Sweeping the Sea + The Old Oak + Strange House, 2023

Exhibition Text by Bart Pushaw

This installation explores the many lives of quarries, the pits or caverns of earth that remain after the extraction of stone and minerals (limestone) by miners. Many timelines converge in the quarry: deep geological time, as ancient million-year-old histories of clay as it hardened into stone; the more modern history of mining, extraction, and wealth production; the later abandonment of the quarries; and the new possible futures that take root as nature reasserts itself. The materials of the quarry also embed lives that are just as varied, from the ancient creatures whose fossils are literally embedded in stone, to the later ecologies displaced and disfigured by extraction, and the human lives responsible for that labor of displacement.

Põld and Sheppard play with and intertwine these multiple timelines in their recreation of a quarry from recycled clay and plaster. Their quarry transforms the traditional „pit" instead into an amphitheatre, where multiple stories—and experiences—can be told. Polyphonic melodies, inspired by the lyrics of an Estonian folk song „Sweeing the Sea, Large Oak, Strange House", resound through the cavernous rocks, as the sonorous voices of miners fill those spaces emptied by their extractive labor. As they sing distinctive call-and-respone melodies of Estonian runic singing, the installation echoes a similar call-and-response between the triangular relation of the video displays. As viewers linger in the sounds and sights of this new-yet-reconstituted quarry, the impact and meaning of mining extend beyond the economic interests that the exploited underground once provided (and in some places, still do) for the surface. The artists beckon viewers into the future of the abandoned mine, to contemplate what abundance the quarry might nourish, what communities might form and take shape in the interstices, when these stony landscapes no longer maintain value within a cycle of wealth production.