

REVIEWS

HOUSTON

Brie Ruais Moody Center for the Arts

The concept of "nature" has been muddled during the Anthropocene era, its definition shifting based on intent and context. The word is indistinct, generally taken to mean the "natural environment" or "wilderness," yet speaking of "nature" often elides the difference between land and landscape, between the natural and the artificial. Brie Ruais's work, as showcased in her recent exhibition "Movement at the Edge of the Land," can be seen as the residue of an attempt to mediate increasingly unclear boundaries between these realities—between the natural and the unnatural, between an environment and its remnants and transformations.

Ruais begins outdoors,

"in nature," where she produces delicate, ephemeral, raw clay works on a tiny property that she owns in the remote Great Basin area of Nevada. This land provides her with space and a connection to nature unavailable back in New York, where she lives. The works in this exhibition, made in her Brooklyn studio, were inspired by impermanent pieces in Nevada. Ruais's process is part performance, part fabrication. She uses clay in a way that accentuates and replicates her body and its actions, yet her material muffles and disguises the source of its conception. In a certain sense, she's a realist whose replications of the land—of the physically present world—are abstracted by the workings of her presence and her manipulation of the material. As Ruais explains, "My practice relies on the understanding that the land and the human body share similar ways of being affected, marked, and colonized."

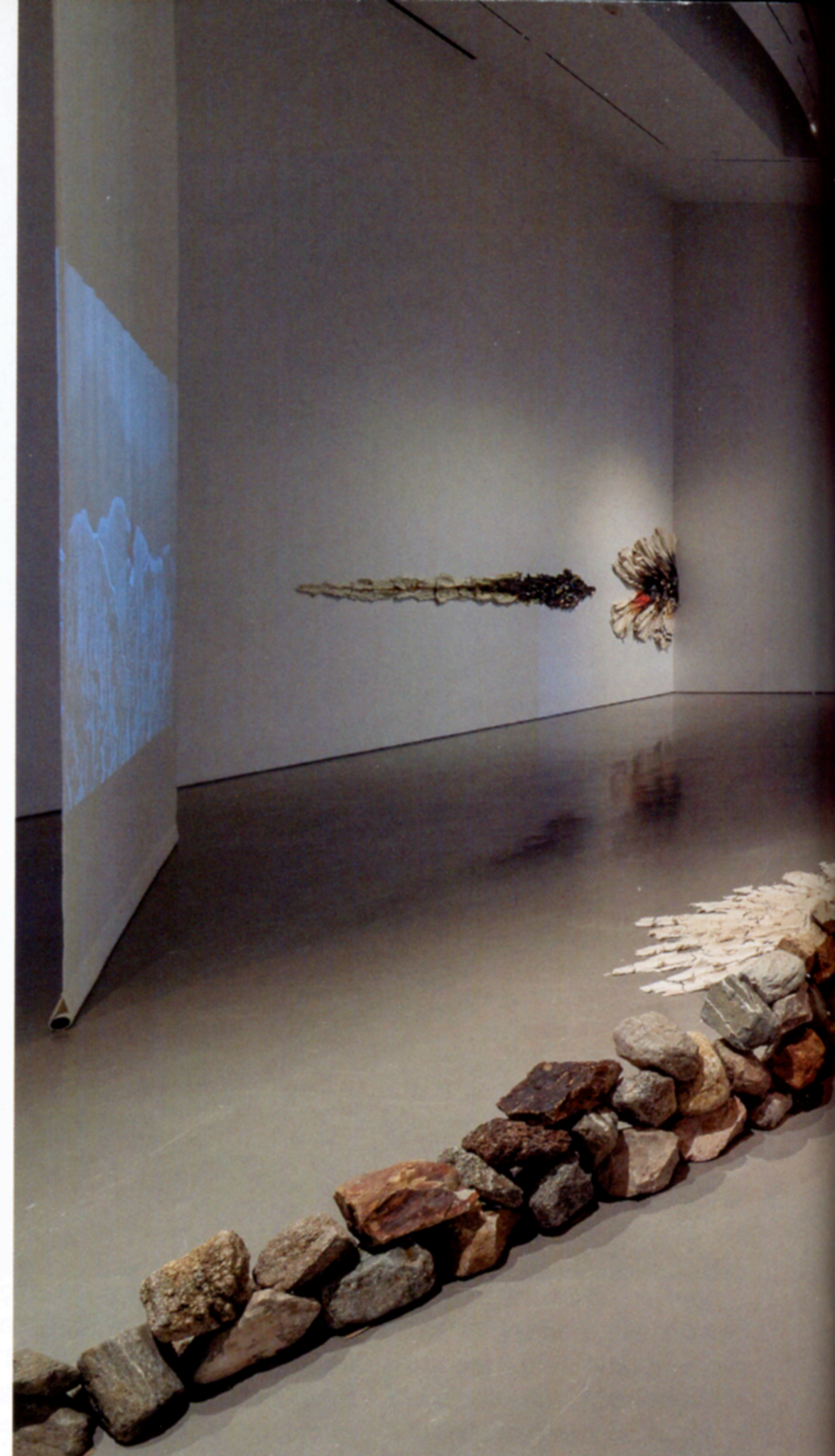
Her process is both simple and arduous. She starts with a large piece of clay equal to her body weight, then expands this lump over a chosen area by compressing, spreading, and forming it with her naked body. Through these maneuvers, the clay takes on the topography of the earth while mapping her

movements and progressions. The result is an encyclopedia of gestures and a record of surfaces. In a sense, Ruais's process mimics the primeval forces that shaped geographies. It also speaks to the extreme alterations that even the most remote areas of the American wilderness have undergone as a consequence of human development and exploitation.

The ceramic medium completes a conceptual circle that begins with the fragility of the environment. The brittleness of the fired clay is contradicted by

the force of Ruais's work, its monumental scale and weight. Its suspension from the walls seems a near impossible act, a flirtation with catastrophe that neatly mirrors our present flirtation with climate disaster.

"Movement at the Edge of the Land" featured several conceptual divisions; there were large-scale works on the walls, indoor floor installations, and outdoor works. *Withdrawing Body*, *Emerging Earth* began inside and continued on the other side of a glass



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BRIE RUAIS

LEFT TO RIGHT:
*Closing In On
 Opening Up, 132 lbs
 (Nevada Site 3),
 2020.*

Glazed stoneware
 and hardware,
 installation view.

Installation view of
 "Movement at the Edge
 of the Land," 2021.

*Withdrawing Body,
 Emerging Earth,
 2021.*

Glazed ceramic, raw
 clay, dirt, rocks, gravel,
 and construction
 debris, installation view.

wall, where it occupied an exterior plaza. Combining sculpture, dirt, rocks, and chunks of concrete, these pile forms implied burial mounds, nascent volcanoes, and ritual spaces. Ruais evokes the Indigenous American use of color to symbolize the Four Directions. Her glazes replicate earth colors but also incorporate more saturated hues—yellows, reds, turquoises, bright whites—which add an oddly hopeful and celebratory dimension to these somber works.

—KAY WHITNEY

