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# Rutstein's

In a world that is flooded with a near-constant stream of images and information, one is challenged to remain aware of the forces of nature, especially those of the vast geological sort. The continuing blight of suburban sprawl and thoughtless consumption of earth's resources push us farther and farther from the sustenance of earth's rhythms. The recent paintings of Rebecca Rutstein show a sharp awareness and sensitivity to nature's potent force, and recognize the rhythms of nature reflected in human relationships.

Swarthmore College's List Gallery is home to Rutstein's current multimedia exhibition, "Canopy Adventures: The Crum Woods Through Time." The Crum Woods are a 200-acre woodland preserve on the edge of Swarthmore's campus. Rutstein has described the woods in her exhibition catalogue as "a thriving oasis of the past in a desert of cement and suburbia." Home to a variety of plant and animal species as well as 500 million-year-old rock formations, the woods are a precious resource that Rutstein tributes in this installation. She describes a fascination with geology that was peaked when she attended Cornell University, in geologically dense Ithaca, NY. While majoring in art she took an introductory course in geology in which she explored an already deep love for nature. A time spent living in Colorado also strengthened her passion for nature and geology.

At the time, her painting was focused on explorations of process, abstract expressionistic works that she used as experiments in layering of color. These pieces, she says, were unconcerned with concrete forms or intentional imagery. But the impact of nature was still evident, and the way in which she layered paint mirrored the buildup and breakdown of sediment in the earth, the natural processes which have become the central motif of her current paintings. The concepts of subduction and obduction, where plates in the earth collide and slide beneath one another, came to the forefront of her consciousness. She experimented with the application and removal of paint and the notions of the layering and density of her chosen medium: oil paint. Rutstein describes a point at which the imagery of geology, maps and diagrams began to emerge in the work. Whereas before these concerns were more thematic than literal, now they rose to the surface of the work, imbuing them with a new layer of meaning.

In the current body of work, Rutstein has used epic geological change as a metaphor for human experience. The undeniable connection

between the rhythm of human life and that of nature is beautifully presented in the pieces. A residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada crystallized the subject matter. Rutstein describes the feeling of humility she experienced treading upon ancient beds of rock, which contain the building blocks of all life on earth. She describes the experience as integral to the development of the themes that had been emerging. Prior to her residency at Banff, she had been working from the traditional white surface of a canvas. The quality of light in this northern climate inspired Rutstein to begin working with colored surfaces. Daylight in this Rocky Mountain climate lasts from 5 a.m. until 11 p.m. She describes her emotional response to this seemingly constant daylight: "The color..intensity [and] crisp[ness] of the light" inspired Rutstein to begin applying screen-printing and acrylics to her surfaces. She studied topographical maps given to her by a regional geologist. These maps appeared to her as works of art unto themselves.

In "Canopy Adventures," Rutstein has created her first site-specific exhibition. A natural progression from the work made during her residency at Banff, the installation grew out of her evolving exploration of natural formations. List Gallery Director Andrea Packard suggested to Rutstein that her work would fit perfectly into the space, at the edge of the rich ecosystem of the Crum Woods. Studies of the history of the woods have lent a depth to the work that is impressive for the artists' first venture into site-specific installation. A timeline is the unifying element of the exhibit—a rich and multi-layered piece, which tells the story of the woods in words and sketches. The timeline reads as a field diary, with a distinctive human touch that adds warmth to the entire space. This rough hand-drawn quality is balanced by graphically exact screen prints of words such as "confrontation," "warmth," "volatility," "fluctuation," "break up," and "loss." The words appear as points on the map, destinations or records of a journey. The piece as a whole is a journey through time and human emotion. Sketches of geologic plates and landmasses make the timeline read as a diary of the similarities between science and human experience.

The image of the canopy bed, which has appeared in numerous paintings, lends a whimsical, fantastic quality to the installation. The bed takes on several connotations: the forest canopy which protects species from the elements, the canopy bed that Rutstein describes as a desired object of her childhood, and the beds of rock that compose the earth. The back room of the gallery houses a canopy bed constructed by a team of set designers led by Rutstein. A sheer cover creates the canopy and lends an airy, dreamlike quality to the space. The bed is covered in a silken quilt that Rutstein screen-printed with the imagery from the paintings. Sounds of birdsongs recorded in the Crum Woods play as the viewer sits on the bed. The viewer is invited to experience the sacred rhythm of the woods and its inhabitants.

Each of the paintings exists in a world of their own, but combine with the others to create a diary of Rutstein's observations of the world around and inside of her. The juxtaposition of commonplace objects—the bed and, in one painting, a seeming geyser made of shoes, seem perfectly at home within the scientific diagrams of plate tectonics and geologic processes. The conflict and reunions that make up human relationships, along with the everyday objects of daily life, are explored on a grand scale through images that Rutstein employs. She has performed, through this work, the delicate task of synthesizing science and human emotion.

