

# ASIAN ART NEWS

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QUARTERLY

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# A Sense Of Wonder

The best photographer's art begins long before picking up a camera. The beginnings of English artist Daniel Eskenazi's creativity lie in the observing the world and developing a unique visual vocabulary to inform his narrative.

By Ian Findlay

Why an artist is drawn to one particular art form over another intrigues me. It may be decided upon after a long struggle or it may be entirely serendipitous. However it comes about, the pleasure and pain of discovery is frequently fixed at the heart of their work. In the case of Daniel Eskenazi his attraction to photography was inspired not by fantasy but by the thrill of the real world.

"I have always been a visual person who has, more often than not, been in awe of the world around me," says Eskenazi, whose subject matter ranges from insects to animal skulls to sculptures. "As a teenager the idea of trying to capture life felt like a form of magic and perhaps that was where the seed was first planted."

His sense of awe has been captured over the years through his choice of materials as different as roots and shells, fulgurites and crystals. Each object speaks uniquely to both his subjects and themes as well as to the timelessness of the world in which his forms have been fashioned.

Looking at recent work from Eskenazi one is quickly aware of coming face to face with a wholly personal vision, one that has been arrived at through close observation and a keen sense of what is important in shaping his art. One might think he chooses his subjects carefully but he quietly disabuses

one of this notion in conversation. "It feels like they select me," he says.

The manner in which he photographs and presents his art is informed by a poignancy that embraces the nostalgia

*I, Long Root I*, and *Fulgurite I* (all 2014), which recalls the rough tone of the art of Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), and the raw *A Rift in Time* (2015), which reminds me of the dramatic New Mexico paintings of cow and deer skulls by Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986).

While the viewer is aware that his subjects are inanimate objects, the way in which he has lit these suggests a natural flow as in works from his *Untitled* series (*Pictures of You*) (2013). These forms possess an ephemeral quality that engages the imagination quickly. These images "evolved from trying to create images of incense smoke traveling through scholar's rocks like mist in the mountains," he says.

"That project didn't quite go to plan. What did happen was that I became enthralled by the smoke itself. I built a machine to make the smoke appear more solid and I found that in a split second I could capture ethereal images with the camera. There was a lot of trial and error: the humidity and temperature played a major role. In the end I called the series *Pictures of You*, although the works are all untitled, as I wanted viewers to come to their own conclusions as to what the forms looked like, much

like cloud gazing."

The success of his best photographs lies in the care he takes to light his works which captures the subtle energy of his forms and encourages the viewer to

perceive the works in a number of different ways.

"All images come from light and shadow and that is up to available light or manipulated light. The character of an image comes from here," he says. "In a way you paint your subject with light, deciding what to reveal and what not to reveal. That is where the challenge or difficulty lies. I love seeing how light plays in our world so I enjoy this part of photography."

"I seek to play with different perspectives, which can make objects seem something other themselves and suggest movement. Our mental imagery is a fascinating subject and relates to how we can perceive a rock to be scary or joyful."

At the same time, Eskenazi has imbued some of his subjects with an uncanny sensual tone, even gently erotic, but not provocative. One sees this in works such as *Entheos* series (2015) of which *Entheos II* and *III* are particularly erotic. But in these works I see a suggestion of deformed humanity come to life as gnarled pieces of wood.

Eskenazi notes that sensuality and deformed humanity were not things that he was especially looking for but "The images are of physical nature, which I find to be sensual." At the same time, "These images are of concretions made almost of pure silica formed over, some scientists say, 30 million years. I find them astounding for their purity of form that has an almost human quality yet are totally natural. I do not know of any other natural phenomena quite like them. In France they are often called *gogottes*,

whereas in the United States they are referred to as 'fairy stones.'"

While sensuality is important to some works Eskenazi notes that this is but one aspect of his current preoccupation. "At the moment I am enjoying nature which is perfect and imbues creation, time, and perspective," he says. "To capture it is an endless journey I am happy to pursue."

Another part of his journey of dis-

covery involves a deep interest in classical sculpture from India and China. "I do like early sculptures for their purity of form," he says. "In the early periods they seem to generate a greater sense of calm and purpose than the later, perhaps more stylized examples."

While works such as *A Rift in Time*, *Long Root I*, *Fulgurite I*, *Meteorite I* (2004), and *Desert Rose I* (2014) speak to modern sculptural stylization, they also address something of nature's powerful forces. "This group played with time with *Fulgurite I*, formed from a lightning bolt in the Libyan desert, to *Meteorite I*, which is older than the earth itself. With *Long Root I* and *A Rift in Time I* played with scale and lighting to present a different perspective," says Eskenazi. "We are so used to how we see objects that changing their scale can make us see them in a new light. The 1977 documentaries *The Powers of Ten* by Charles and Ray Eames influenced me on this matter."

One particular work I like a lot, which also speaks to the challenge of perspective, is *Ball Root Study* (2014). This work also invites the artist to consider the challenges of photographing a single work in many positions. "This is a single object that had so many different views, each with a very different feeling. By showing them together it voices the idea that everything is a question of how you look at it," he says.

"The main challenge is that, when you are making a two-dimensional image from a three-dimensional object, you are restricted to one view to convey its mul-



Daniel Eskenazi, *A Rift in Time*, 2015, archival print on photo rag, 50 x 37.5 cm: edition of 10, 2AP; 110 x 75 cm: edition of 5, 2AP.



