

# Alison Jean Cole's Way West

by Paul Maziar

Precipitous calcite  
Mined from the hills of Nephi  
By harried and obsessive men  
Who probably tote guns  
Who probably vote conservatively  
Mined from your birthplace  
A psychedelic cave  
A place that cast a spell  
Destined for the flurry of bidders on eBay  
The fury of a rockhound's desire. . . .  
—"Flowering Tube Onyx," Alison Jean Cole

Oregon artist Alison Jean Cole makes jewelry with matter sourced from the American West—rich mineral deposits in Utah, Nevada, and, closer to home, Oregon's high deserts and the Archie Myers loop near the state's southern border. Such sites yield coveted gems and stones with spell-casting patterns of curves and hues, like the flowering tube onyx that occasions for Cole the "fury of a rockhound's desire." "Southern Oregon has everything a rockhound could want," she explains, "agate, jasper, opal, petrified wood, fossils, picture stone."<sup>1</sup> Out of these materials (fig. 1), she creates vibrant pendants and charms for necklaces, rings, and other wearable items. Her work is utilitarian, everyday, and also remarkable in its thoughtful approaches. A professional lapidary working exclusively with stone, Cole practices a type of detailed piecework called intarsia, layering and adhering fragments together. The technique is readily perceptible in works like her cuprite, rhodonite, and dumortierite bolo tie (fig. 2). This is a tasteful twist on the classic western neckwear, made with an arch-shaped, deep-red cuprite stone atop a wedge of pale-pink rhodonite flanked by two cuts of denim-blue dumortierite, all mounted on a steel bracket and strung on a braided leather cord. A pair of similarly elegant, wedge-shaped flowering tube onyx earrings appeared on Cole's Web site in 2018,<sup>2</sup> crafted of stone collected from the Nephi hills in Utah; the stock was quickly bought up (fig. 3). Here the simple geometry and regularity of the forms, together with the smoothness and flatness of the stone, contrast in a striking and satisfying way with the curvilinear, even psychedelic multicolored patterning inherent to this type of onyx. The material looks as if blue, yellow, orange, and pink inks have been trapped beneath a microscope glass, dangling as round-bottomed triangles from long, thin gold hoops to adorn someone's earlobes.

Sold through boutiques, galleries, and museum shops across the U.S. and in Japan as well as through her Web site, Cole's jewelry is in high demand, necessitating further excursions



Fig. 1. Alison Jean Cole, uncut stones, 2019. (Photo: Courtesy the artist)



Fig. 2. Alison Jean Cole, Bolo Tie, 2019, cuprite, rhodonite, and dumortierite, steel, steel alloy, leather; slide 1 15/16 x 1 1/2 in., cord 48 in. (Photo: Courtesy the artist)



Fig. 3. Alison Jean Cole, Flowering Tube Onyx Earrings, 2018, onyx, gold; 2 1/4 x 1 1/4 in. (Photo: Courtesy the artist)

into the remote, stony terrain that seems literally to call to her. “The mountains sing,” Cole says, attributing her peculiar synesthetic experience to basin and range geology, “with long parallel mountain ranges, one after another. . . . I don’t think it’s sound in the way that sound travels in waves or on waves. It’s other sound.” Cole’s art is deeply informed by place and this special type of perception. The walk, the quest, the memorable experiences along the trail are all integral to her process. However stunning to behold—colorful, powerful, and wholly unique in shape and execution—her jewelry is only the end point of a transformative adventure. Rockhounding, moreover, brings heterogeneous groups of people together with a common interest in stones, gems, and jewels, and what makes the journey so enriching for Cole are the bonds that develop with folks of different generations and political leanings. Some of the subjects that ordinarily form a wedge between individuals become incidental in the desert and down among the rocks. “I’ve met so many people out there on the road,” she says.

There was the map maker I met at Wild Willy’s [Hot Spring] whose job is to map every dirt road in Nevada. He says he was abducted by the military and dropped in the middle of the desert to be a drone target. There’s Randy who bought the Hard Luck Gold Mine outside Beatty and built a four-story castle on top with a built-in pipe organ. There’s “Co-leen” who lives in a saloon in a ghost town called Gold Point. . . . I made friends with a few paleontologists in Utah who go undercover to arrest dinosaur bone poachers in the badlands. And then there’s my desert friend Charlie—he collects books about the west and has a library built into his truck.

My favorite rockhounds are Susie and Deb. They are in my rock club. Susie is a retired engineer, a psychic, martial artist, and tremendously talented stonecutter. I think Susie votes blue, . . . she always carries a pistol and a go-bag. Deb worked with Susie at Boeing. . . . I’m guessing Deb votes red. She has a problem with transgender people in bathrooms and doesn’t believe in evolution. I’ve never met anyone who loves rocks more than Deb. She taught me to cut stones and for that I owe her my life. She drives like a bat out of hell and also carries a gun.

