Crystalized time

In the 1970s, American artist Michelle Stuart took paper into the landscape, where she massaged soil and graphite into its surface, tracing over the uneven ground to catch its shadow. These scrolls reveal the texture of a site, a worn piece of ground that has taken shape over millennia. Her works have served as a point of departure for Matthew Allen's recent graphite works presented in *As a Surface Becomes a Space*.

Graphite is a mineral compound. Its molecular structure is related to that of diamond. While diamond is the hardest of minerals and graphite is the softest, both are a form of carbon in a state of metamorphosis. That is, they have undergone material transformations because of heat and pressure beneath the Earth's crust before being extracted through mine all over the world.

Graphite gets its name from the Greek word 'graphein' which means 'to write'. German mineralogist Abraham Gottlob Werner gave it this name in 1789 because the dark, soft mineral was so often used as a writing implement. We first used graphite in the 4th millennium BC to add tone to ceramic paint, but it was not until 1565, when British began wrapping pieces of graphite in sheepskin, that we developed the pencil. In 1795 the French artist Conte began mixing graphite with clay and wax in different ratios to make pencils on the HB scale.

Despite being named for its mark-making properties, only 7% of the world's graphite is currently used to make pencils. 93% is, and has long been, used in other ways. Graphite powder coated cannonball molds in Elizabethan England. Indeed, it is now ubiquitous in industrial and military production, being used to make Stealth F-117A and B2 bomber aircraft. It is also a used to manufacture everyday industrial objects: in the production of glass and steel, in lightbulbs, batteries, break-linings, and mechanical hearts. Graphite is everywhere.

It is a peculiar substance, a non-metallic mineral that still behaves like metal inasmuch as it conducts both electricity and sound. Because of these acoustic and thermal properties, we use graphite in arc lamp electrodes to conduct electricity that casts light in our evenings, and in carbon microphones as part of the mechanics that record human voices and broadcast them back to us in song.

As Allen burnishes fine graphite into the surface of paper or linen, he transforms this dark mineral powder into a glimmering field. Conducting and reflecting the light around it, the graphite takes on something of a diamond's sheen. This time, the heat and pressure that have transformed the substance are not the result of geological movements, but rather of the artist's hand. These works are the result of many hours of labour, and while each arises from the same process, none are exactly the same. Some are hard smooth skins with occasional pock-marks, while others appear feathered, revealing the weft and warp of their linen base. They take up to five days to make, during which the artist pinches the thumb and forefinger together and leans into the work to squeeze this substance between his body and the page.

Each piece is thus crystallized *time*—a thickening, a compression, a condensation. In burnishing, Allen flattens and smooths the molecular skin of the graphite; the more uniform and compressed the mineral is, the more it reflects ambient light. In reflecting light, these pieces also reflect that which is in the light, limning an otherworldly version of the viewer. Paradoxically, this flatness creates an illusion of depth, perhaps because we associate reflection with pools of water—a shining skin that belies another world. You should be careful not to fall in, for if you were to rub up against these pieces (please don't), they would leave their mark upon you. Portals lead to perdition as often as they produce transcendence.

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