unwinding yards of parchment from the umbilicus (the supporting rod or baton) or painstakingly gluing sheets of handmade papyrus together to lengthen an ongoing record. The motions associated with these older scrolls were rendered largely unnecessary after the rise of the codex, which, with its individual pages, was easier to write in and more suitable for long texts (e.g., the Christian Bible). Today, the codex, or bound book, is associated with leisure, with reading a text of a significant but finite length for pleasure or enrichment, whereas scrolling connotes the 24-7 industriousness of our own century, the physically undemanding yet cognitively taxing labor of plumbing a bottomless sea of language.

For Stuart, the task of making *#1 Woodstock, NY, 1973*, the earliest extant example of her celebrated scrolls, landed closer to that obsolete method of constructing a text—laborious and emphatically material, durational but not endless. She laid down a piece of paper twelve feet long and marked it with graphite in heavy motions that picked up variations in texture. For Stuart, the “ground” is the heart of the matter. Travel is a crucial theme and impetus for her work, and her scrolls are often direct rubbings of the earth at sites where she has spent time. The paper’s surface becomes so saturated with frottage marks, or with raw material brought back from a site and embedded directly into the sheet in the studio, that it appears to be covered with a variegated block of color. The later works seem to transcend paper entirely—they resemble layers of loamy soil. We might think of Stuart as a translator, extracting

Paper, whether parchment, papyrus, or cotton rag, is organic. It bears memories of its former lives.



Michelle Stuart, *Project for a Chart of the Earth Reflecting the Sky, 1983*, plaster, handmade paper, earth from Zagora, Morocco, 17 1/2 × 21 1/2 × 2".

material from one context to settle it in another. And we might think of the flecks of earth as pixels or units of code scrolling across the page—as “sensory data,” as Patricia C. Phillips put it in this magazine in 1986.

When Stuart began displaying these works, most of the scroll would be hung on the wall; the rest would be unfurled onto the floor, resting at a short distance from the wall. (In *#9 Zena, 1973*, a portion of the drawing was left concealed in a roll.) A sense of continuity, and by extension of history, is important for her work, as is powerfully suggested by *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated, 1975* (a 460-foot length of paper coated with red earth from a site where the Niagara used to run and unraveled over a cliffside where rushing waters once carved a path), and by *Sayreville Strata Quartet, 1976* (a grouping of four scrolls, on view at Dia:Beacon, New York, whose ocher gradations visualize layers of earth at the eponymous New Jersey quarry).

Stuart’s scrolls were largely executed on muslin-backed rag paper, a durable material with which she was familiar from her earlier career as a cartographic drafts-person for the army. (Born in Los Angeles in 1933, Stuart attended the Los Angeles Trade Technical College and took the drafting job in the early 1950s in part to pay for classes at the Chouinard Art Institute, one of many art schools she attended.) As installed, they mimic drapery, which seems fitting considering that the Latin *mappa* (as in *mappa mundi*) denoted textiles. The earliest known maps related to astronomy, their constellations of marks not far from the speckles of dust that pepper Stuart’s rubbings. (In the ’60s, she, like Vija Celmins and other contemporaries, made works based on images of the moon obtained from NASA.)

In 1982, Stuart wrote, “Much like a map, the dictionary is a repository of possibilities, the poetry of which lies in our own ability to recognize it.” Her book-like objects, which number more than fifty, chart their own poetic lexicon—a “language of marks,” to adopt the title of one such tome. They are lesser known than the scrolls but were begun around the same time—commencing in



Clockwise, from top left: Michelle Stuart, *Jasmine Book*, 1972–73, handmade paper, goat-wool cord by the artist, leaves, $6\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{4}$ ". Michelle Stuart, *Every Wave Book (for Melville)*, 1979, earth, sand, and sea pebbles from North Shore of Long Island, linen, muslin-mounted rag paper, $8 \times 14 \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ ". Michelle Stuart, *Niagara Gorge Path Relocated*, 1975, rock and earth with iron oxide on muslin-mounted paper. Installation view, Artpark, Lewiston, NY. Michelle Stuart, *Natur Far*, 1984, earth, paper, organic material from Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, Collinsville, IL, found book, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{1}{4}$ ". Michelle Stuart, *Sandia*, 1976, earth from Sandia, NM, string, rag paper, linen, $9 \times 11 \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ ".

