HAND PAPERMAKING

VOLUME 34, NUMBER 1 SUMMER 2019

HAND PAPERMAKING

VOLUME 34, NUMBER 1 • SUMMER 2019

FRONT COVER: *Catherine Nash & Radha Pandey,* Eclipse, *2016, 10 x 8 inches, handmade gampi paper, red Sedona soil, blue sodalite paint, wax, PVA adhesive. One of fifteen works included in Hand Papermaking's limited-edition portfolio,* Intergenerationality, *published in 2017. Photo: Jim Escalante.* BACK COVER: *Robert Rauschenberg discussing the addition of screenprinted tissue paper images with Kenneth Tyler, for Rauschenberg's* Pages and Fuses *project, Richard de Bas Paper Mill, Ambert, France, August, 1973. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni. Gift of Kenneth Tyler. Courtesy of The Kenneth Tyler Collection, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © Gianfranco Gorgoni.*

Paper at the Nexus of Being and Place: A Conversation on How Art and Science Interpret Human Origins in Kenya

LYNN SURES, WITH RICHARD POTTS

Lynn Sures, Homo erectus: Conversation, *2018, 16 x 24 inches, pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting. Drawn from two* Homo erectus *skulls, 1.8 million and 1.6 million years old. Photo: Mark Gulezian. All photos courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.*

In 2016 I received a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship for my project, "The Nexus of Being and Place: Interpreting Human Origins." Two scientists from the Human Origins Program at the Natural History Museum in Washington, DC advised me: Dr. Richard (Rick) Potts and Dr. Kay Behrensmeyer, each with expertise in paleoanthropology, paleoecology, paleobiology, and geology. In October 2016, I began drawing fossil casts at the museum using colored pencil on various papers I made from hemp, flax, linen, or abaca. In the summer of 2017, I took my handmade paper to Nairobi, and drew from original fossils of early humans and fauna in the collection of the Nairobi National Museum. Camping with scientists at Olorgesailie, I drew their excavation sites. In the spring of 2018, at Carriage House Paper in Brooklyn, New York, I made embossed pulp paintings based on the drawings, and continued this work in my own studio through 2018. This conversation with project advisor Rick Potts took place in Washington, DC at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History on April 17, 2018.

RICK POTTS (RP): You make your own paper—your context in which you're making art. In the Human Origins Program, we say, "context is everything." Human evolutionary studies as a field is known for "discovery," but has moved to what science *is*: not a collection of facts and objects, but a series of explanations about the world, limited to the empirical evidence. Thus people, regardless of language or background, can tap into part of the history of all human beings. Context helps us to understand survival challenges and extinction throughout the last six million years.

The fact that you are making that context and the product at the same time is totally in line with the philosophy of modern-day studies of human origins. That dialectic between the philosophy and methodology of how we understand the universal narrative of our kind, and the contextual nature of it, is mirrored by the fact that you are always involved with making both context and object/visual/message.

LYNN SURES (LS): Making the paper is my entrance to whatever my inquiry might be.

RP: Previously, discovery of fossils without context offered no place to plug those discoveries into the narrative. Without the geology, the environment, you don't have the very paper on which the story of human evolution is written. Geology provides this framework, one that preserves the objects we find and the sediments that tell us about environment. The narrative of human evolution is an unfolding over time. At Olorgesailie we have more than a million years of time. Seeing the evidence of dynamic changes in that environment urged me to expand into the environmental sciences which develop a context in which human evolution is studied.

LS: I hear you through my own experiences with researchers in Kenya and here in DC, such as walking with Kay (Behrensmeyer) through the "purple mystery tuff"[1] at Olorgesailie. If context for you is a way to figure out some explanations, for me it roots me enough in a line of inquiry to start asking questions, with no conclusion. Drawings enable me to study, to enmesh myself, get glimmers of insight into how what I'm doing is relevant—to my overall study, or to anything in my life.

RP: Anyone who seriously engages in your work or mine is asking the thematic question, "What does it mean to be human?" You're asking it whether you're observing, interrogating the evidence, pondering the beauty of a set of objects, or a hillside of sediment. As meaning builders we're looking for good questions and ways of exploring. I'm looking for, "I hadn't thought of that before." The whole idea of "what does it mean to be human?" is that there is no answer; the whole body of human responses creates the diversity of sense we all can bring to the world. What you describe about your own work is along those lines.

