

METRO PICTURES

Wurtz, B. "Rocks and Star Stuff," *Art in America* (November 2016): 58-59.

Art in America

MUSE

A Browne: rosa-del-monte flower from the Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants, Harvard Museum of Natural History, Cambridge, Mass. Photo Jennifer Berglund.



Rocks and Star Stuff

by B. Wurtz

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"B. Wurtz: Selected Works, 1970–2016," at La Casa Encendida, Madrid, through Jan. 8, 2017.

B. WURTZ is an artist living in New York. See Contributors page.

IN WINTER 2013 artist Judith Barry invited me to be a visiting faculty member at Lesley University College of Art and Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During some free time I went to the Harvard Museum of Natural History to see the Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants. I'd always assumed they were made out of gray glass, because my only knowledge of the glass flowers had come from seeing Christopher Williams's photographs of them taken in the late 1980s. When I walked into the room I was surprised to see their beautiful lifelike colors. I'd seen Williams's photographs several times over the years, and never once had it occurred to me that they might have been taken with black-and-white film. I felt like an idiot the day I saw the flowers in person but decided that instead of being embarrassed I'd enjoy the surprise.

From there I came upon another room, this one called Rocks and Minerals. I entered with dimmed curiosity,

expecting an overall grayness similar to that which I'd anticipated with the glass flowers. Jumping out at me instead were dazzlingly bright colors and patterns, more intense even than those of the flowers. It was mind-blowing to see this world in place of what I'd imagined to be rather drab rocks. I thought, this rock room is where art students should come before ever entering an art museum.

A COUPLE OF summers ago, on a comfortable Saturday evening, a small group of friends and I visited the Custer Observatory in Southold, on the North Fork of Long Island. My wife and I have a small weekend house in Southold and have become quite taken with the night skies that are visible ninety minutes from light-polluted New York City. That evening we saw a super moon (when a full moon coincides with the closest part of the moon's elliptical orbit around the

earth). As I was looking through the telescope, amazed at the nooks and crannies on the surface, the telescope operator said to me, "You think of the moon as being perfectly round, right? But look at the edge. You can see mountain peaks sticking out." And, sure enough, that is indeed what I saw.

After that evening I found myself mildly obsessed with the moon. Whenever it was out, I would stare at it and think about how close to us it really is. I would think about it as a spherical, sculptural object. But even so, I still considered the moon to be dead rocks, a lifeless place unlike Earth.

Earlier this year, I was eating dinner alone at home, channel surfing, when I came upon the PBS program "Nova." Robert Hazen, a mineralogist, was saying: "Nothing seems more lifeless than a rock. It's inanimate. It's the antithesis of a living thing." That was what *I'd* always thought. I'd heard that life came from "star dust," but I didn't really know what that meant.

Hazen went on to explain how scientists are realizing that "rocks played an absolutely fundamental role in the origin of life." The program recounted an experiment from the early '50s, in which researchers replicated to the best of science's knowledge the physical conditions of the young Earth, establishing that minerals were essential to the formation of amino acids, the basis of life. That evening, my worldview changed forever. We all came from rocks! I was comforted to know that life is possible everywhere—all it takes is the right spark at the right time for life to come forth.

What does this have to do with my artwork, beyond what it has to do with everything? In my process, I attempt to provide the right conditions for ordinary and overlooked



found objects to receive the spark of my manipulations, so that I might inject them with renewed life. When I first started using plastic bags in my work, I was looking for the lowliest thing—something so ubiquitous that it was practically invisible. It delights me when I get positive responses to the sculptures I make with them. The plastic bags seem to be alive in a way that people didn't see before. I think about my pan paintings, in which I apply acrylic paint to the patterns on the bottom of aluminum take-out containers or roasting pans. These works remind me of the colored crystal rocks that I saw in Cambridge. Like life itself, much of my art overlaps with rocks. ○

View of B. Wurtz's exhibition "Selected Works 1970–2015," showing (foreground) *Bunch 2*, 1995, at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK. Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.



Wurtz: *Untitled (Pan Painting)*, 2013, acrylic on aluminum, dimensions variable, at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Conn. Courtesy Metro Pictures.