



# NATURAL FORMATIONS

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any years ago, I attended an opening at a notable Manhattan gallery, and I learned, as the evening went on, that the works on view might be the last pieces this artist would ever make. I was young and still new to the city, and such events were unfamiliar to me; for reasons I was soon to discover, I would never forget this art or its creator.

The artist was the wife of the then-president of Columbia University. They were a socially prominent couple, so there were many famous people at the party — authors, artists, reviewers, corporate CEOs, a U.S. senator, and city officials including the mayor. She wore an elegant black dress, embellished with a tan cashmere shawl draped over one shoulder. Its material formed a perfect long rectangle that fell below her waist, and every time she leaned forward to kiss guests and then backward to look them in the face, the shawl swung like the clapper of a bell. She was clearly used to socializing and being enthusiastic, even with strangers. She knew how to make parties work, and was especially spirited that night because the gallery was filled with her creations and a crowd of admirers.

These works were so unlike anything the artist had made before that even she still registered surprise every time she looked at one. They were miniature landscapes of river rocks, set on painted wooden platforms; someone in the crowd called them “rockscapes.” Every rock was perfectly smooth, a naturally formed circle or oval or ellipse of deep blue-gray. It was as if the rocks had somehow absorbed the colors of the waters in which they had been submerged for eons. The rocks were glued together, though the fastening

agent was never visible, even when the seams were examined closely under the showering white spotlights.

Between conversations, I noticed that the artist would occasionally gaze at a piece, sometimes rotating its platform to position it differently. She wore a look of puzzlement, as if asking herself, “How did I get from shaping bronze and marble to making these? Do these people remember my previous forms and scale, the clouds of dust in my studio from grinding those materials?” I learned that she once had worked with materials she chose, ordered, and shaped herself — not found objects. She once had full control over what her materials could become. Now she relied on forms given to her by nature.

Her changed oeuvre made for easy conversation. “What a departure from the large sculptures you’re so well known for,” I heard a guest say. Another asked, “Where did you get the ideas for these? Rocks as art — how original is that!” Others wondered how the rocks were put together, whether she had picked them up while walking along a beach or riverbank. Unlike the chatter at most art openings, none of these remarks seemed forced. The guests were genuine in their curiosity and happy for the artist. As soon as the evening began, gallery assistants hurried through the room affixing red dots above the pieces. In less than an hour, nearly everything was sold.

My first response to these works, because I was still accustomed only to representational art, was that they seemed too artificial. I took them literally. After all, rocks never form such assemblages in nature — balanced on their narrow sides

BY DAVID MASELLO



JOAN SOVERN (1935–1993), PHOTO: D'ARLENE STUDIOS; LAKESHORE PHOTO: DAVID MASELLO

or stacked like poker chips, others hinged at physics-defying points or forming tiny caves. “Aren’t these sculptures all about chance?” I wondered. Their finished forms could not be imagined before they were executed; they became what they were only after they had been glued together — akin to the toothpick “sculptures” I glued together as a boy. And wasn’t there something inappropriate about taking these perfect objects from the wild, where they resided for millennia, and using them this way? (Full disclosure: on my own windowsill, I had arrayed a dozen such river rocks, taken from a stay in Washington state, though I have never lost the urge to return them to their beach, to scatter them there.)

During the reception, the artist, Joan Sovern, saw me standing alone with my wine glass and the price list. She introduced herself, as she was used to looking after shy students at college receptions. I asked her how she had come to these forms. Without hesitation, she answered, “I’ve been ill for 12 years. With cancer. In different organs. I’ve been living with the disease that long. As soon as I recover from each wave of re-affliction and treatment, I go right back to work. But it’s begun to affect my hands and sight. So I had the idea to work with rocks,” she said, brushing her fingers over one of them. “It’s the only material left to me, if you can believe that. You might say I’ve had a rally. I almost died once — and that was not so many months ago.”

I like to believe now that I would have come to love these works even if I hadn’t heard Joan Sovern’s words. To admire an artwork shouldn’t require knowledge about the artist’s life. But she

taught me, right then, something about perseverance and the need to keep creating, no matter the obstacles. And that nothing could or should quash the urge to create, if that’s what’s in you to do. These works were the best she could do right now, and, yes, they then became beautiful to me. I can picture them still, and I wish that I could own one. Like any work of art — figurative or abstract, written, painted, or composed — her pieces took their form during their making, not at conception. Yet in every literature and art history class I have ever taken, I was made to believe that the artist preordained every symbol and plot device prior to beginning — a sure formula for discouraging any student from trying to create something of his or her own.

Several years ago, I was reminded of this extraordinary woman and her creations one frigid morning when I stepped on to Lighthouse Beach in my hometown of Evanston, Illinois. Milky ice encased the tree trunks near the Lake Michigan shoreline and filled the corrugations of the rusted steel breakwater that cut a profile far into the water. A low wind, ankle-stinging, had carved a deep shelf in the sand, making it seem like a wave at the breaking point that had just stopped. Icicles hung from the lip of this sand wave. The shelf it formed was deep enough to lie under — as a dog, who had run onto the beach, was doing.

A few feet up from the blue-gray water lay groupings of fist-sized rocks. They appeared to be loose, but when I tried to pick one up, I discovered that each was frozen to the sand, anchored in place. There was no dislodging any of them, even with a hard kick from my steel-toed boot. Foot-long

rocks stood securely on their narrow, shortest sides. Some groupings were covered with a thin, gleaming veneer of ice, like dried glue. Others littered the sand as scattered singular objects, or appeared in groups as nubby remnants of miniature Neolithic foundations. What looked unnatural was actual. Because these rocks echoed Joan Sovern’s works, positioned in similar ways, I wondered if she might have ever seen this same sight on some beach, seeking to re-create it in her studio.

I was so happy to come upon these formations and to remember the artist from years ago that I returned to the same beach a few days later. But the temperature had reached well above freezing by then. When I had discovered the small rocks earlier, the roiling water had been held back by ice. Now, the waves reached to where the rocks had been, loosening what had seemed permanent, pulling them out into the lake, leaving no indication they had been there.

I learned that a different tide reached the artist soon after we had met. But her rockscapes, wherever they are now — in people’s homes or museum collections — remain in place, secure and enduring. ●

**Information:** To learn more about Joan Sovern (1935–1993), please visit [columbia.edu/cu/record/archives/vol19/vol19\\_iss2/record192.14](http://columbia.edu/cu/record/archives/vol19/vol19_iss2/record192.14).

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