

山水

SHANSHUI

Two perspectives on the "Poetics
of Silence - Mountains in Art":
Eva Koethen on "Sign, Image,
Reality"

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By; Eva Koethen

Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it. The soft overcomes the hard; the gentle overcomes the rigid. Everyone knows this is true, but few can put it into practice.

Laozi

The consistent pliability of the water is contrasted with the materially solidified compression of the mountains, the stony mightiness of a mountain range. At the sight of its majesty, man is reminded of his organismic smallness, which is deeply anchored in the consciousness of the Far Eastern *shanshui* tradition. One might consider the world-famous masterpiece by Yu Jian 玉涧 in the first half of the 13th century, *Mountain Village in the Clearing Mist*¹, which makes people appear to be integrated into nature as a whole, in the dual sense of being sheltered in both emergence and disappearance.

The sculptural miniatures embody a different approach to nature, transposing the material tangibility of large dimensions into small formats. We find them in Japanese miniature landscapes, commonly known as Bonsai, small trees grown in containers and shaped into desired forms through root and leaf pruning. Originating from the tradition of Far Eastern Garden art - referred to as *Peng Jing* or potted landscapes in China—this cultural practice has also been adopted in the West.

From a Western perspective, one can also connect with a practice that translates objects of everyday perception into artistic processes, as happened in modernism with Cubism. This anchoring of artistic activity in everyday experiences, which initiates

transformations, has fascinated me since ever and is also reflected in my miniatures.

I am particularly interested in the tension between the embodied material presence and the imagined reality reference it entails. By initially disregarding the real dimension of the enormity (or even overwhelmingness) of the mountains and only bringing the picture plane into play through a subsequent photographic "blow up," different levels of reality representation are created.

In contrast to the two-dimensionality of drawing and painting, my starting point is a three-dimensional "marking" with small material fragments. These are found objects that have fallen out of everyday use, catching my attentive eye and, with their repurposed structures, textures, and figurative appearances, challenging the (material) imagination. This is particularly evident in works related to my stays in China. During a lengthy interview with Judith Elisabeth Weiß ("Kunstforum"), she asked me about the origin of the unimaginable in my pictorial montages, which she views as a key element. I then began discussing the Zhangjiajie Mountains, which had deeply fascinated me and inspired an artistic homage to the bizarre landscape. This homage consists of several material miniatures of an urban nature—as embodied in the high-rise elevator to a high plateau—as well as photographs I had taken

