

Curator Jennifer Riddell wrote this essay for “Topographies of Life”:

Lynn Sures’s body of work, “Portraits of the Anthropocene,” is the result of a Smithsonian (SI) Artist Research Fellowship, which supports interdisciplinary work between artists and scientists. Sures chose the SI National Museum of Natural History as her research site where she found an affinity with artifacts related to the origins of early human life on the African continent. To this interest, she brought her expertise in mediums of drawing, painting, and paper-making. Her drawings are on her own handmade paper, and she works in a unique medium, “pulp painting,” in which the painting’s coloration and support are integrated. An additional step of embossing the work with a collagraph plate adds a linear, relief-like pattern to the surface. The handmade paper’s richness and saturation create a dense, tactile effect.

The fellowship enabled her to travel with a team of paleoanthropologists (who study the evolution of human life) and a geologist to the site of an ongoing archaeological dig in Olorgesailie, Kenya, in the southern part of the country. There, discoveries of ancient human fossils and artifacts mark a pivotal period 1.9 million to 200,000 years ago during which early humans, hominini of the species *Homo erectus*, began actively adapting their surrounding environment to their needs, as they experienced ecological change. That transformation, over millennia, has culminated in the Anthropocene, our current epoch, which is characterized by the nearly complete transformation of the earth to meet human needs.

Onsite in Kenya, and in the SI National Museum of Natural History collections in the US, Sures did not so much document as ingest and experience the rare fossil artifacts (housed permanently in the Nairobi National Museum, and in cast form at SI) and landscapes. Her careful and time-consuming study and rendering of objects such as 2017.3 Spine and Hand axes and landscapes such as 2019.4. The Hell Hole, informed more expressive and immediate “versions” of similar subjects, including Communication 2 and The Hand axe Quarry, made in the pulp painting medium. The lines and deep colors of the work transmit a nervous energy and vibrant sense of life.

The display of the SI National of Museum of Natural History’s treasures is informed by rigorous classification systems that locate that object in time and place. We, as viewers, tend to regard these artifacts as sealed evidence in a way; from a time and place so distant that is it no longer reminiscent of us. Sures, through her personal interaction with these evidentiary artifacts, offers an invitation to reconsider our relationship to our early forebears and how we have arrived at our own place in time.