

Mnemonic
TRACERIES
the structure of memory





Janet Chaffee, *Sound of Rocks, Unknown Song, Place and Reverb*, 2023-2025, encaustic, oil, and calcium carbonate on panel, wall-mount pedestal with encaustic on aluminum post, 48" x 96" x 9"



THE INTERNAL LIFE OF rocks

Dr. Sara-Jayne Parsons

Even though Janet Chaffee has lived in Texas for most of her life, she was born in Colorado and the Rocky Mountains continue to resonate strongly with her. Rock formations in particular have great significance in her exploration of personal memories and family stories. Whether attempting to

understand her grandparents' experiences moving from Colorado to California as migrant workers, or the incredible story of her great-grandmother's seasonal job as a pony express driver, Chaffee encounters the trace of these moments in stony arrangements found on boulder strewn

hillsides, dramatic outcrops, crags and cliffs. Spiritually she connects the past and the present across the Continental Divide through the materiality



Fig. 1

of stone, held by a web of metaphors expressed through her processes and materials.

The strategy of layering, in both image and materials, is important to Chaffee as a means to represent personal experiences in her abstract paintings and drawings. The idea of geological sedimentation in which gestures accumulate, compress and become deposits of time perfectly aligns with Chaffee's interests in archiving, remembering and possessing,

and encaustic is a generous and loving collaborator in this process. A technique of painting developed in Ancient Greece that involves a heated wax medium containing colored pigments, encaustic is a challenging method, but one which offers an appealing dimensional quality and luminosity in color. Chaffee uses beeswax, dry pigments and oil paint which are combined in layers over time. Large scale encaustic works—*Hesse, CaCO₃ (Calcium Carbonate)*, 2015 (fig. 1) and *Fissure, ZnO (Zinc White)*, 2013 (pg. 6)—are monumental abstractions of rock formations with playful tactile surfaces. The smoothness of wider wax areas is juxtaposed with crevices, cracks, bumps and trails. The tension of hard and soft elements in the scaly skin of the paintings reflects the melt and stretch of the wax during cooling. There is a sense of the hand of Chaffee using tools to spread the warmed wax to create forms, exploring possibilities and leaning into



Photo credit: Andrew Ortiz and Patricia Healy

Encaustic painting is an ancient technique that uses heated wax mixed with pigments, applied in layers to a warm surface. The wax is then fused with heat, creating a rich textured finish that helps colors stay vivid over time.

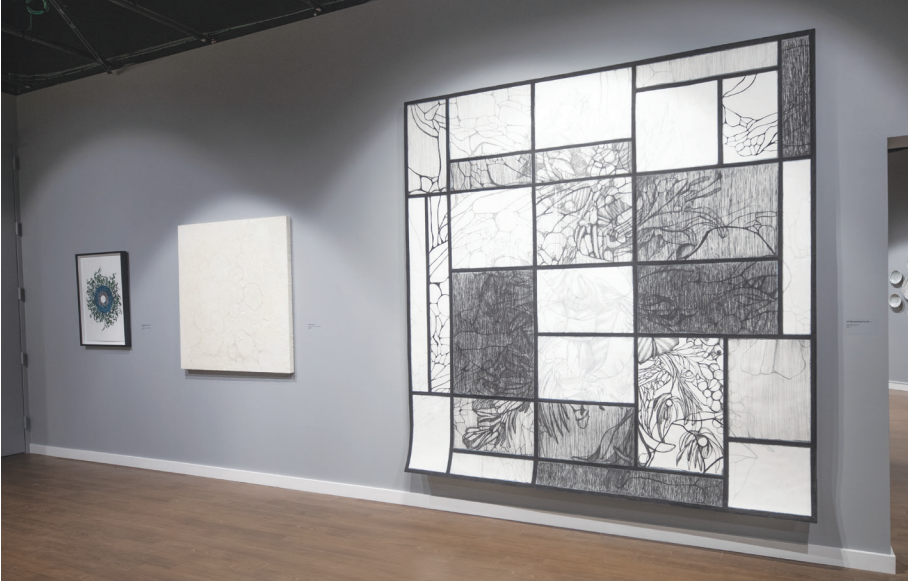


Fig. 2

intuition; gestures of tenderness and affection that transform the line, color and opacity of the forms as they begin to solidify. In this mesmerizing, alchemical space Chaffee's actions are full of love and grief; she simultaneously holds the rocks close and lets them go.

