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First Office,
'Rude forms among us',
SCI-Arc Gallery,
Los Angeles,
California,
2020

The exhibition installation by First Office, containing and inspired by photographs by the natural historian Eugène Trutat (1840–1910), was a full-scale house that mimicked the form of the Dolmen of Vaour, a megalithic monument in southern France. This mock-up for an accessory dwelling unit (ADU), built of structural insulated panels (SIPs), was four times the size of the dolmen.



Rude Forms Among Us



Contemporary Construction of Prehistoric Ruins

Anna Neimark is a founding partner of First Office, an architectural firm based in Los Angeles. Here she describes a recent exhibition design for Eugène Trutat's photographs, and the installation inspired by them that was created at Sci-Arc in 2020. The exhibition is both a simple display of Trutat's work and a contemporary take on his influence on what she refers to as 'Rude Form'.

The exhibition 'Rude forms among us' at the SCI-Arc Gallery in Los Angeles gathered a small selection of Eugène Trutat's photographs from the municipal library and the archives of the Muséum – a natural history museum of which Trutat was director from 1890 to 1900 – in the French city of Toulouse. The Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) hosts large-scale installations by young architects, such as this one, biannually. Blurring the line between exhibition and installation, First Office Architecture built a mock-up for a house that was inspired by the natural historian's photographs from the turn of the 20th century of what the architectural historian James Fergusson called 'rude stone monuments'.¹ The resulting artefact offers both a timely and a timeless paradigm, in which contemporary techniques of construction bear the weight of prehistoric ruins.

Prior to setting their gaze on the structure hovering beyond the photographs, the exhibition's visitors were invited to closely examine the landscape scenes captured in the delicate focus of 'piezographic' prints, framed in Nielsen black aluminium profiles. Frédérique Gaillard, Curatorial Assistant and Head of the Photo Library at the Muséum, digitised and developed the original glass plate negatives, transferring the image from gelatine and silver bromide to the contemporary carbon-ink printing process, specially for the show. The exhibition opened with two scenes captured by Trutat, one looking to the future and the other to the past. They depict human figures awkwardly scaling a pair of objects in the open landscape: a car and a dolmen.

In the first scene, the driver leans his body on the automobile's hood, standing at the head of the engine. Looking past him at the road beyond, feet planted firmly on the dirt road, another man reclines against the step leading to his seat. Perhaps it is Monsieur Béraldi performing as footman, holding onto the hinged door that encloses the back couch. Inside, two women are seated, likely Madame Béraldi, fully veiled by hat and net, puffed sleeves, among the bags, and the other a young woman in her care. The automobile is wedged with stones that block its wheels from rolling. In this still shot, the car – its roof cover retracted, armchairs tufted, wheel projecting – appears as an object frozen in space, a Béraldi family prop, not an industrially produced vehicle in motion.

The second scene takes us off the road and into the rocky landscape. Here, a smaller group is perched on a 6,000-year-old monument, one of the dolmens of Le Mas-d'Azil. Centred in the picture frame is a colossal slab of stone, cantilevering past orthostates – vertical stones that support it horizontally in mid-air. One man stands, hovering above the capstone, his arms idle by his sides; another sits in a thinking pose, his leg dangling off the edge; the third reclines theatrically, cradling his head in the palm of his hand. They seem to be engaged in silent dialogue. 'Was this rude stone monument once a house?' they wonder. 'Perhaps it was a grave. Or a giant's table,' they quibble. No one knows for sure, though many theories persist. Is that why two of the men are donning a hatchet and a handgun, uncertain of something or someone they might encounter from the chamber's past?



Time Standing Remarkably Still

Some readers will recall the comparison of the modern machine with the historic monument famously imagined by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier on the pages of *Towards a New Architecture*, originally published in 1923. That pairing features this very same early automobile, named 'Humber', as an analogue to the Doric temple at Paestum. For the modern architect, these crude examples represented the rustic beginnings in an evolution of vehicles and in a progression of temples, all leading to the streamlined 'Delage' sports car and the idealised Parthenon on the Acropolis.² Le Corbusier argued that housing, too, could be refined along the lines of Greek temples and modern cars, and even villas could evolve into 'machines for living in'.³ Le Corbusier developed the reinforced concrete structure for the open floor plan of the Dom-ino House (1914–15) to bring building construction into the era of mass-production. To this end, he depicted time along with culture moving steadily forwards.

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The exhibition opened with a pair of 'piezographic' (carbon ink) prints developed from Eugène Trutat's negative glass plates from the archives of the Muséum, a natural history museum in Toulouse, France, of which he served as director. Above: *The Béraldi Family and Their Car at the Mountain Pass of Aubisque* (1906). Left: *Men and Dolmen*, taken in the commune of Le Mas-d'Azil at the end of the 19th century.





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The pedestal, positioned in the exhibited house, features two original negative prints realised by Eugène Trutat from the archives of the Muséum in Toulouse. Framed from left to right are views of the Dolmen of Vaour, 'face on' and 'in profile'.

