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From *Leslie Shows: Heap of Elements*. Sausalito: Headlands Center for the Arts, 2007.

Leslie Shows' pictures compress time and space to human scale. They have been said to evoke a cataclysmic vision of devastation. While it's tempting to interpret these empty landscapes as critical of our callousness toward nature, she is quick to clarify that this is not her intent. Erosion, decay and disappearance are part of nature, as are we, and all that we make and destroy. Thinking in geological terms of time and space, Shows recognizes the potential for apocalypse in every action. All of this is simply matter reorganizing, devastating to some entities and inconsequential to others.

Shows has been deeply influenced by the theory that our behavioral systems follow the same engineering principles as all matter to self-organize into hierarchical structures and non-hierarchical composites or aggregates. Bureaucracies of state, church and academia might represent the former, while markets and assemblies on the local level might represent the latter. Architecture can operate as an exoskeleton for humans, structured similarly to mineral crystals. Similar ideas of living and nonliving things as aggregates in flux come up in Buddhist philosophy and in the geological lexicon, and Shows composes self-organizing systems of geometries and symbols drawn from all these sources. In these paintings we can see indications of a humanity that at first appears absent, nonliving matter being the principal actor.

Constructed narratives from film and television have resurfaced in her latest work, *Shape Quarry*, which seem at first incongruous with the inhospitable settings that frame them. Shows employs these familiar tropes as another kind of visual shorthand, representing narratives that arise from inorganic elements into sentience as humans did. Language is another material that she uses to reference narratives in the present. Text culled from specific and varied books are recombined into a topography of words, a tactic influenced by Robert Smithson's 1966 drawing *A Heap of Language*, in which words pile upon one another to suggest meaning without revealing it. In Shows' hands these ambiguous texts form a geological "unconformity," a phenomenon whereby strata within the earth, formed eons apart, are compressed and touch one another across millions of years.

When speaking about her work, Shows has invoked Marjory the Trash Heap from the 1980s children's show "Fraggle Rock." This is a creature that originated as an immense pile of compost, but gained both sentience and wisdom through some fortunate combination of ingredients. If organisms are but heaps of elements evolving into consciousness, a similar alchemy applies to painting, as pigments are manipulated to evoke anything from a rock formation to an animal to a mood. Somehow base materials give rise to society and culture, religion, science, architecture and art. This is a wondrous transformation that Leslie Shows approaches with fascination and critique in equal measure.