But a question for you: whenever I see your drawing of a fossil, the effect is different from the way I usually encounter the object. The fossil becomes a series of swirling lines; you portray objects, which are concrete, in a much more dynamic fashion, which greatly appeals to me. When I see a fossil skull or a stone artifact, I want to hear the breathing and the striding of the individual, the crack of stone on stone that made the stone tool, the dynamism of life that I'm studying. Many people draw "exactly what I see," which captures precisely or abstractly what is in front of you, but doesn't necessarily have the dynamism around it.

LS: Reading physics has helped me see the world as a continual series of forces acting and responding. I can't draw things and deny their innate motion. At the Olorgesailie handaxe quarry, I kept thinking how noisy it must have been. I think of things in their alive state. These objects and locales come alive to me because that's what I know about them, through staring at them. And you, too, glean information from the experience of staring at something. Art is interpretive, yet in this series I've tried hard not to randomly interpret. My goal has been to be fully present when experiencing and studying objects and locales. Thus following my gut, the drawings come out the way they do. The paintings done from those drawings, though, are emotional; I am joyful in what I have learned. But I don't call anything I make an "answer."

Rick Potts joyfully holds a handaxe found at Olorgesailie, circa 2005. Courtesy of the Human Origins Program, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

Lynn Sures draws at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, completing work on the fossil hyena jaws begun in Nairobi, 2018. Courtesy of the Human Origins Program, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

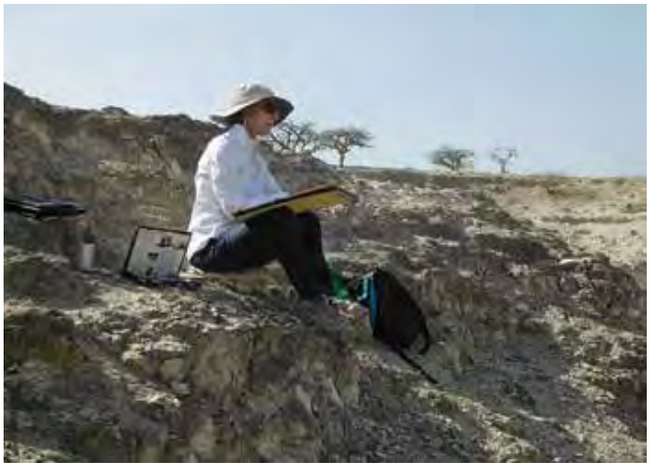
RP: The concept of the answer as many people hope and expect from science is also more interpretive, dynamic. Interpretation is shaped and molded by many critical fingers pressing into empirical understandings, and data, and recovery of new information that then shapes that understanding, in a slightly different interpretive sense than maybe what art is. But your art is analogous to what a scientist does when working or writing alone. Typically, scientists must work in a situation with many other voices, many thousands of fingers pressing for answers.

LS: In art, the contemporary and historic fingers also press . . . yet while in the field, the studio, or in proximity to an object, what I'm doing is treading my pathway alone.

RP: If science were about the discovery of what you always knew to be, it wouldn't be science. It's the unexpected that

Lynn Sures, The Hominin Site: Habitat*, 2018, 24 x 16 inches, colored pencil on kenaf paper handmade by the artist. Photo: Mark Gulezian.*

Lynn Sures, Turkana Boy: Thought, Communication, Structure*, 2017, 16 x 24 inches, colored pencil on kenaf paper handmade by the artist. Drawn from fossil remains of a 1.6 million-year-old* Homo erectus *boy. Photo: Mark Gulezian.*



Lynn Sures drawing at the Hominin Site, where the first human fossils were discovered at Olorgesailie. Photo: Kay Behrensmeyer, 2017.

makes perhaps every human endeavor wonderful and joyous and rewarding and meaningful. A table made of wood is solid, but from a different perspective, of atoms and physics, it's mostly empty space. You wouldn't know that if you weren't able to delve into the composition of things. Organizing the atoms and elements of brush strokes or laying down of paper is the substance of what you're doing, but what emerges is a composite that is as different as empty space and a wooden table.

