

HYPERALLERGIC

Mining Mineral Structures with Watercolor and Sediment

Mineral geometries and natural forms inspire delicate artworks with fractal patterns and meticulous details.



Barbara Pollack 3 days ago



Left to right: Guo Hongwei, “The Landscape of Artificial Natural Form No.7” (2017), photograph; “A Study of Artificial Natural Form No.1” (2017), watercolor on paper; “Samples of Artificial Natural Form No. 1” (2017), samples of sediment on board (all images courtesy Chambers Fine Art)

Beijing artist Guo Hongwei is a master of watercolor technique, able to create convincing, almost photographic, results from this most minimal medium. He is also a collector of sorts, using his skill to assemble taxonomies of natural elements: leaves and butterflies, rocks and crystals. In this current exhibition, *The Pre-existent Painting*, at Chambers Fine Art, he’s turned the gallery into a hall of minerals like a natural history museum’s, with paintings and sculptures that draw an equivalency between geological discoveries and artistic innovation.

The heart of the exhibition is Guo's "Illustrated Book of Natural Form," an ongoing project currently comprised of more than seventy stunning paintings, each depicting a different mineral. Presented in a grid, the works invite viewers to make comparisons between the various rock formations and to spot the differences between quartz and malachite. At the same time, we come to appreciate the artist's acute eye and obsessive practice, which capture the layers embedded in each stone, reminding us that it actually took a millennium to create these petrified patterns.



Guo Hongwei, "The Illustration Book of Natural Form (on going)" (2017), watercolor on paper

Less accessible but equally fascinating is his study of what he calls "artificial natural form." According to Guo, these mineral-like objects are discards from a commercial painting plant where layers upon layers of spray paint accumulate on the wall and chip off in shards. It is a process of creative entropy not dissimilar to the way sedimentary stone is created in nature (albeit in a much shorter time period). Here, samples of this material are displayed within a frame while watercolor studies hang nearby, like a geological report.

Guo knows this mode of inquiry well, having grown up in Chengdu with a father who held an administrative position at a mining company. Exposed to geological material from an early age, he developed an intimate understanding of minerals and became fascinated with how such natural forms outshine even the most accomplished creative efforts. By introducing such

irregular shapes and fractal patterns into his work, Guo adds a kind of spontaneity to his otherwise meticulous process.



Guo Hongwei, "The Pre-existent Painting No.3" (2017), oil on coral

"The pre-existent painting" is Guo's term for these ancient elements, and the eponymous exhibition is the first of two solo shows for Guo at the gallery this fall. On November 16, Chambers Fine Art will open *Plastic Heaven*, a series of new oil paintings that examine decidedly manmade objects, ranging from a magnified view of an apple hidden within webbed wrapping material to the multicolored door of a garish child's playhouse. In making these paintings, Guo experimented with a wide variety of materials and techniques, in order to create different textures. From a quick preview, I can already spot a winner in this collection: "Transformed by the Setting Sun, 1917." In this painting, the object in question is covered by a purple blanket, mysterious and unidentifiable, against a dark black background. These works possess a studied superficiality with a focused attention on things so commonplace that they are usually taken for granted or overlooked; here, they are given due focus.