

40 Years and more

Ilana Halperin

“The way in which we experience the world is always personal...I have described and reflected upon my experience in encountering a volcano called Askja, in the north-eastern part of Iceland. To come to Askja, or to any other place on earth which confronts us with the overwhelming and fascinating power of this reality into which we are born, is to become aware of one’s earthly condition and to recognise oneself as an earthling.”
— Páll Skúlason

In Scotland I am used to extinct volcanoes. The hills are volcanic plugs and craters. Former lava flows pave the streets. Island chains erupt, only in silhouette, out of the water.

21 years ago almost to the day, and just a few weeks after I moved to Scotland, I was sent to SSW to work with stone, as Glasgow School of Art no longer offered carving (no more contact between hand and eye and rock). Through my early training as a stone carver I became interested in geology. My work deals with geological intimacy, vivacity, and the uncanny fact that something as apparently inert and certain as stone was once liquid, airborne, ash and alive. A geologic cultural alliance inbuilt into the Rock Cycle.

I was carving small pink alabaster ears that went hot red when you held them up to the sun. Stone with a pulse. The same phenomenon that transforms the thin skin between your outstretched fingers blood red/lava when blocking the sun from your eyes. A throwback to our

animal, vegetable, mineral days. The molten core of the Earth, veins in ears like active volcanic channels just under the surface.

Every part of a lava flow is like an anatomy lesson, muscle opened, bone revealed, blood and tissue all there, like holding a heart in your hand. A volcano is like a body. It pumps lava throughout its system and breathes in and out through the mouth of a crater. Molten ore opens new channels, pathways forged out of liquid matter. How is it possible to lead a normal life in a still world, alongside the knowledge that your neighbour, (the remote world) is right next to you in this continual present?

Jenny told me that Eden said iron pours are elemental. Hand-made lava.

On Big Island in Hawaii, the amount of lava that comes out of the Kilauea volcano could pave a road to the moon and back again five times a day every single day. At the crater's edge is Volcano House, a meeting point for volcano lovers since 1865. For 90 years, Volcano House held a register, where visitors were asked to describe exactly what they saw the volcano doing when they were standing at the crater's edge. Say you were the only visitor one day and witnessed an unusual lava fountain. Your chronicle of events might be the only record of this moment in the volcano's life. Thus, a 90 year-long daily history or - a volcanic diary changing hands each entry, was constructed. A communal biography of a volcano. A geologic life told through hundreds of personal encounters.

This reminds me of a conversation I had with a volcanologist; ultimately, a volcano's life is much longer than yours or mine, so to learn about a volcano, study it, get to know it, you must accept that you may never see its full range of behaviours first-hand. A calm volcano might have a violent eruption 400 years from the day you first meet, and even multi-generations of volcanologists may still only see 300 years in the long life of an active mountain. So, inbuilt is the tradition of passing along everything you know about your volcano to the next volcanologist who will be there when you are gone. Inbuilt

into the story of each person who gets to know a volcano is the story of that same person's obsolescence. A volcano perpetually erases its own history.

Is it always like this in a place where people come and go, meet and depart? An ongoing communal biography of a place. An ongoing communal biography of SSW, and simultaneously a new eruption every time the human constellation in Lumsden reforms.

You begin to obliterate through the act of watching lava. Each small part of new rock that forms breaks off a little part of your body. You have no sense of distance, perception of space. You don't feel like you will stumble and incinerate in a hidden fissure, but instead just break apart into volcanic particles, becoming part of the extended volcano. Now it is the closing day of our time here rather than the start, when all the days were still laid out in front. The trip home is so epic. How will we ever make it all the way there? And the real truth, I don't want to leave here, I am becoming part of the volcano, so how can I be expected to leave? What has passed between us is too physical, too personal. I feel like my arms could fit between the braided channels of lava, that I could spoon into the crushed drapery, in sleep, in the fields.

William Melson, a volcanologist who recorded the sounds of the Arenal volcano erupting for over 40 years (40 years, longer than most marriages, and as long as the current life of SSW) explained the nature of love to me.

He said,

"You love what you get to know, what you pay attention to and therefore become more aware of. This is not a passive form of love. This is how I feel about Arenal. Now, after forty years, I don't need to see the volcano to know that I love it, just as I don't need to see my daughters often to know that I love them. Just to know they are there and happy and doing as they should is enough."

This feels apt for 40 years, and then 40 and more, for SSW.

Ilana Halperin is an artist, originally from New York, based in Glasgow. Her work explores the relationship between geology and daily life. She combines fieldwork in diverse locations – on volcanoes in Hawaii, caves in France, geothermal springs in Japan – and in museums, archives and laboratories, with an active studio-based practice.

Ilana first visited SSW in September 1998, in one of the very first months of her arrival in Scotland. More recently, in November 2018, Ilana led *The Mountain Inside- Geologic Intimacy*, a workshop and sharing as part of our day-long event with artist Simone Kenyon, *Into The Mountain: A Meet* at Tramway, Glasgow.

This text was commissioned on occasion of *SSW is 40*, celebrating 40 years of Scottish Sculpture Workshop.

