

Everything's a Rock

by Amanda Nudelman

Annie Albagli would tell you that before you were born, you were a rock. That even the ocean, whose vast nutrient-rich waters are considered the great originator of life on Earth, was born from rocks. My father-in-law, a geologist by training, would agree. His most simple way of describing the world, perhaps unsurprisingly, is “Everything’s a rock.” You need only look up at night for the tendrils of the Milky Way to see this heritage inscribed in the sky: the clusters of stars, dust, asteroids, and gas that populate our galaxy are some of the same materials that sustained our fledgling planet. Science, of course, is not the only way to tell the story of our existence. The ancient Greeks explained the pearly incandescence of the Milky Way as a stream of divine milk sprung from the goddess Hera’s breast. Nourishing, warm, and responsive to the needs of its environment, breastmilk is a compelling and beautiful metaphor for the conception and sustenance of our beginnings. For Albagli, science, lived knowledge, and fabulation are not at odds but kindred and inextricable; pulling the thread of one phenomenological explanation inevitably unravels the other.

In her exhibition *Milk Teeth*, these strands entwine with questions about our origins: as inhabitants of this planet and as mothers of children and children of mothers, biological and chosen. Albagli’s works probe the boundaries of these relationships, the points at which they both replace and regenerate each other. These ideas are illustrated at a grand scale in the work *When We Are Born, We Consume the Cosmos* (2024), an immersive 24-foot-long digital print of the Milky Way as seen through a powerful telescope, which shrouds the ceiling in a cosmic field of stars and sky. The image is overlaid with a dense compilation of iconography of breastfeeding through time and cultures, including Isis feeding her son in ancient Egypt and Jesus being fed by Mary. This constellation of figures radiates from a central image of the artist herself, seated at the long table directly beneath the installation, her son cradled in her arms as if to say: there is no separation between you, as a person, and the Earth, the universe, the past—your mother.



By foregrounding a material experience of the histories of our cosmos and ourselves, Albagli allows us to, as she says, “touch time.” In her world, this means touching limestone. Because this type of sedimentary rock requires biogenic material—matter made of or by living organisms—to form, it is not the oldest kind of rock on Earth. However, its essential trait of preserving the remnants of lifeforms makes it one of the primary record keepers of Earth’s biological history. Our planet first materialized as a scorching, swirling gaseous ball. Gradually cooling over time, it shifted into a magmatic mass and then hardened into layers of rock that formed its core, mantle, and crust. In the process, water vapor and gas were released from the rocks, which eventually condensed and fell as rain to form a primordial sea. For over 3 billion years, versions of

this briny expanse sheltered the entirety of life on Earth. Our most ancient ancestors were soft-bodied things whose physical traces are mostly lost to time through erosion and other geologic cycles. It wasn't until around 550 million years ago that lifeforms evolved to have internal and external skeletons that are more easily preserved as fossils because they contain calcium carbonate, the main chemical compound that produces limestone.



Geologists are mediums and fortune tellers in this sense, using rocks as channels for contact with the past and future. They unearth the biographies of rocks of all kinds using chemical tests, loupes, and magnets or break them to see how they fall apart. For the

rest of us, limestone is a particularly accessible conduit as it wears its stories on its surface. Most often found in shallow marine environments, it is a register of an aquatic necropolis made from the accumulation of the tiny shells and lime skeletons of intertidal dwelling creatures who are buried where they die. We need only to run our fingers across the contours of these sedimentary accounts to commune with our early predecessors who, in the warm, dynamic tides of oceanic lowlands, chanced beyond the known boundaries of their world to live on land.

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Before we fed from our mothers, we were sustained by the sea. As early fauna, we fractalized our bodies across the ocean floor to maximize absorption of nutrients directly from the water or dragged our pliant bellies across algal mats to graze through our skin. Many marine organisms continue to be nourished by the sea alone. Others, hybrid creatures that evolved to straddle terrestrial and aquatic life, learned to find sustenance beyond the brackish tides of the coastline, paving the way for our development as humans. Despite their essential place in our intertidal lineage, these animals remain strange and unrecognizable to us. But they shouldn't. We may have swapped fins for limbs and gills for lungs, but we took the sea with us.

The theory of hypersea suggests that sea-to-land evolution maintained a connection to the crucial nutrition of the ocean by fostering a direct network of fluid exchange between terrestrial lifeforms like plants, fungi, and animals. Essentially, each organism holds the life-supporting aspects of the sea within itself, contained by the skin or membrane that covers it, and finds a way to transfer it when necessary. Rooted plants shift water between themselves underground and then into the animals that eat them. Mammals who have just given birth naturally transform their salinated blood into breastmilk to feed their babies.

Albagli's video projection *Reaching for the Past, Holding the Future, Grasping Only Air in the Present* (2024) explores this idea of unified interconnectedness through questions of ancestral bonds. Albagli narrates the film, reflecting on a journey she undertook through crumbling burial grounds and limestone quarries to trace her own family's ancestral migration from Egypt. She was six months pregnant with her first child at the time, nurturing one beginning while pursuing the story of another.

What are my bounds, my edges? Where do you end and I materialize? What are my beginnings?...