Daniel Eskenazi, *Entheos V*, 2015, archival print on photo rag, 58 x 43 cm: edition of 6, 2AP; 110 x 82 cm: edition of 3, 2AP. All Images: Courtesy of the Artist and Rasti Chinese Art, Hong Kong.

of passing time and the ache of change. This is clear in his light, engaging sculptural forms such as *White Speech II*, *White Speech IV*, and *Entheos V* (all 2015) and in the elegant abstractions *Desert Rose*



Daniel Eskenazi, *Untitled II* (from the *Pictures of You* series), 2013, archival print on photo rag, 58 x 43 cm: edition of 6, 2AP; 110 x 82 cm: edition of 3, 2AP.



Daniel Eskenazi, *Untitled III* (from the *Pictures of You* series), 2013, archival print on photo rag, 58 x 43 cm: edition of 6, 2AP; 110 x 82 cm: edition of 3, 2AP.

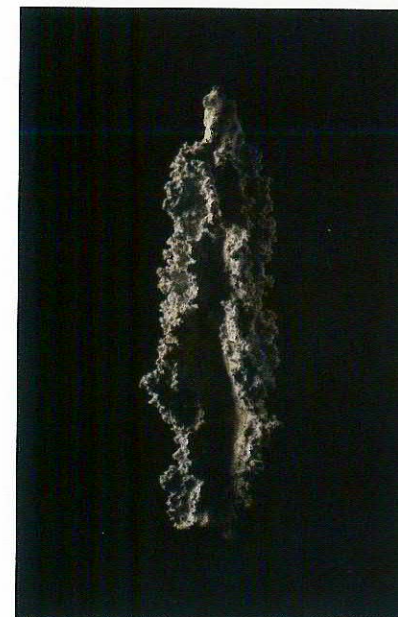


Daniel Eskenazi, *Untitled V* (from the *Pictures of You* series), 2013, archival print on photo rag, 58 x 43 cm: edition of 6, 2AP; 110 x 82 cm: edition of 3, 2AP.





Daniel Eskenazi, **Ball Root Study**, 2014, archival print on photo rag, 136 x 104 cm. Edition of 5, 2AP.



Daniel Eskenazi, **Fulgurite I**, 2014, archival print on photo rag, 82 x 53 cm: edition of 3, 2AP; 139.5 x 61 cm: edition of 5, 2AP.



Daniel Eskenazi, **White Speech I**, 2015, archival print on photo rag, 50 x 37.5 cm: edition of 6, 2AP; 110 x 75 cm: edition of 5, 2AP.



Daniel Eskenazi, **Meteorite I**, 2004, archival print on photo rag, 82 x 61 cm: edition of 6, 2AP.

tifaceted nature. I have great pleasure in studying and exploring objects closely to find the view that is truest to its spirit. It is almost meditative to give one object ones entire attention."

This close respect has also been given to his 2015 *Creatures* series. And working with these colorful works also speak to the challenges of working in color and in black and white. "I bought a few beetles in a shop during a lunch break and it sort of went from there," he says. "I had no intention of buying them but I was mesmerized by their alien form and boiled sweet colors. If man ends up destroying his life on the planet, I have no doubt they will survive."

"Working with black and white you imagine the color subconsciously whereas with color photography they are a given. I like both as they reach different parts of you. The *Creatures* series needs color as the insects have the colors of the rainbow. The *Entbeos* series is all about form where there is little color: by removing it entirely you expand the possibilities back into the subconscious."

Daniel Eskenazi, born in 1969 in London, was raised in a family that has dealt in Asian art for almost a century. He knows the demands

of understanding Chinese art, both ancient and modern, as well as the discipline required in making it part of his life. Asian art has indeed been a fundamental part of his life and has inspired his own aesthetic and visual narrative.

At the core of Eskenazi's art one senses a deeply spiritual and philosophical view of life and creativity. One feels that he also believes that our times demand a spiritual quality in its artists. Perhaps this is why he says that he is not only a disciplined photographer, but also one who likes to work in series. "I try and stay true to my aims of capturing

an image that has purpose and meaning," he says. "One advantage of doing a series is that you can play with rhythm by juxtaposing the work much as one does in a book. I do believe each work has to speak for itself but the whole can collectively enhance a general feeling or point."

Eskenazi, who shoots digitally, uses Hasselblad and a Leica. "For street or travel photography I love my Leica M. It is small and unobtrusive with a manual fixed lens," he says. "For indoors I use the medium format Hasselblad, which has a greater range of tones from its larger sensor and which also allows for larger prints."

According to Daniel Eskenazi, no single photographer or school has influenced him exclusively. It is being a voice of his time that moves him. "Photography has gone through so many technical advances in its two-hundred-year history, which has lead to many distinctive styles. Like painting and literature, many have influenced me in one way or another," he says. "What satisfies me most is work that acts as a conduit to a bigger world of emotion and existence, where the artist is almost just the *portavoce*, the spokesperson, albeit with his unique accent." ▴



Daniel Eskenazi, **Long Root I**, 2014, archival print on photo rag, 61 x 82 cm: edition of 6, 2AP; 82 x 110 cm: edition of 3, 2AP.