Among these rockhounds an artist found her mentors. An amateur geologist, drawn to the western landscape from the East Coast ten years ago, Cole had been educated in science, with degrees in marine and freshwater biology from Napier University in Edinburgh. She was without formal training in craft when she joined the Mt. Hood Rock Club in 2013; a few of the women gave her a demo on the lapidary equipment in Northeast Portland. “It was trial and error from there on out!” she comments, with an autodidact’s modesty that, while refreshing, is also surprising given her abilities and experience. Cole in turn often leads groups of women in rockhounding workshops across Oregon’s varied landscape of mountains, rivers, deserts, caves, and hot springs. She and her co-collectors mine their resources with present attention to the surrounding areas and to the earth and its inhabitants. They subscribe to the Rockhound’s Code of Ethics, guidelines that include socially responsible resolutions:

I will cause no willful damage and will take home only what I can reasonably use.

I will practice conservation and undertake to utilize fully and well the materials I have collected and will recycle my surplus for the pleasure and benefit of others. . . .

I will appreciate and protect our heritage of natural resources.<sup>3</sup>

The groups’ trips, their minute attentiveness to the expansive landscape, honor the fragility and power of the natural world and the short duration of a human life compared with the slow-going land. In conversation, Cole makes one ponder the physical and time-based aspects of her odyssey. From her perspective, when she’s surrounded by the remote vastness of the desert (fig. 4), time seems suspended. “When you’re out there, it doesn’t feel that time exists, but that time already existed,” she says. “If you’re passionate about



Fig. 4. Alison Jean Cole, Mojave Desert, January 14, 2016. (Photo: Courtesy the artist)

geology, all you see around you is evidence of vast linear time. Weathering and erosion, mountain building, plate movements, all of those things happen in a sequence, they don't happen all at once," she explains, making the connection that the human construct of time often differs from the protracted time of the earth's processes. "Everything is ancient—many billions of years old. If I have a volcanic ash that formed thirty-four million years ago, that's exciting, pretty old. But that ash is coming out of a convective plume in the mantle within the center of the earth that's this solid mass of beautiful green crystals. It's been sitting there for 4.6 billion years. It's all old!" She speaks about her fascination with stardust at the further reaches of the galaxy and the materials of the raw physical earth beneath her feet. And noting how our forms, too, emerge from star-matter, she laughs: "You're old, I'm old."

People complain about getting old and I say, "Trust me. You're older than you think. You're 4.6 billion years old, friend!"

Through Cole's work and philosophy, one comes to remember that art often reconciles the personal with the universal, and to appreciate what's natural in this world. Her wearable art is informed by discovery—of earthbound objects apart from the apparatuses of technology which she brackets as she undertakes each search for beautiful stones. She refuses the vexation and potential alienation of always being technologically plugged-in, and shows how we can re-approach the world. Something therapeutic occurs during her long treks in the desert, which she relates to getting in touch with herself, her past, and her inner demons. "Your past doesn't have to haunt you all the time. You don't have to dig it up, bury it again, dig it up, bury it again. You can just talk to it. You can understand it, just have dinner with it," she suggests. In an experience that's like taking a walk with an old friend, rockhounding and the aridity of the landscape can offer the mind space to think, process, intuit. People travel and venture for perspective and return changed just as the land has been changing. This is Cole's way, and she seems compelled to pursue it: "I feel as if," she muses, "with a lot of my work, I'm making up for lost time."

- 
1. Alison Jean Cole, interviewed by the author, 15 November 2018, Portland, Ore. Subsequent quotes are from *ibid*.
  2. See <http://alisonjeancole.com>.
  3. American Federation of Mineralogical Societies, "Code of Ethics," 7 July 1999, <http://www.amfed.org/ethics.htm>.

*Writer Paul Maziar lives in Portland, Oregon. A chapbook of his poems, Little Advantages, was published by Couch Press in 2013, and his first full-length collection, Opening Night, is forthcoming from BlazeVOX Books. His art writings can be found regularly online at ArtCritical, ArtPractical, the Los Angeles Review of Books, Oregon ArtsWatch, and Rrealism.*

This essay was edited by Sue Taylor, and is among a series of writing commissioned by The Ford Family Foundation's Critics and Curators Program, with founding Editors Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College; and Sue Taylor, Professor Emerita of Art History, Portland State University. The commissioning institutions share a goal to strengthen the visual arts ecology in Oregon, and a key interest of increasing the volume of critical writing on art in our region.