LS: In papermaking, I'm less interested in a dependable result, I crave surprise. For Kenya, I chose to work on kenaf paper, for its ruggedness, but I had to be able to draw on the surface; colored pencils had to be visible upon it, the paper needed strength and weight . . . and suspense. Papermaking is a practice that combines instinct, trust, and experience, similar to the way my project unfolded in Nairobi and in the field at Olorgesailie. When I first started out in 2016, I wondered what I would do, comfortable with that uncertainty. I had to limit my project, not deal with the entirety of human origins. I did lots of reading, articles by scientists I knew in the Human Origins Program, and then others. I learned how to read papers, finding the points that helped me.

RP: That's an unusual skill to develop.

LS: It opened my eyes to a lot. I became particularly interested in *Homo erectus,* who entered into making things. I could meet *Homo erectus* with understanding, because I know fabrication, making. There was my entranceway.

RP: *Homo erectus,* as far as we know not an artist, is emblematic of a transition in early human endeavor, going from flaking to shaping—the difference between the basic tool kit and the manufacturing of handaxes. You have, with *Homo erectus,* a shaper. That early ancestor would naturally have gravitational pull on your attention.

LS: Going to Kenya, I wanted to concentrate on individuals found there. That made it doable for me . . .

RP: . . . drawing the project into a focus.

Lynn Sures, Handaxes: Makers, *2018, 30 x 40 inches, pigmented flax, embossed pulp painting produced by the artist at Carriage House Paper, Brooklyn, New York. Drawn from handaxes discovered by Mary Leakey at Olorgesailie. Photo: Mark Gulezian.*

LS: That said, the desire to express the thrill I find in the study of ancient humans also drives me to pulp painting. With that medium I release a more unbridled depiction of the allegory I have inferred through the act of drawing. What you say about the first artists—now I would like to spend time getting to know the…

RP: …Paleolithic artists.

LS: The art, and the makers of that art. As you say we hardly know anything; yet we seem to know so much. "Know" I guess always has quotes.

RP: Yes, absolutely. The idea that knowledge may be ephemeral is not disturbing to a scientist.

Since you have looked at handaxes and know about their persistence, I imagine you are intrigued by how the way of life of the handaxe makers disintegrated, ultimately replaced by a different set of tools, the use of color, and other innovations that became the foundation to the development of art as we know it.[2]

LS: This is precisely what I will start in on as my *Homo erectus* study comes to a stopping point!

RP: In our professions, whether as an artist or a scientist, the ability to have something expressed to the world—it's this desideratum, the impulse that has to be fulfilled. Now to be able to engage on these questions of innovation, art and symbolism, networking, social awareness, spatial awareness, those things that look like they're foundational to the emergence of our species on the planet: Those become a fertile area for you as an artist and for our future discussions, as your art explores those major shifts in evolutionary history.

LS: Thanks Rick for this conversation!

Postscript: In November 2018 I was appointed Research Associate, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. This post has afforded me the opportunity to continue to draw fossil casts in the collection, with a focus on exploring both Neanderthal and archaic Homo sapiens fossils. I have produced an ochre-pigmented paper, made from Kenyan sisal fiber, for the new series of drawings. There is recent evidence suggesting that ochre pigment, a mineral on a spectrum from dull orange to bright red, was used in the first artistry practiced by the Neanderthal and archaic Homo sapiens, both closely related species of humans. The paper itself and my current drawing palette are imbued with variations of that hue.

NOTES

1. *The "mystery" of the tuff, which is a kind of volcanic rock, was to figure out where it fits into the geological story of the Olorgesailie Basin.*
2. *Three relevant papers were published by Potts and colleagues in the American Association for the Advancement of Science's* Science, *April 6, 2018; and one by Behrensmeyer et al in The Geological Society of America's* GSA Bulletin, *March 15, 2018. For a "plain-language" account, with images of the field and the finds, go to http://humanorigins.si.edu/research/east-african-research-projects/evolution-human-innovation.*