

## The Matter at Hand

Everyone gathers objects for necessity and pleasure, but few of us have the focus to study and learn from them. And even fewer of us pick up disparate materials from nature and culture in order to join them and push them beyond their original roles. Matt Magee belongs to this last group. In his paintings, sculptures and prints, he creates a language of symbols that sends an open-ended message; he is an alchemist, turning letters into abstract forms and everyday objects into language, suggesting that immaterial ideals can emerge from material forms.

The gathered objects and painted shapes Magee uses can appear as drawn geometry in an oil painting, or take the form of rocks that stretch across surfaces like a message. The reflective and tactile quality of his materials, such as aluminum cans, mica, or stones, encourages the energy of his work to reach beyond its physical parameters. His sculptures (made with street trash and found objects) show us moments when nature and industry create an unlikely synergy, often due to a pairing of the smooth with the rough. Joining the disparate, he reveals the characteristics of things by allowing them to stand in relief one against the other. And by organizing objects and forms in grids and lines, he allows us to observe their qualities and feel their innate power. Magee's work transcends time in a way the history that surrounds it can't, by indicating how familiar geometric shapes create new messages for each decade.

At an early age he learned how to compare and contrast, as well as how to organize in order to reveal. His father, a geologist, took him along as he collected rocks and arrowheads. Returning home, they would lay out their finds and study them; this early introduction to classifying objects made by both nature and humans is the cornerstone of Magee's work, perhaps encouraging him to treat natural elements like mica and man-made cast-offs like aluminum cans with equal respect. In Magee's *Textcavation* series done in 2014, the artist gathered Texas pea gravel (flint, obsidian, limestone and small fossils) from a driveway and created lines of stone that resemble ancient text. The connection between writing and stone placement is a "loose" one according to the artist, who sees a relationship between his sequencing of materials and the petroglyphs and pictographs of Native American rock art.<sup>1</sup> Word play is another dimension of this work whose title suggests a contemporary sort of excavation- retrieving needed information by scrolling through numerous cell phone texts.

*Black Mirror* 2014 also reveals a desire to join natural forms with contemporary concerns. This work references the dystopian Netflix show of the same name, as well as the "black mirror" of technology that we face everyday on our phones and computers.<sup>2</sup> Magee spray-painted the back of the glass black and then drew a white grid on the front surface, filling the matrix with white oval shapes. The grid format

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Magee, Interview with the author via email, August 2016

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

appears again in *Record* 2015, a collage of aluminum cans set in an irregular grid, and also in *Aluminum Circuit 1* created in 2014. In a recent interview Magee describes these works, "Laying things in rows is about marking time in a way that I think Agnes Martin must have thought about it; it's a deeply satisfying act. The aluminum circuit boards are paragraphs carefully placed, that function as a kind of map... The composite density of the aluminum surface is also like the bark of a tree, an intriguing almost organic texture, derived from a man-made material."<sup>3</sup>

Magee's sculptures, such as *Palm Springs Screw*, 2016, reveal a penchant for humor as well as an ability to stop while ahead. This sculpture, a metal bolt rising from a small rock, is only 3.75" high, and confirms that the simplest gesture can be the most compelling. Like theorist and rock collector Roger Caillois, who remarked that "..human invention is only a development of the data inherent in things"<sup>45</sup>, Magee understands the important knowledge his materials hold. In his varied work, Magee is able to show us how the connective tissue linking contemporary life and natural history rearranges time, as well as thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Laster "On the Road with Matt Magee", *Whitehot Magazine*, August 2016 (<http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/on-the-road-with-matt-magee/3461>)

<sup>4</sup> Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell, eds., *The Keeper*, Marguerite Yourcenar, "Roger Caillois's *The Writing of Stones*", (New Museum, New York 2016) p. 121