

ROCK BEINGS: DOES THE ROCK HAVE A SOUL?

Kim Robertson

ABSTRACT

This article proposes ways to investigate whether a rock has a soul. Thinking through portraiture and utilising these classification methods, I question whether we can apply the same methods to rocks to discover their personhood and, in turn, their essence.

'Rock Portraits' is one such investigation (a series of screen prints of rock portraits created using rock pigments). I will share the thought processes and outcomes that revealed unexpected results. Firstly, from what appears to be a mountain of beige or grey rock, we reveal an array of the softest pinks and yellows in multiple shades. Secondly, the process of making, through grinding rock and printing, becomes a collaborative event with the mountain itself.

A POINT OF VIEW

Many Indigenous tribes refer to rocks as 'rock beings' and work with these rock beings for healing and knowledge. Not only precious rocks, or crystals, but the rocks we might perceive as 'ordinary'.

In spiritual work, we may sit quietly in a group or 'circle' and hold such rocks with deep respect. Through a process of stillness and quietening of the mind, they can impart their wisdom of nature and the endless cycles of this planet and the universe. These rocks can also help us unravel answers to questions that sit deep within us, offer guidance in our daily lives, and heal us.

Through various engagements with rocks, my practice explores the animist belief that the rock has a soul. I am often pulled to work with the mountain of Jabal Hafeet, the only mountain in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, located next to Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates. I have repeatedly returned to this mountain over the years, and here, I also find individual rocks that have fallen in my path.

I began considering portraiture to discover whether

a rock has a soul. Could we make a portrait of a rock and still call it portraiture? What is the definition of a portrait? The word portrait comes from the Latin *portrahere*, translated as drag out, reveal, and expose. Can we reveal or expose the soul of the rock simply by making a portrait of it?

I looked to Freeland (2007, p.98) for a further definition of portraiture. 'A key aim of portraiture is depicting the sitter to convey his or her "person-ness."' As I am thinking of a rock as a being, could this portrait convey its being-ness and how could we define this? Freeland continues (2007, p.100) 'We could describe this aim by saying that the painter seeks to convey the subject's unique essence, character, thoughts and feelings, interior life, spiritual condition, individuality, personality, or emotional complexity.' She further breaks down essence, 'What is meant when we speak about a portrait as revealing a subject's personality or essence? I suggest that portraits can show subjects in any of four ways: by being accurate likenesses, testimonies of presence, evocations of personality, or presentations of a subject's uniqueness.'

Can I cover any of Freeland's four points in creating these portraits of rock beings? I set up some portraits in the studio to investigate this further.



Figure 1

Figure 1. Rock Portrait Colour Studies (2023) by Kim Robertson in collaboration with Mother Earth

Initially, I take digital 3D scans of the rocks (to enable me to see both the exterior and to reveal glimpses of the object's interior), which I then use as the basis for some digital collages. From these collages, I decided to take it further and use these portraits as the basis for a screen print, a technique I have not used in recent years but know well. I decide to use the rock itself for pigment. Could this enable me to find its true essence?

I begin by grinding these rocks, many of which look similar in colour, a pale grey or beige. Many quickly reveal beyond these façades some of the softest pinks and yellows to make my rock ink. (Figure 4)

This process is much more embodied and sensorial than simply opening a commercially made jar of ink. The physical act of breaking down the rock with a hammer and grinding it with a mortar and pestle brings me into proximity to it. It is a physical process, and there is an exchange of energy involved. The further grinding and addition of binder bring me into an even more intimate relationship with the rock as the material begins to transform.

I have always felt that mountains were masculine—all that power and density, solid and hard rocks. However, how could they be if this was 'Mother' Earth? Searching for essence has shown none of these masculine qualities. What she now shows me is that beyond that outer rigid shell, she is the divine feminine—soft, tactile, sensory, and delicate. She reveals the perfect masculine and feminine balance between the yin and yang.

As I begin to print, I can smell the sweet scent of petrichor in the air, and soon, the room is filled with a damp, sweet smell of mountain. I can feel her graininess on my skin—these sensations I did not envisage. By printing with this pigment, there has been a physical shift in my bodily sensations, energy, and understanding. I am no longer the sole creator but a co-creator with the Earth as a collaborator. The mountain (of which each rock forms part) speaks through me. I am the facilitator. I can step back as a viewer and admire the work of the mountain; I could not have done this without her. I admire with awe the beauty in the palette of colours that she shows me, so many more shades than I could have anticipated. The experience of printing with these ground rocks has been visceral and sensual. I genuinely believe that I have found the essence of the rock, its being-ness and that this experience has captured Freeland's requirements of likeness, presence, personality, and uniqueness. Does this then mean that, indeed, the rock does have a soul?

I trusted my instincts for this project and decided that these works had to be screen-printed. At the time, I thought it was odd. For many years, I screen printed as a designer maker and then as a fine artist, but due to environmental concerns, I now commonly choose to opt for digital processes. However, something was telling me to choose screen print for this project. I now realise why. The mountain wanted me to experience this through a medium, and I knew I could witness these modifications with all my senses. It allowed me to understand that



Figure 2

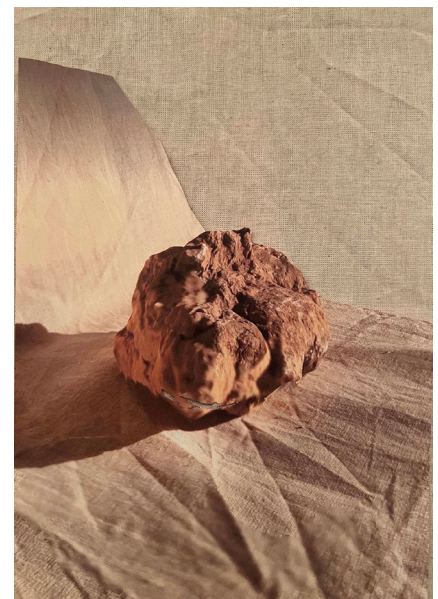


Figure 3

Figure 2. Rock Portrait Study 1 (2023) by Kim Robertson in collaboration with Mother Earth. Screenprint 750mmx550mm
 Figure 3. Rock Portrait Digital Study 1 (2023) by Kim Robertson Digital print, 360mmx260mm

this was not the work of a single artist but that some other factor was involved in creating this work, and it was no longer a solo act. .

