

Nature gets classic rock tribute: Bernhard Keber's work builds on the raw form of Earth's riches

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BERNHARD KEBER'S LIVING ART

Showing at: Lando Gallery, 11130 105th Ave.

Until: May 10

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Bernhard Keber's Living Art show at the Lando Gallery is rock-solid in every sense.

Not only are Keber's enigmatic and abstracted landscapes direct and earthy representations of the wild spaces of Alberta, his collage-based images are also constructed from actual stone. The Austrian-born artist, who has lived in Alberta for nine years, builds his relief work using thin sheets of slate and fossil-bearing stones.

"I've been fascinated with fossils since I was a little boy," he says, adding that he was thrilled to have such easy access to the rich fossil beds of Western Canada.

This dedicated amateur collector and preparer of fossils -- which he makes into jewelry as well as fine art pieces -- is particularly taken by luminescent ammonite fossils.

Ammonites are coiled, chambered shells of extinct cephalopod mollusks that were abundant in the Cretaceous Period and common in this province. These fossils are romantically named after Ammon, the Egyptian god of life and reproduction, a deity who was represented as a man with a ram's head.

"While I like making jewelry, I personally like the raw form of the stones themselves. It's the feeling that you're dealing with the raw form of Mother Nature that's the real joy," he says.

The artist says he was inspired to create his stone-based collages because he wanted to find a use for the rubble that was left over after he polished and prepared a piece.

Supplementing his found stone with pieces of slate that he purchases commercially, Keber sees stone as the perfect medium for landscapes.

For starters, he says the natural colours and feel of the rock are a perfect way to represent nature.

Secondly, stone is a "very clean medium" that has a direct connection to the Earth.

"A person who buys one of these works is actually getting a piece of Mother Nature," he says.

The finished pieces boast extremely finely cut pieces of stone and weigh only seven to 14 kilograms.

Keber also loves the natural richness of the stone-fossil combinations, often going as far as to use fossil bits of fern and ancient poplar leaf remains as foliage in his compositions.

"There's lots of things you can see the more you look at these pieces. Because they are three-dimension work you are allowed to go very deep. The stone gives you all these different colours depending on the light and the angle the light hits it."

A prolific acrylic and watercolourist, Keber started to work with the stone collages because of his desire to experiment with as many mediums as possible.

The artist says that his day job as a professional hardwood floor installer as well as his lifelong love of mosaic work were instrumental in his deciding to create this particular series of work.

"The fun part of these works is the fact that I am experimenting and discovering all the time," he says. For example, Keber says, you never know what a finished work will completely look like until you apply the final coat of varnish (to prevent the stone from flaking), a chaotic and endlessly surprising element that he finds particularly exhilarating.

Another betrayal of Keber's wood-working day job is his love of producing thick wooden frames for the amazingly delicate stone-based works.

"It's very European of me, but I believe an artist's duty is to produce the whole picture."

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Shaugn Butts, The Journal / Collage student Bernhard Keber