1972, with *Jasmine Book*—and involve many of the same themes and processes, primarily earth rubbings. The pages could be interpreted as sections of the scrolls; their surfaces, too, are usually saturated grounds. During our conversations, Stuart made few distinctions between her approaches to the two forms, except insofar as the books present more of a “mystery” to the viewer—most cannot be opened, and few contain actual language or information; imagery and natural materials are more common contents. The vocabulary of their titles associates them with the literary tradition: *fragment, notes, brief, myth, history, book, legend, love letters*. And yet their pages are usually held together with cloth or a string wrapped several times around or, in special cases, weighed down with a stone, sewn closed (like Emily Dickinson’s packets of poems), nestled within a folio, or covered with an encaustic slab. They cannot be read; they must be read as forms. This is enforced by the apparent age of the objects. They seem ancient, their life spans registered by the accumulation of dust, the sedimentation of the page, as if they’d been buried, quietly decomposing, before they came to light. This fictive decay of language is not far from the truth. *Natur Far*, 1984, is literally an unearthed object—a phone book? a circular?—found in Illinois. A scab of pine needles and pulped paper adorns its cover.

The imagined time line of Stuart’s book-objects finds its real correlate in the following story: In 1983, Stuart visited a library in the Sahara called the Zaouia Naciria, which holds Berber and Arabic texts, many written on the skins of gazelles. Some, she recalls, had been left unprotected and bleached nearly to blankness by the desert heat. Stuart made two books in response to this

trip: *The Book of the Library Near Zagora* and *Project for a Chart of the Earth Reflecting the Sky*, both 1983. The former appears to be made of clay. The latter, in photographs, could be mistaken for an arid plateau. Both underscore the ephemerality of paper, which, whether parchment, papyrus, or cotton rag, is organic. It bears memories of its former lives.

All of Stuart’s books, tightly linked to specific sites and bearing indexical traces of their making, evoke Socrates’s image of memory: Your soul contains a block of wax on which experiences and images, like signets, create imprints. The encaustic that Stuart uses in many of her books is itself a stand-in for memory. Dirt, seeds, and pigments are captured within it. The pages, thick with the viscous medium, might almost be a solid block.

But Socrates did not intend to present this model as a unified theory of cognition. In fact, he wanted to demonstrate how memory might fail. Wax is unstable. Impressions may overlap and fade over time. His metaphor illuminates the potent sense of loss in Stuart’s illegible books, with their employment of physical sediment as language, their simulation and embrace of decay, their inaccessibility (to anyone but the writer) as records of experience. With respect to Stuart’s scrolls, Lawrence Alloway delighted in the “paper’s memory of earlier rolling during the work process.” But the books’ resonance with memory feels even more profound. These objects are mutable: During our studio visit, as the artist paged through some of the books that can be opened, she would often pull out the leaves and rearrange them, turning them over and shuffling their order before closing the book again. Their sequences are easily misremembered.

Passage is a key word in Stuart’s oeuvre, which is ripe with the passage of time, the passages of ships (which inspired many of her sculptures, books included), the passages of living things (manifested by found and fabricated fossils), even passages of text (though not in the books themselves). If we return to the very start of her oeuvre, before *scroll* was used as the verb we now know, we find vessels that read definitively as sculptures and yet already hint at the codex form. Her earth diptychs of the late ’60s are pairs of resolute wooden boxes with the proportions of bricks that have been packed with dirt and are displayed vertically; they are seemingly hinged at the center, like books whose pages have disintegrated. *Earth Diptych*, 1968–69, which contains reddish sediment from Georgia, is almost the negative of *Earth Diptych: Self Imprint / No Imprint*, 1969, whose twin hollowed voids contain only a crust of soil. These blocks can read as obtuse full stops, far less emotive than the later books, but nevertheless sharing their formal vocabulary, material directness, and semiotic indeterminacy. Paper “exists to be obscured,” the artist Steven Kasher wrote in a 1978 essay, “The Substance of Paper.” And “only an empty sheet of paper has volume.”

Stuart understands the page as, in essence, a vessel—an idea communicated more literally in her books depicting boats. By 1975, Stuart was making *White Mountain History*, which appears to be a stack of thin, cracked plaster slabs with fur-like fringes around their edges. “I beat the rocks and earth into the surface fibers of the paper and rubbed the residue continually until the paper was imbued with earth. It became like velvet finally and the fragrance of the minerals arrested my senses.” More contaminated than any typeset or even handwritten volume could ever be, Stuart’s books require intense contact, not only in the making of the paper but in the exchange of oils from hand to earth to page. These are, after all, rubbings. More than one writer has described her paper as “impregnated.” Via this allusion, one can circle back to the umbilicus that allowed the scroll to be unfurled and was therefore just as essential to it as the papyrus or parchment. Without this element, there could be no growth, no additions, no revision.

Stuart’s work, whether waxen or stone, fictive or historical, is subject to the vagaries of memory, from which it draws its power. While she made her last scroll in the 1980s, the book form preoccupied her into the 2000s. The most recent is *Hooker’s Cabinet*, 1999–2007, which references the geologist Joseph Dalton Hooker and resembles a scrapbook full of seeds. Alongside so many surfaces turned to earthen grounds, this book feels expectant, waiting. □

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