

Uncertain Allies

Neha Choksi

A virtual exhibition presented by Carolyn Campagna Kleefeld Contemporary Art Museum at California State University, Long Beach
February 24 - April 30, 2021

A curator's statement

Uncertain Allies, a monographic exhibition by Neha Choksi, features sculptures, painted wall works, and a newly produced video. Due to the pandemic, the Museum has pivoted to an online presentation. Not lost upon any of us, however, is how much this now virtual offering by Choksi is meant to be predicated upon a direct haptic and spatial engagement with its objects. Curator Kristina Newhouse is grateful for Choksi's generosity in allowing us to move in a direction that privileges vision over other senses.

The focus of Choksi's efforts is stone that is touched by human activity, and human activity that is touched by stone. *Uncertain Allies* brings geologic and cultural timescales and agencies into uncertain but unavoidable conversation. After all, stones are "ancient allies in knowledge making," to quote medievalist Jerome Cohen, who wrote eloquently about geophilia in *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (2015).

As she contemplates stone, Choksi believes new ethics are needed for humans to engage in any relation, spatially or temporally, with this primary matter. Bringing time and agency into play, Choksi contributes to such through the artworks of *Uncertain Allies*, in ways that are both earnest and absurd. She hopes to enable us to think beyond knowable durations, movements, and scales that make sense to us.

Rock is vulnerable to time, nature, and the forces it exerts upon itself. Despite its obstinate presence and apparent blankness, rock is, to the artist, magic and enchantment in practice. We know its timescale, its condensed energy, and we marvel. In scope and proportions, rock as matter enlarges our sense of time, slows down movement, and engages us with its agency. In relation to it, our agency seems comparatively minor, even as we center and prioritize our understanding and experiences through our capacity to act upon it.

Foundationally, the substance we call "paint" is like river meeting mountain. Rain washes rock clean, revealing, unearthing, displacing. Liquid binds with crushed mineral. Even as color delights Choksi, paint as a vehicle for color confounds her. She adores it, and yet, her comfort is challenged by the extraordinary disturbances of the earth's crust and the huge spatial displacements involved in transporting pigment, which ultimately arrives at the surface of her artworks. Reflecting on these processes, Choksi makes use of unsized canvas and linen, fabrics historically associated with the discipline of fine art painting. She coaxes these art materials into shapes that are visually ripe with the forces of gravity and time. Choksi then selectively applies raw pigments extracted straight from the earth onto the forms.

In many of wall works in *Uncertain Allies*, Choksi enlists rocks as tools with which she mars the surfaces of the fabric through repetitive pounding. Distressed by this action, the material is marked and torn. Subject to the fraying friction of raw rock on fabric, the works evoke the passage of hard time on cultural objects. In this way, the wall works record the uncertain encounters between human and rock agency. By including specimens of unaltered stone in the final compositions, the causal and originary agency of stone is indelibly linked.

Egill Sæbjörnsson: *Given that everything on Earth comes out of magma, or that living creatures descend from inanimate materials, are humans walking and talking stones?*

Jane Bennett: *Yes.*

"Ten Questions to Jane Bennett"
Egill Sæbjörnsson, 2015

In Choksi's sculptures, collectively entitled *The Weight of the Cave* (2017-2019), she placed herself directly into an encounter with the ancient obdurate agency of plutonic igneous rock. She began by boring into the faceted surfaces of granite boulders that had been industrially harvested from central California. Through an act of coring, she infinitesimally mimicked the vast mining and quarrying industries that punctuate the earth's surface. Chipped fragments from precise cylindrical cavities were then gathered and hand ground into pigment. As she engaged the rocks through her labor, they provided haptic and proprioceptive input. Choksi was made aware of her body by lifting and budging, pushing and pulling, the dense igneous matter that was just at or beyond her capacity to lift. At the specific points where she gripped and attempted to lift or simply budge the weighty stones, Choksi marked her efforts by tracing an outline of her outstretched hand in thick paint made from the rock dust her boring efforts yielded. This act of inscription harkens to primeval cave paintings made by earlier humans.