While the encaustic works suggest a very material understanding of the metaphors at play in Chaffee's work, her large charcoal drawings offer a somewhat more liberated, although no less rich, approach to exploring the internal life of

rocks. With a grid as a framing device, Chaffee uses light and dark to organize space inhabited by imagery of rock formations and floral arrangements. Here her abstraction of nature relies on the tonal quality of the drawing, simplifying elements of line and a sense of tension; some areas of the drawing are in focus and offer clarity, while other parts are ambiguous and veiled. The segmented drawings engage with questions of how our memories work; some are large, noisy and take up space, while others quietly fade into the background or offer vague

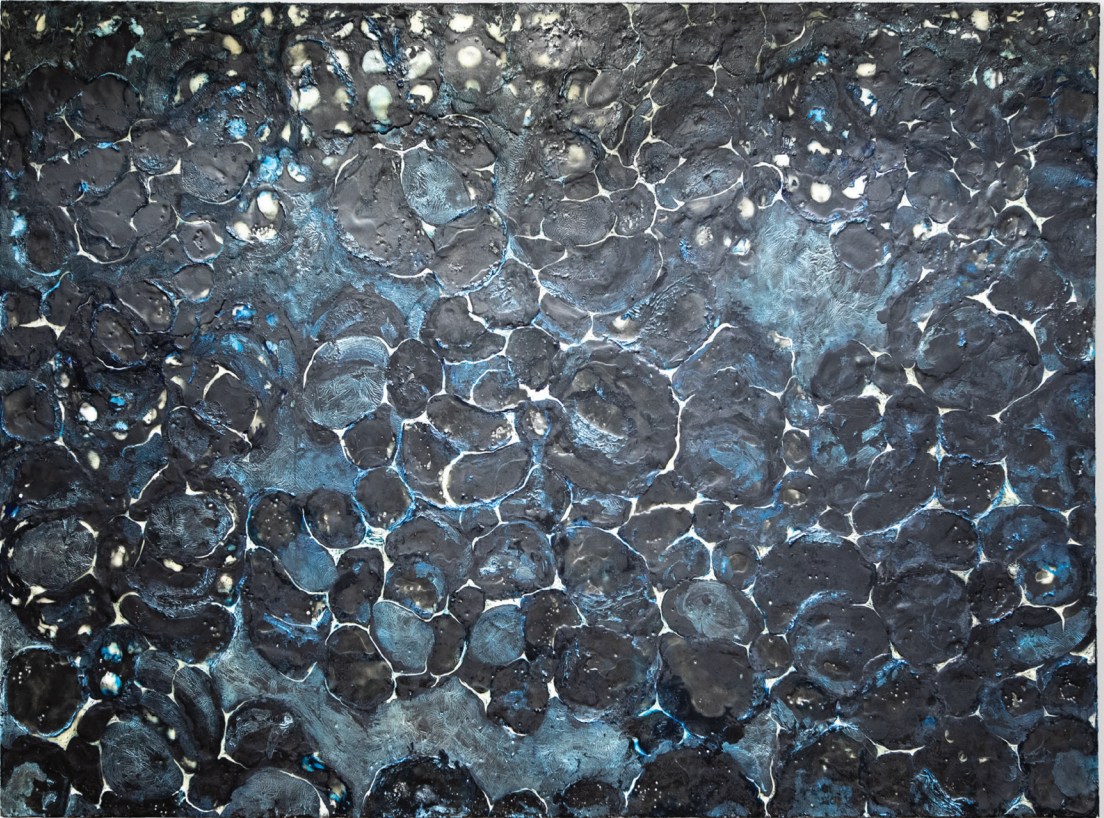


Fig. 3

Fig. 2 | Janet Chaffee, *Interlacements 1*, 2021, charcoal, chalk pastel on paper, 104" x 104" (right)

