

Pebbles

An essay by Hettie Judah to accompany Amalia Pica's work
rock comb commissioned by Brighton CCA
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“I must begin with these stones as the world began.”
– Hugh MacDiarmid, from *On a Raised Beach* (1934)

A pebble is at once a symbol of humility and of endurance. To be a pebble on the beach is to be a fragment of a whole, an indistinct portion of a mass, a tiny component of something grand. Yet there is strength here too: this shingle beach is a defence against the ravaging sea, its stones are tens of millions of years old.

The chert and flint that skirts Brighton's seaward edge once peppered the great expanse of chalk, formed some 80 million years ago, that lies beneath south-east England and north-west France. Both the chalk and the concretions within it derive from ancient life-forms. The calcium carbonate of chalk from the shelly remains of tiny ancient foraminifera and coccoliths: flint and chert from silica in the skeletal structures of marine organisms. Successive ice ages ravaged the chalk ridge that once attached Britain to continental Europe, forming white cliffs of chalk on either side of what is now the English Channel. As the chalk has been eroded by waves and weather, the tough concretions within it endured. This is the shingle that now crunches beneath our feet on Brighton Beach, and the nodules that stud the walls of Marlborough Place and Pavilion Parade.

In his classic stone-fancier's manual *The Pebbles on the Beach* (1954), Clarence Ellis recalls the hundreds of thousands of tons of shingle “removed from the beaches annually in cart-loads for building and other purposes” in the first half of the twentieth century. With their sandy, stony barriers depleted, towns were left vulnerable to flooding, and cliffs to erosion. The 1949 Coastal Protection Act prohibited the removal of sand and pebbles from British beaches. Writing five years after the act was passed, Ellis clearly didn't see this prohibition applying to the discriminating collector.



Touring the English coastline, Ellis notes that all but “the most zealous of pebble-collectors” would judge Brighton Beach “to have far too much shingle and also too much of the same kind.” A century earlier this had been a prime haunt of the pebble-hunter, who hammered the flint pebbles in the hope of finding intricate fossil patterns within. Local lapidaries tended the craze for pebble collecting, cutting and polishing the hobbyists’ finds. Ellis laments the lack of lithic ardour among 1950s beach goers: “Of the thousands who now throng the Brighton beach, how many are thus engaged? Perhaps none, but there are still many fossiliferous flints there and many a flint pebble would repay the cost of its fashioning in the pleasure it gives to the beholder.”

Piling a two-ton haul from the beach in an art gallery, Amalia Pica invites us to view each pebble as an individual object, and then place it in a new relationship to the shingle mass, sorted according to colour. At the opening of rock comb a stripe of pebbles ran along the gallery’s west wall, their colours descending from darkest grey, through brown and sand to creamy white. Visitors are invited to scoop up a bowl of pebbles, study them, sort them and add to the carpet.

The attempt to impose order on a mass of stones or sand has a strong absurdist legacy. In Paul Auster’s novel *The Music of Chance* (1990), two failed cardsharps are trapped into re-ordering a mound of stones into an endless, pointless wall. In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, the Walrus and Carpenter look back along the beach they have walked down and lament its gritty covering: “If this were only cleared away, / They said, it would be grand!”^[i]

We might imagine Pica casting us as one of the “seven maids with seven mops” tasked with clearing up the beach, but this is no Sisyphean enterprise. There are fixed parameters – two tons of pebbles, three months of sorting – and the arrangement is imagined as the work of a multitude. The artist has likened the activity to the creation of a flowered carpet – a festive enterprise that is both communal and impermanent. At the end of the exhibition, the pebble carpet will be swept up and the shingle returned to the beach.

In a recent work, the New Delhi-based artist Bharti Kher re-imagined the myth of Sisyphus as an expression of bliss rather than frustration. In a different cultural context, the endless cycle of pushing a stone uphill is transformed into a meditative gesture of repetition. There is something of this, too, in rock comb. This abstracted beach shares its ordered pebbled with the carefully raked stone waves of a Zen garden. We could see the act of sorting pebbles into a pattern as a calming action for busy minds, a narrowing of focus, a mantra for the hand and eye.

As a collective task, the work of sorting and grading pebbles allows the individual to take their place in a multitude, as one of the many un-named authors of the rock carpet. Laced within this mass of

pebbles are a few from another source, which Pica has coated in gold leaf. This presents a choice in how we look at the pebbles. If we hunt for gold our bowl of pebbles becomes a sorting pan, in which all else is rejected as worthless and uninteresting. If we forget the gold, the other pebbles come back into focus again. The one approach is a means to an end, the other is an end in itself: an acceptance of collective action, and our metaphorical status as pebbles on the beach.

Hettie Judah, 2022

Hettie Judah is chief art critic on the British daily paper *The i*, a regular contributor to *The Guardian's* arts pages, and a columnist for *Apollo* magazine. She writes for *Frieze*, *Art Quarterly*, *Art Monthly*, *ArtReview* and other publications with 'art' in the title, and is a contributing editor to *The Plant* magazine. Following publication of her 2020 study on the impact of motherhood on artists' careers, in 2021 she worked with a group of artists to draw up the manifesto *How Not To Exclude Artist Parents*, now available in 15 languages. She regularly talks about art and with artists for museum and gallery events, and has been a visiting lecturer for Goldsmiths University, London and Dauphine University, Paris.

[i] From Lewis Carroll 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' first published in *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). Reverend Charles Dodgson, who wrote the Alice books under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll, was a regular visitor to Kemp Town, the Brighton district that is in turn the source of Pica's pebbles.