Before you were born, we searched for the answer to this question. I wanted it to be a gift to you upon your arrival. Suspended in water, you traversed old limestone quarries and overturned cemeteries that hold your ancestors; we searched for the crumbs of an origin story. Rocks are not much different than cemeteries, it is where we go to touch time. Limestone rock is its own graveyard, composed of fossils and lime skeletons.

Albagli folds together musings on the collapsed boundaries between kin—past, present, and future—with whizzing imagery collected from a moving speedboat of monolithic limestone cliffs rising from the ocean on Cassis and footage of a weathered graveyard surreptitiously gathered with an iPhone dangling from her neck.

You hold vestiges of past lives and landscapes. Every birth reenacts millions of years of evolution compressed within 9 months when one emerges from a miniature sea to breathe on land. This is our inheritance.

The film spirals back on itself, ending as it began.

Because this question haunts us from the moment we are born; where do we begin?



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Before the ocean, there was the Moon. More than 4 billion years old, it was created not long after the Earth. For a time, many believed it was cleaved from young Earth's just hardened crust through resonance—a combination of solar tidal forces and the constant oscillation of the planet generated such a tall, unstable wave of liquid matter beneath this barely set outer shell that part of its surface tore away and rocketed into space. Ensnared by Earth's gravity, the collection of material locked into the planet's orbit to form what we now know as the Moon. It was proposed that the wound it left behind, a massive basalt depression, shaped the basin that now holds the Pacific Ocean; an absence, billions of years in the making, that foretold a fated bond of ebb and flow between the ocean and the Moon.

Other possibilities have since replaced this story of cosmic birth, the most widely accepted of which describes a beginning no less violent than the wrenching process of

resonance. The theory posits that the Moon originates from the debris of a collision by a Mars-sized object with proto-Earth that, possibly within a matter of hours, coalesced and settled into a wide and stable orbit around the Earth. This forebear of the Moon was named Theia after a Titan from Greek mythology. Progenitor of light and brilliance, she was the mother of Selene, goddess of the Moon.

Albagli's third and final work, *If the Earth is Mother, the Pacific Tidal Basin is Her Womb* (2024), relates to this speculative bond between the Earth, the Moon, and the Pacific Ocean through the radical shifting physicality and connection of pregnancy and breastfeeding and the singular yet predictable changing phases of the Moon. Nearly 15 feet long, the rectangular limestone slab covers an old wooden dining room table in the same room beneath *When We Are Born, We Consume the Cosmos*. The lunar phases are carved across its length in overlapping circles, cut out at varying depths and shapes to mimic the crescent or semicircle silhouettes of a waxing or waning Moon, with the highest points of the rock rendered as the shadowed areas. We only ever see one side of the Moon, and only when it is illuminated by the Sun, which Albagli simulates in a one-night performance during which she fills the hollows of the sculpted limestone moons with breastmilk. Thick and glossy, the "liquid gold" shimmers in the low light of the space, almost reflecting the breastfeeding mothers arrayed on the ceiling above it—the pale inverse of a darkened sea whose surface gleams from the attentions of a starry night.



Forged from the Earth, cradled in the spiraling arms of the Milky Way, it is easy to imagine the Moon as a child of sorts. Not only for its nearly identical composition to Earth but also its trajectory as an independent celestial body. As children progress from adolescence to adulthood, many of them, like the Moon, which moves away from the Earth almost one and a half inches annually, drift farther and farther from their origins each year. They are, perhaps, simply following a cosmic impulse to venture past the limits of what is familiar—an impulse that has spurred millions of years of evolution.

Here on Earth, for now, we are never far from our origins. We can touch the evolutionary arc of time by following the simple prompt in Albagli's film: *Feel your cuticles, caress your skin—this is the surface tension of water, where sea meets air.* Should you long for something unbounded by the body made from your mother(s), alive and warm in present-day flesh, or still and smoothed by time in limestone, just wait until night falls and the Moon rises. Though novel in our experience of its ever-shifting phases, the Moon remains remarkably unchanged from its conception 4 billion years ago. To gaze upon the Moon is to see the Earth when it was young, before life thrived in its waters and beyond, when it was just a rock.



Amanda Nudelman is a curator and writer based in the Bay Area and currently a Director at Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. She was the closing Exhibitions and Public Programs Curator at McEvoy Foundation for the Arts and previously held positions at KADIST, San Francisco and UNTITLED, ART. Recent exhibitions and programs have been presented at / (Slash) (San Francisco), Wattis Institute (San Francisco), e-flux (New York), Royal Nonesuch Gallery (Oakland), swissnex (San Francisco), and Headlands Center for the Arts (Marin). Her writing has appeared in Creative Villages Journal, CSPA Quarterly, and Blackout Magazine. She holds a MA in Curatorial Practice from California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

This text was commissioned on the occasion of the exhibition, *Milk Teeth*, at the David Ireland House.

Images—All images by Henrik Kam **[1]**: Installation view, *Reaching for the Past, Holding the Future, Grasping Only Air in the Present*, 2024, The David Ireland House, San Francisco, CA. **[2]**: Installation view, *If the Earth is Mother, the Pacific Tidal Basin is Her Womb*, 2024, The David Ireland House, San Francisco, CA. **[3]**: *If the Earth is Mother, the Pacific Tidal Basin is Her Womb*, 2024, detail