Janet Chaffee, *Hesse*, CaCO_3 , 2015, encaustic, dry pigment, and oil on panel, 48" x 48" (center)

Janet Chaffee, *Deliberate Involute No. 1*, 2024, water-soluable encaustic on paper, 29.5" x 22" (left)

Fig. 3 | Janet Chaffee, *Fissure*, ZnO (Zinc White), 2013, encaustic, oil, graphite, and dry pigment on panel, 60" x 84"



Photo credit: Andrew Ortiz and Patricia Healy

Dating back to Greek and Roman times, encaustic painting involves “burning in” each layer by fusing pigmented wax with heat. The technique produces luminous color and surfaces that range from richly textured to perfectly smooth, with pigments sealed in wax.

narratives. This is especially evident in *Interlacements No. 1* (fig. 2) from the *Over-The-Pass Series*, 2020 where the outline of rock forms juxtaposed with the patterns of lace draw attention to the experience of hard and soft elements to further support this unease. Chaffee depicts rocks remembered from a journey through a pass in the In-Kah-Pah mountain range she regularly took when her daughter lived in California for a time; the memory of these rocks now acts as a portal between them. Chaffee's use of lace as a subject is also significant, functioning as a cultural connection between old and new world generations of women makers. The lace highlights the web of human relationships in daily life, and the role of women in making domestic arrangements, including organizing family histories in material and memorial ways.

CHAFFEE'S ABSTRACT

exploration of natural forms sits comfortably within a tradition of artists looking closely at the world around them. From the painterly depiction of recognizable landscapes to detailed scientific still-life drawings, the pure study of nature has captivated artists as means to understand the universe and hypothesize human existence. Well-known precursors



Fig. 4

1 Zollner, Frank. *Leonardo Da Vinci: 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*. Cologne: Taschen, 2007.

Fig. 4 | *Virgin of the Rocks*, Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1483, oil on canvas, Louvre Museum, Paris, public domain

of Chaffee's particular interest in geology and rock formations include Leonardo da Vinci, whose *Virgin of the Rocks* painting (1483-6) (fig. 3) is a study of form and perspective in the landscape that reveals a careful consideration of light, shade and color.¹ More specifically, Leonardo was known to have made numerous preparatory drawings of rock formations which informed the grotto surroundings of the holy figures in the final painting. Centuries later, the Victorian artist, critic and historian John Ruskin emphasized the necessity of observing the natural world as the key to artistic integrity. As such he is known to have produced numerous detailed drawings of rock formations made in-situ in Scotland, Northern England and the Swiss Alps. His book *Deucalion: Collected Studies of the Lapse of Waves, and Life of Stones* (1875-1883) (fig. 4), a collection of his writings on rocks,



Fig. 5

stones, and coastal geology, also substantiates his deep interest in geology.² Around the same time, American painter Thomas Moran documented aspects of the American West as part of The Hayden Geological Survey (1871). His watercolor sketches captured the detail, color and drama of rock formations in areas of the Rocky Mountains, and what would become known as Yellowstone National Park.³

2 Ruskin, John. *Deucalion: Collected Studies of the Lapse of Waves, and Life of Stones* (Volume 1). Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1879.

Fig. 5 | John Ruskin, *Study of Gneiss Rock*, Glenfinlass, 1853, pen, brown ink, ink wash (lamp-back) and bodycolour, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.



Fig. 6

3 Kinsey, Joni Louise. *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

Fig. 6 | Thomas Moran, *Above Tower Falls, Yellowstone*, 1872, watercolor and gouache on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Armistead Peter III.

