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[Shinji Turner Yamamoto's Sidereal Silence, at Weston Art Gallery \(http://aeqai.com/main/2016/04/shinji-turner-yamamotos-sidereal-silence-at-weston-art-gallery/\)](http://aeqai.com/main/2016/04/shinji-turner-yamamotos-sidereal-silence-at-weston-art-gallery/)

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Turner-Yamamoto's paintings and sculptures are so commanding yet austere that, depending on temperament, a viewer either pays little attention or becomes lost in front of them. The latter of course is preferable and, I would suggest, the point of art, conjuring an experience of a new thread of reality; and with any luck becoming a littler better of a human being in the process. Along these lines, DH Lawrence said that consciousness is the only aristocracy. He might have substituted "awareness" for "consciousness" to the same effect. Try to sit and experience Turner-Yamamoto's work with this in mind. It is in my opinion some of the most interesting and important art being made in this country.

Putting his work in context is rather difficult. It isn't an artist's responsibility to make work with an intention to become part of any sort of linear historical canon, despite what the pyramid scheme of academia may implore. Nor is it necessarily a critic's (or viewer's, or collector's) responsibility to peg it to any school or movement. With Turner-Yamamoto, our taxonomies exhaust themselves, a reminder that great art usually has this effervescent quality of otherness. His work certainly has its precursors in land art, and contemporaries working in that tradition, like Andy Goldsworthy, come to mind. So does that subset of artists working with Indeterminacy, from the granddaddy John Cage to Dove Bradshaw, who shares a number of sensibilities with Turner-Yamamoto.

But it is the foreignness of Turner-Yamamoto's work that interests me. It feels utterly new yet ancient (its ancientness being a literal fact given his clever use of 450 million-year-old fossil dust as a "pigment" in his paintings). Utter originality coupled with something primitive is, in my opinion, a telling and optimistic sign of our times. The dichotomous combination serves as an aid in the complicated balancing act of, on one hand, some path forward out of the diaspora of much of contemporary art and life with, on the other hand, a deep awareness of our rich and ancient histories, our primordial connection to "mother earth."



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Sidereal Silence: Irish Study #16

2016

Ca. 450-million-year-old Ordovician fossil dust, turf ash, calcium carbonate, magnesium silicate, mica, rainwater, nikawa glue, tree resin, raw cotton canvas

60" x 36" x 1.5"

152 x 92 x 4 cm

Take, for instance, his *Sidereal Silence: Irish Studies* series. Granules of minerals, 450-million year-old fossil dust (an incomprehensible age, implicating the mystery of time and the universe), calcium carbonate (limestone), magnesium silicate (talc), mica, nikawa (cow hide) glue, tree resins, fossils, dirt, clay and the detritus of the earth pepper and sweep across the canvases in grand gestures that have nothing to do with the artist's hand, at least in any traditional sense. They implicate, say, erosion more than the gestures of abstract expressionism. Simply put by Turner-Yamamoto, these paintings are made in "collaboration with nature." But the questions arising from that collaboration are far more complex, and absolutely intriguing. Who exactly makes these gestures, the artist, or something we conveniently call "nature"? Is there a difference? This is the kind of question Melville files under "the whiteness of the whale."

Being both gestural and uncontrived is a rather difficult thing, but Turner-Yamamoto achieves it. His work, and the contradiction implicit in it, is impossible to comprehend in any linear sense, having been created by a nature full of forces far greater than we can emulate or understand. We're just stewards on this earth, rather insignificant in the rip-roar of space and time. Turner-Yamamoto whispers that in each painting and sculpture.

He isn't taking small ideas and making them big, a faddish equation for success in an art world seemingly concerned with banality. Turner-Yamamoto does the opposite, condensing massive, incomprehensible ideas into objects oozing with density. In his *Pentimenti* and *Quintessence* series he grows crystals on acetate, using a difficult and time-consuming process that, according to the artist, "manifests the strata of time, submission to the elements, and the yielding of artistic control." In *Quintessence: Callixylon Newberryi*, the crystal is grown on a 350-million-year-old piece of petrified wood, measuring only 9"x4"x4". The result is an ephemeral "thingness" that somehow recalls Chinese poets writing poems on leaves and tossing them into the river. We're in Zen territory here, and while I'll try to keep my western foot out of my western mouth on the subject, suffice it to say that you need know nothing of Zen to appreciate Turner-Yamamoto's work. But if you go see it, which you should, you'll know something of Zen when you leave.

Then there is the installation and video pieces, *Sidereal Silence II* is installed in the atrium of the Weston. It creates a mist cloud amidst a towering black box. In conversation with the paintings and sculptures below, and the sound installation of a waterfall, it creates something of a walking trail. This was the artist's intention. I'm reminded of Thoreau's essay on *Walking*, discussing wildness: "Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him."



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Pentimenti: Steinbruch Ostermundigen
2016
Ostermundigen sandstone fragment, cultured crystals
4.5" x 4" x 1.5"

For me, conjured up amidst all this wildness, density and stillness is some sort of restlessness for future work and ideas just over the rim of consciousness. An artist's path is and must be like a river. Turner-Yamamoto's work has and will continue to follow its own path.

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