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Kim Robertson is a visual artist whose work encompasses drawing, digital image, printmaking, installation and video. Her work revolves around territories, both physical and of the mind, and she believes that we do not fully engage with the power of our minds nor fully embrace what it is to be human. She has been researching belief systems that bring us closer to our planetary environment in the hope that we can engage with it at a deeper level.

She holds an MA in Fine Art from the Royal College of Art in London and is pursuing a PhD at the Transart Institute/ Liverpool John Moores University.

Kim is an Associate Professor at New York University Abu Dhabi in the Arts Practice Programme.



Figure 4

IMAGE GALLERY

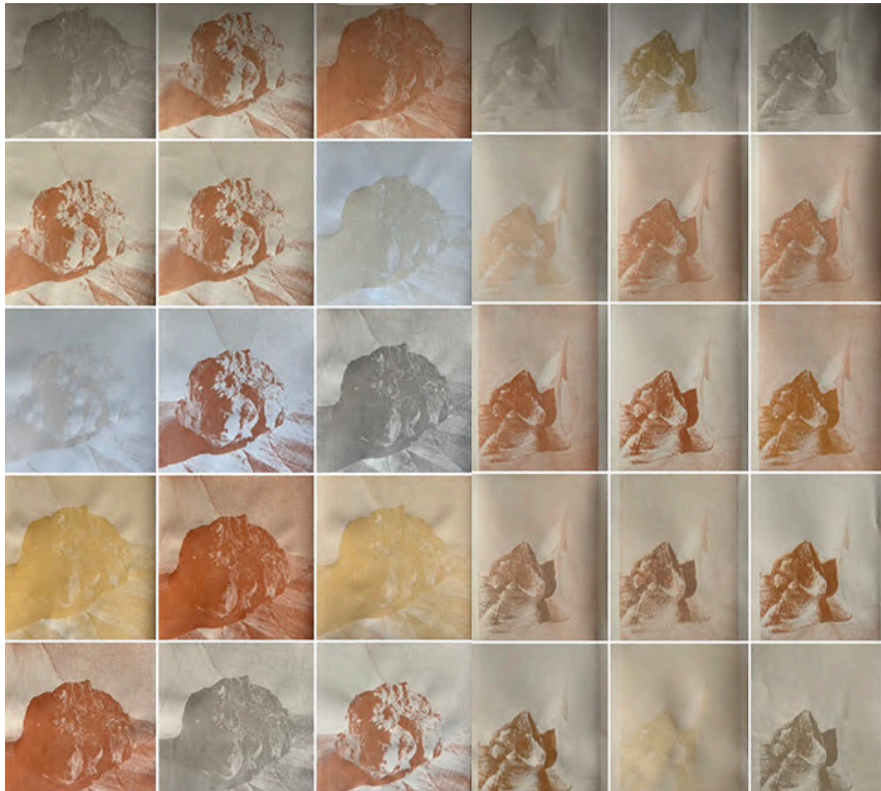


Figure 1. Rock Portrait Colour Studies (2023) by Kim Robertson in collaboration with Mother Earth

Figure 2. Rock Portrait Study 1 (2023) by Kim Robertson in collaboration with Mother Earth. Screenprint 750mmx550mm

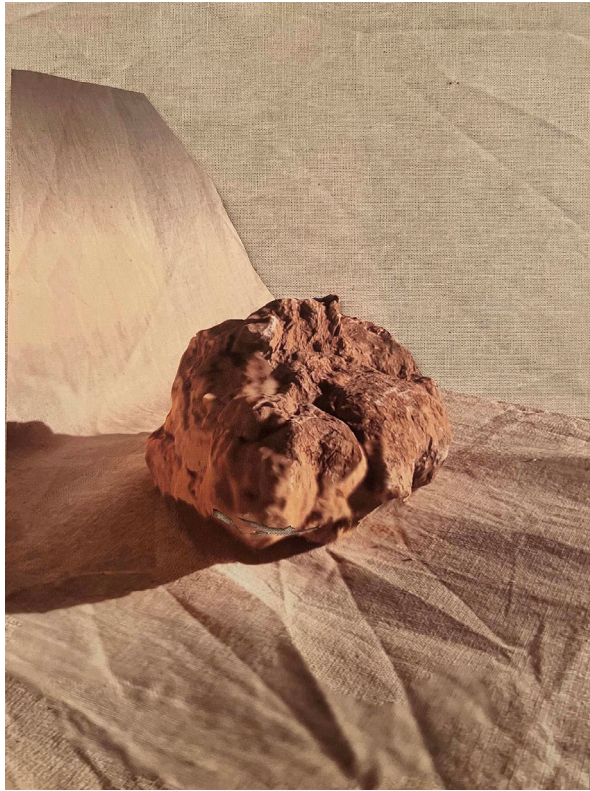


Figure 3. Rock Portrait Digital Study 1 (2023) by Kim Robertson Digital print, 360mmx260mm

Figure 4. Ground rocks (2023) by Kim Robertson.