

When Science Meets Art

Roger Mitchell Exhibit Coming to Co. Lab Gallery & Arts Centre

By Lindsay Campbell

Roger Mitchell's delight in rocks and minerals is ignited under the lens of his petrographic microscope. But even before that, he grew up collecting stones along the east coast of the U.K. during family vacations. If he was lucky enough, he recalls, he'd come across fossilized materials.

"Naturally, there are always some I consider more interesting than others," he says. "But when you crack these things open, it's the colours and textures and their various combinations that continue to fascinate me." As a seasoned geologist and internationally renowned authority on the characterization of rocks and minerals, what exists inside of these natural formations has been at the centre of Mitchell's life for decades. Now his scientific discoveries are making their entry into the art world.

Twenty-two samples of Mitchell's rocks and minerals, in poignant texture and vibrant colour, will be blown up onto canvas in an upcoming abstract art exhibit at the Co. Lab Gallery & Arts Centre inside Goods & Co. Market. Called *Steinbilder*, the snapshots are derived from his professional travels in India, Siberia, Australia, Tanzania, and the Canadian Arctic—to

name a few. And as unique as these geographical locations are, Mitchell has found a way to provide his own creative interpretation of each rock sample through a number of digital tools.

On one canvas print, one might see Technicolour fragments that closely resemble a stained glass window. On another, the winding lines and bulbous shapes that attach to them, might look like the cells and arteries of an artistic illustration in a biology textbook—"biomorphic," Mitchell says. Another plays up a sample's natural elements, making use of its branch-like contours over an earthy green foreground. "This is what lives in rocks," Mitchell says, pointing to a spread of his pieces across his dining room table. "I like to think I've brought out their beauty, which is not so blatantly evident [...] but I prefer to let people make their own interpretations when they view them."

There is no one yet in the art world he knows of who has formally created art from rocks like this, Mitchell says. He's only seen pictures somewhat similar on the Internet.

He has his own detailed process: first he cuts a razor thin sample of a formation, then he shaves it down so its contents are thin

enough to be viewed with his microscope, which has a digital camera attached to it. You can change all of the settings on this camera, he tells me, including the colours. Then, he saves the file, and more often than not, he plays with the shades and textures some more in Photoshop. Sometimes it takes hours to decide what he wants to do with a sample. Other times it takes days.

The idea for using his work as an artistic medium has been in the works for quite some time, though. He decided to pursue it, Mitchell says, after he authored a rocks and mineral atlas of various colour-coded samples in 1997, but it's only been over the past four months that he's found the time to commit to such a project. And despite painting surrealist art prior to this exhibit and notably having his paintings on display in Toronto, Mitchell is unsure about how the public will receive his rock art. "We will see if there's a market for it," he says, when asked if he'd continue to create pieces of this nature. "This is something different."

Still, this is undeniably the kind of art that would speak to the boy who first saw rocks and minerals as hidden treasure along the English seaside.

Steinbilder has its opening night on September 15 at 7 pm, and the exhibit will continue September 16 and 17 from 10 to 4 pm, at the Co. Lab Gallery & Arts Centre inside Goods & Co. Market.

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