In both *The Weight of the Cave* and the wall works, mineral extraction encounters its origin; that is, pigment confronts rock, within the same spatial frame. Through these pieces, Choksi draws attention to time—chronologies literally embedded into fabric and boulder. There is the time of the rock and pigment. Then there is the time taken by the artist to attack the fabric with rocks or daub it with paint. Psychic and material energy comingle.

Choksi's 2021 video, *Charge* (2017-2021) is built upon footage from a 2017 work, *A Stone's Throw*. In both, her interlocutors are prompted by a simple request. Choksi asked friends, in Los Angeles and in Bombay, to choose a stone that fit into their hand and throw it directly at the camera. To quote Jeffrey Jerome Cohen again, "A rock is not a construction or a concept, not dead matter or pliant utensil. Whether a pebble or a volcano, a mountain or a meteor, a stone is a passage into action, a catalyst, a cause." Picking up a pebble and then giving it a cursory examination before dropping it is a common diversion. As an action of primal control and engagement, testing a rock's weight, lifting it up high by retracting the arm from elbow to hand, and then letting it go with a forward fling into the air can be sheer delight. This same act, when directed at others, be they inanimate or animate, is recognizable as that of the hungry, the

desperate, the frustrated, the angry, the oppressed. Such throwing has emotional heft, whether it is full or devoid of emotional intent.

In *Charge*, as in *A Stone's Throw*, the framing of the footage captures only the articulated movement of arm and hand as a stone is released. These sequences, filmed against a pale empty backdrop, are paradoxically anonymous and deeply individualized, as each hand possesses distinctive features. The agency of the throwers is critical to the sequence, as each stone is propelled directly at the conceptual barrier of the "fourth wall." Stone is a locus that concentrates and communicates force. As witnesses to these acts, our impulse is to physically react to each percussive shock.

For *Charge*, Choksi intercut the sequences of thrown stones with still images she has curated of, among many things, ancient cultural sites, scientific discoveries, historic artworks from many world traditions, award-winning photographs of natural events and phenomena, architecture, contemporary artworks, and references to her own 2017 project, *Faith in Friction*, which was performed and filmed at a Jain ashram under construction in India. Each of these interjections signifies conscious human interventions onto the Earth, whether additive or subtractive. Midway through the loop, the sequence plays out in reverse, with the stone projectiles reentering the hands of the throwers. Substituted for the still images of cultural phenomena in the first phase are recent photographs taken by Choksi at the Huntington Library Botanical Gardens and a selection of digital images she collected of sunsets posted on the Internet from all over the world that were date-stamped in a period between June 10, 2011 and June 9, 2012.

In the broadest sense, *Charge* points to Choksi's interest in the concept of multivalency. In the field of material culture studies, this term refers to the ability of a single object to represent more than one thing at once. In Jain philosophy, which Choksi grew up absorbing from her family, the idea of multivalency is present in the doctrine of *anekāntavāda*, which is an ontological assumption that the past is beginningless and the future is endless. Any entity is at once enduring but also undergoing change that is both constant and inevitable. According to this doctrine, there is no one truth; simply, one could say reality has many forms as experienced by entities and all must endeavor to appreciate that the reality perceived by the other is different. Through this awareness, humans can find ways to resolve conflicts. In *Charge*, our conflict as humans can be understood in relation to our economic reliance upon the extraction of natural resources, a circumstance from which we cannot materially extricate ourselves.

Three questions have motivated much of Neha Choksi's recent artistic inquiries: *Who am I? Who are we?* and *How do we sustain existence as a species?* With *Uncertain Allies*, she continues her inquiry into the last question with her work about rock. This started with her 2016 solo exhibition, *Stone Breath Mountain Dust*, presented by Project 88 at Frieze London, and *Liberty Matter*, her 2017 solo exhibition at Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. *Uncertain Allies* and these exhibitions are the third part of the series of questions that continues efforts undertaken for her 2017 multi-channel film installation, *Faith in friction*, presented at the Manchester Art Gallery in Britain, and *Elementary*, a long-term, multi-format project initiated during a 2018 artist residency at 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica.