



## Concrete Wave

From satellite feed to ground-level perspective, an artist brings the earthwork to the canvas

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

IF YOU SEARCH Instagram for #rockstudies you'll find countless photographs of geologic formations, land art monuments, and gallery-size sculptures incorporating various boulders and stones (from Michael Heizer's steel-framed asteroids to Pierre Huyghe's biotopes). Chances are, nearly all these hashtags are tumbling from the rock-obsessed feed of Theodore Boyer. With his concrete-and-grout-based topographical paintings and jet-black coif, one might mistake the Brooklyn-based Boyer—a Seal Beach, California, native—for the bastard son of Jay DeFeo and Robert Smithson. "Smithson was into mapping, geography, traveling around the country collecting rock samples, and using variations on how to contrast the natural environment with man-made objects, and DeFeo, her application of material and affinity with nature also struck a chord with me," says Boyer, adding that, "coming from Southern California, from a very young age I've also been interested in aeronautics and space technology."

As he walks me through his cavernous Clinton Hill studio, his craggy canvases

leaning against the walls appear like mold-formed imprints of Google Earth screenshots or image captures from NASA's New Horizons mission to Pluto. The latter form the basis of "JPL" (for Jet Propulsion Laboratory)—a series of gray-scale extrapolations of the planet's surface, as seen from exploration cameras, marked with spray-painted lines of purple, blue, and gradient yellow-white-and-gray (some atomized and apparitional; others utterly digital)—which will comprise his solo debut in Los Angeles next month at the Venice gallery of Shulamit Nazarian.

"The use of grout is pivotal," says Nazarian, "as it acts as a conductive material or connective tissue between aesthetic, often geometric, elements. Theo's work sets the medium free to act without any purpose other than the aesthetic."

Growing up in Seal Beach's punk scene, Boyer became intimate with his chosen materials by skating the concrete ledges near the old Belmont Pool and doing demolition for local construction companies. In high school, he went door-to-door throughout Compton, selling

security systems in order to earn the money for a ticket to Australia after graduation. Though he was always a water man, Boyer became a true explorer of the natural world after he and a friend touched down in Sydney. There they purchased a used Ford Econovan, built a bed in the back, and spent the next year surfing and camping around Oz. During that trip, Boyer made numerous drawings—mostly of local desert and beaches—but it wasn't until he returned stateside that he took up painting. After spending a few years at dead-end jobs in Long Beach, he moved to New York in 2006 and began running around with up-and-coming artists like Zane Lewis (with whom he deejayed on Saturday nights at Lit Lounge) and Justin Lowe and Jonah Freeman (who employed him and his future studio mate, Dennis Hoekstra, to help produce their time-warped environments).

Three years after his arrival, Boyer enrolled at the School of Visual Arts to study painting with Lynda Benglis, Jack Whitten, and Alice Aycock, who became his mentor. "When I was at SVA, I was doing mostly figurative oil paintings, and I was interested in abstraction, but not comfortable enough with the medium to dive into that," Boyer says. "I think what sparked my interest in concrete and sculptural materials was working construction—and Laurie Anderson's speech at my graduation. She talked about sincerity within the art world and the importance of taking some time off to find out what was important to you." After a short break, Boyer realized that his grout-and-concrete experimentations with Hoekstra—and his own history with industrial materials—were the avenue for him to explore his long-running fascination with geologic formations and their round-the-clock examination by tech companies and the government.

"I took to grout because it has a certain texture that simulates the surface of the earth, and you can manipulate it in so many ways," says Boyer, who began this process by infusing pigments and plastics into his proprietary grouts, then applying them to flat canvases with various bonding agents. "It's a very primitive form of mold making," he adds.

Once the materials are applied to the surface, Boyer shapes abstractions of rock samples and satellite images—from the deserts of Death Valley and Mesopotamia to Saudi Arabian irrigation systems and ancient earthworks recently discovered in Kazakhstan by means of Google Earth—that ultimately feel like a post-Internet redux of DeFeo's oeuvre, from *The Rose*



*JPL#7*, 2015.  
Sanded grout  
and acrylic  
on canvas in  
maple frame,  
68 x 46 in.

OPPOSITE:  
Theodore  
Boyer in  
his Brooklyn  
studio, 2015.



“I took to grout because it has a certain texture that simulates the surface of the earth.”

gestures that leave some space for an artistic correction to the technology that provides him with his imagery.

His mark-making “remnants” echoing the trajectories of the probes exploring Pluto (signified by purple lines) or cars navigating Google Maps (charted by thick, digital blue, yellow, and white lines) are intentionally tweaked from the ones beamed down from outer space, which we blindly take for gospel as soon as it appears on our devices. “Everyone has access to this mapping technology, maybe not at the level of JPL,” says Boyer, who also sees a problem with our reliance on satellite-fed information. For him, the paintings are an investigation of old-world exploration versus high-tech mapping. “It’s almost like when you look at the map and get lost, and realize you made a circle that doesn’t have any relationship to the road. That’s how I drive myself: You don’t always want to stick to the path.”

In addition to a selection of new paintings, Boyer plans to make some sculptures cast from rock samples he’ll collect from the New Mexico and Arizona deserts—home to JPL rover-testing sites and many earthworks icons—on his cross-country road trip from New York to Los Angeles. If the paintings are meant to evoke what you’d see from above, the sculptures are representations of what you’d see at ground level in the images he pulls from science journals and the Internet.

“All these motifs are tied together through technology, man-made industrial materials, landscapes, and the earth itself,” says Boyer, who argues that what he’s really creating is new “evidence” of seemingly understood lands, charted in potentially misleading fashion. Whether Boyer’s sculpted evidence leads to revelations about our cruel, crazy, beautiful world, well, that’s another story. **MP**

to *Black Canyon*. “I look at rocks from a very close perspective, and interestingly enough, when you look at something from a distance and then really close up, there are a lot of similarities,” says Boyer. “I try to bridge the gap between the two.”

Another one of Boyer’s preoccupations is the recent controversy over the supposed alien life on KIC 8462852, a flickering star located more than 1,000 light-years from Earth, in the Cygnus constellation. Though MIT researchers put a damper on the extraterrestrial speculation this fall, the initial concept of habitable planets proved interesting enough to inspire David Bowie’s new album, *Blackstar*.

“Everything that exists here on Earth

exists elsewhere in the cosmos,” says Boyer. “It’s the kind of stuff that makes me want to create art about it—very honestly and simply.”

Honest, sure, but Boyer’s work is far from simple scale modeling. Despite its rough edges, his paintings draw heavily from the technical experiments of his SVA professors and the California finish fetish artists he grew up admiring. “At a certain point in the process the materials totally take over and the images are no longer relevant. There’s a lot of alchemy involved—the colors blend together on their own—but with every piece I learn a little more,” he says, noting his “JPL” paintings, which he began working on last year, are all marked with sprayed

*Nevada #2*, 2015. Sanded grout and acrylic on canvas in maple frame, 40 x 28 in.