As photography grew in popularity and the desire to capture a visual likeness of the world was ably assisted by the new medium, the study of nature became intimately entwined with the history of abstraction in art. One of the most striking examples of this shift is found in the work of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian, who, influenced by Cubism, sought perfection through abstraction in his study of trees in the period 1908-13. Paring down the representation of trees to a series of vertical and horizontal lines, Mondrian was driven by spiritual concerns connected to his study of theosophy and which he later expressed with regard to his practice more concrete terms:

“Natural (external) things become more and more automatic, and we observe that our vital attention fastens more and more on internal things.”⁴



Fig. 7

Mondrian’s words foreshadow the approach of Georgia O’Keeffe who also embraced the need to explore form and feeling through abstraction. Inspired by the landscape of New Mexico and its range of colors and light, the artist studied rock formations and collected stones which became part of the fabric of her home and daily life. As the subjects of her paintings, O’Keeffe considered the rocks and stones as symbols of time, place and being, which could conjure sublime feelings when presented in close-up through abstraction.⁵ Her thinking was

4 Piet Mondrian, ‘Natural Reality and Abstract Reality’ (1919), in Herschell Browning Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968, pp. 321.

Fig. 7 | Piet Mondrian, *Gray Tree (De grijze boom)*, 1911, oil on canvas, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Netherlands, public domain

undoubtedly influenced by indigenous perspectives in New Mexico; she recognized that while shaped by change, rocks represent strength and resilience and they can, in effect, teach us a lot about ourselves.

THIS INVITATION TO REFLECT

sits at the heart of Chaffee's practice and her focus on geology. Her excavation of this terrain is propelled by a love of nature interwoven with the desire to trace and connect with personal and family history; to find belonging in the internal life of rocks. For Chaffee the consideration of geology as a metaphor allows her to consider past moments in time as things hidden are revealed through her creative archeology. Geological samples do not carry DNA, but they reveal their origin and confirm the passing of time and preserve the trace of other lives through fossils. As such, the action of studying geology becomes a framework for

understanding ancestry and lineage, and Chaffee's evocative paintings and drawings challenge viewers to think about how the natural world can teach us about ourselves. By weaving together metaphorical threads from geology and genealogy, her work encourages us to seek out material clues as to who we are. A meditation on rocks can be steadying in times of loss or uncertainty; their stillness and permanence remind us that change is inevitable and, more importantly, survivable.



Fig. 8

5 Alicia Inez Guzmán, *Georgia O'Keeffe At Home*. London: Frances Lincoln, 2017

Fig. 8 | Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Rock on Red*, 1971, oil on canvas, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Gift of The Burnett Foundation and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, 1997.5.4 ©ARS



Fig. 9

Fig. 9 | Janet Chaffee, *Impasse, No. 2*, 2025, charcoal on paper, 84" x 60" (left)

Janet Chaffee, *Fissure, ZnO (Zinc White)*, 2013, encaustic, oil, graphite, and dry pigment on panel, 60" x 84" (right)



Fig. 10

Fig. 10 | Janet Chaffee, *Interlacements, No. 2*, 2022, charcoal on paper, 104" x 104"

ARTIST JANET CHAFFEE



Photo credit: Andrew Ortiz and Patricia Healy

Originally from Denver, Colorado, Chaffee has lived in Texas most of her life. She earned a BFA in painting from The University of Texas at Arlington in 1999 and an MFA in painting from Texas Christian University in 2002. After graduating, she taught drawing at TCU, UTA, and The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and has exhibited widely in solo and group shows across Texas. Her awards include third place in The Dishman Competition (2005) and The Murrin Family Award (2006). Chaffee has had solo exhibitions at The Ellen Noel Museum and Brookhaven College, and her work has been shown at institutions including UT San Antonio and The Art Museum of Southeast Texas. She has also participated in residencies in Germany and Santa Fe, New Mexico. She currently teaches Upper School Art at Trinity Valley School in Fort Worth, Texas.

Cover Artwork: *Deliberate Involute No. 1*, 2024, water-soluble encaustic on paper, 29.5" x 22"