¹ See p. 63, Editor's Note

Mountain Landscape - Near and Far

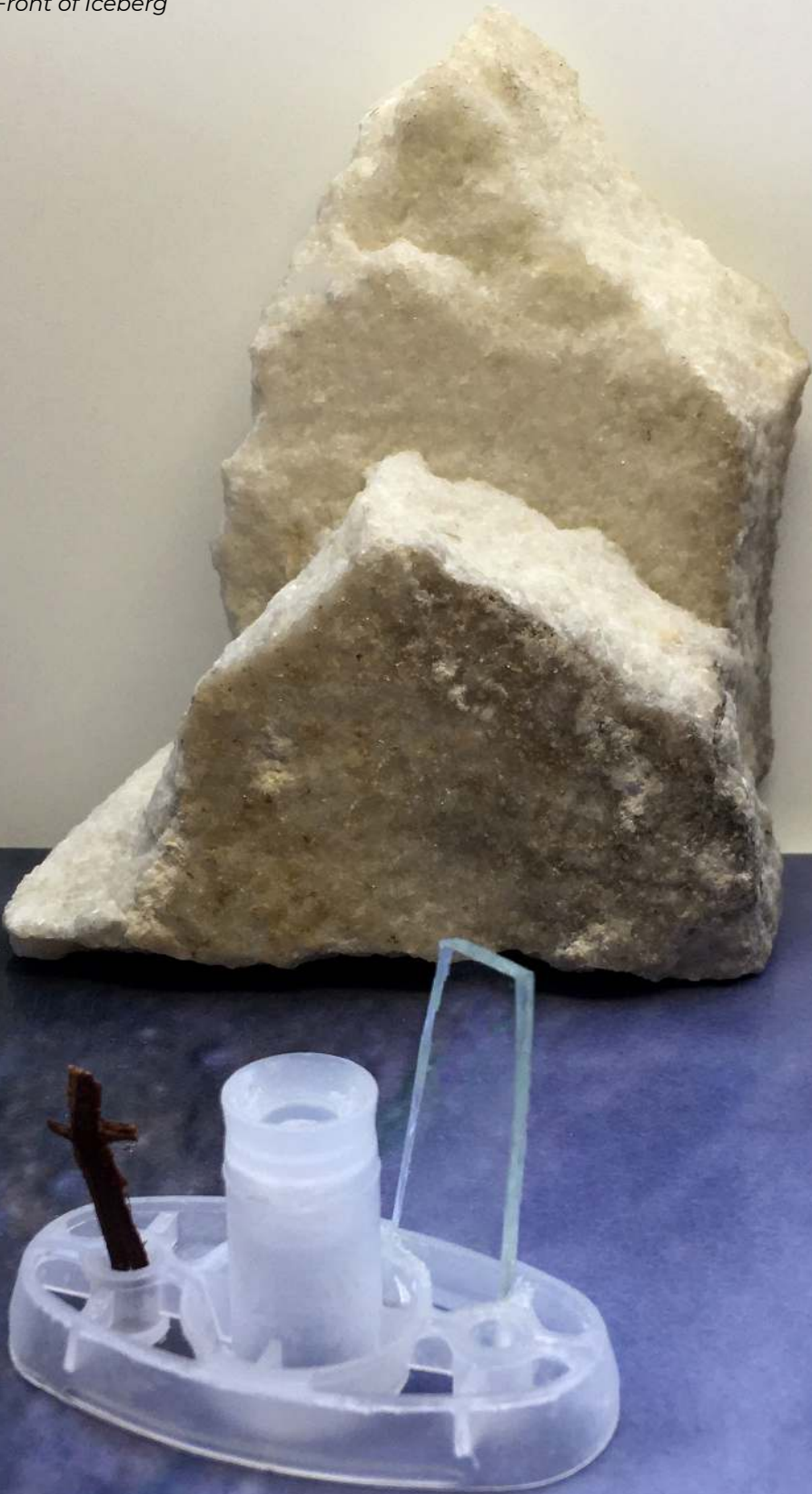




Bastion



Ship in Front of Iceberg



on-site.²

The documentary images from back then had long been buried, until the moment when I formed the smallest structures that reminded me of my photographs. They are not a template for my objects, but only with an object reminiscent of photography does the deposited material re-emerge. Working on the miniatures has nothing to do with representation; rather, I love materials and am led by the tactile to "unthinkable" memory images. Only when I construct the small objects can I see the striking connections, and the artistic work on them leads to newly conceived photographic shots. During her intensive examination of the ensemble, Judith Weiss added a cinematic dimension: "The mountain spontaneously brings me to a classic film that I have just come across again: In Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a mountain becomes the central location of the events. Superficially, it is a simple science fiction film about encounters with aliens, but between UFOs and light spectacles, there are many other levels. Essentially, it's about encountering the unknown and the question of what this unknown means. The two protagonists feel magically drawn to the mountain, on which the huge spaceship with the peaceful aliens will eventually land. They only have a sense that this mountain has significance, but cannot anticipate anything. The film has great symbolic power in relation to art. Because an interesting aspect is that the protagonists sculpturally shape and draw this visionary mountain as if driven, to give expression to their inner intuition. They must relate to this unknown. The image they create precedes the actual event, and when they finally stand at this mountain, they suddenly understand the connections. They do

2 *Das Werk - der Weg*, Barton Verlag, 2023, p. 86-96

not seek the form, but the form finds them." And this aspect, which already preoccupied Willi Baumeister in his considerations on the "unknown in art," fully applies to my way of working. (aus: „Über gleiche Gewichtigkeit“. *Eva Koethen im Austausch mit Judith Elisabeth Weiss*, 2024) Indeed, I perceive artistic creation as an intertwined metabolism of opposing cohesions in "superpositioned states," whose inscrutability constantly challenges new artistic concretions.

The kind of unknown also emerges in "surreal" extensions of my work through focusing on individual sculptural elements. This was the theme of last year's exhibition at Tenri Paris and is reflected in tangible montages that reveal hidden aspects and present transformations.

By encapsulating the figurations under the term "Sous-Realism," I draw on Surrealism as a philosophical figure according to Wolfram Högrefe, who assigns the concept of the "Überseiendem", not the superstructure, but the substructure as the "carpet of life." The fabric of these life experiences led me to the density and strength of an 'sous-real imperative' that simultaneously supports and limits us while we believe we are soaring into the air... Last but not least, the theme reminds me of an old Chinese proverb that has long moved me: "Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Tao. The law of the Tao is its being what it is." In conjunction with my pictorial examples it is hoped that the images presented - and not only the original sculptures and photographs - convey the opening of perception to a multi-dimensional, ambiguous reality reference and enrich intercultural exchange!



Mountain Drawing of a Giant Dragonfly