Any technological anachronism is aptly dulled by the equalising lens of the camera that arrests the past, present and future with every shot



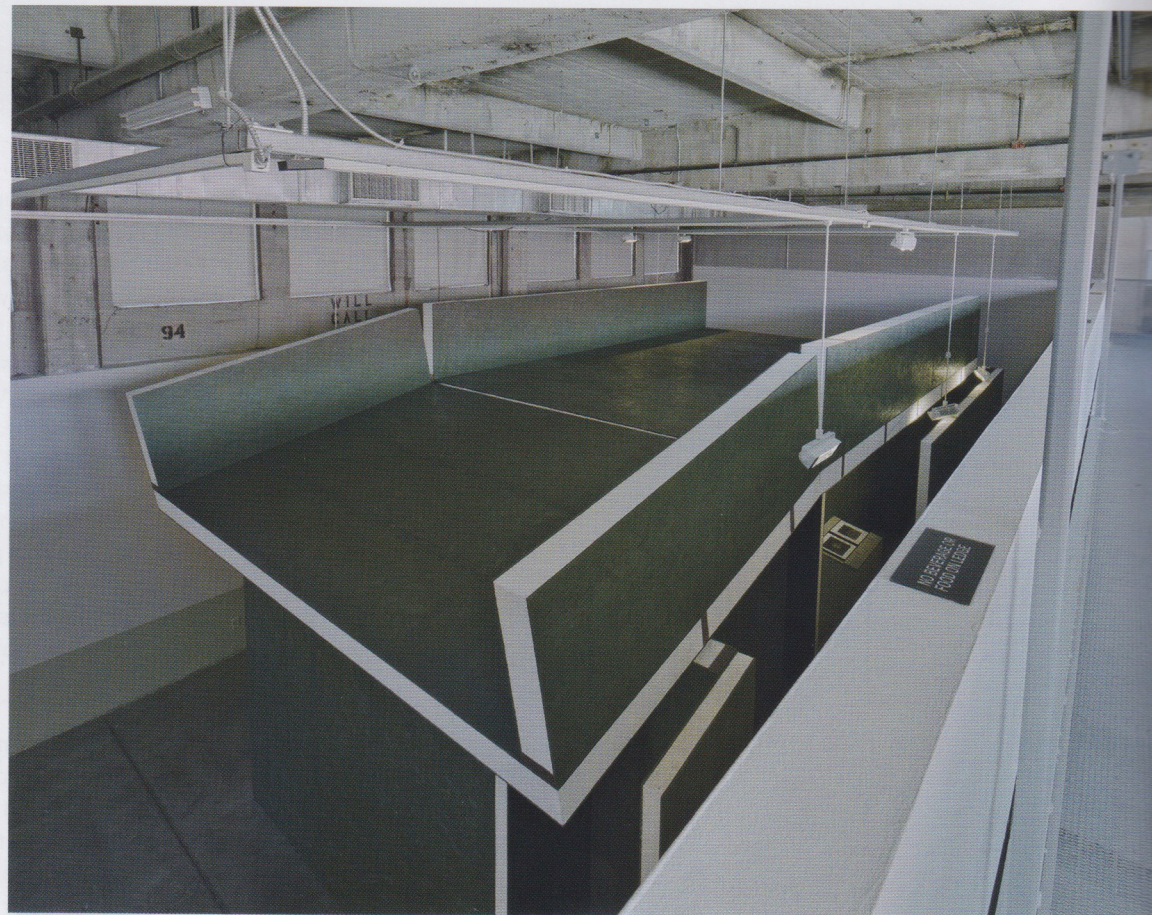
Eugène Trutat,
Dolmen of Vaour,
Tarn, France,
c 1880

This original photographic print of the Dolmen of Vaour was realised by Trutat with a silver bromide emulsion on paper, a technique that he invented to make more durable and portable negatives than those projected on glass plates.

By contrast, Trutat's pictures represent time standing remarkably still. The car helped its occupants traverse space, while the monument transported them across time, but no one seems to know where to go next. Side by side, the upholstered Humber and the unhewn dolmen appear primitive, providing shelter to the tourists and the scientists on their exploration of the Pyrenees. Though the typical persons, technical objects and ancient monuments in Trutat's photographs seem out of synchrony with time and with one another, they uncomfortably belong together. Simultaneously, they share the scientific space of natural history: the background of a unifying landscape and the format of the photographic medium. Any technological anachronism is aptly dulled by the equalising lens of the camera that arrests the past, present and future with every shot.

A House Projected from the Dolmen

In his treatise on the application of photography to the field of natural history, published in 1884, Trutat wrote that 'nothing [could] be more complete than the photograph of the facts of details: folds, intrusions, erosions', capturing what he called 'the physiognomy of a region'.⁴ His own



prints depicting the Dolmen of Vaour, a low megalithic monument capped by a broken stone, portray a seemingly petrified creature, striking a recognisably melancholic pose. The negative print of Vaour's profile view (we must do some mental work here to imagine the light values inverted) accentuates the rough texture of the rude stones, the high contrast of light and shadow, and the pictorial continuity between figure and ground. It is a portrait of landscape, and as such, it models for this contemporary architect a *rude form* that holds within it the possibility of thinking towards a house.

A house projected from the dolmen differs from one derived from the Dom-Ino, which was defined by its engineered concrete slabs and columns. The dolmen's materials have qualities that exceed their quantities. The panels of the corresponding house express eccentricities related to Trutat's 'facts of details', which develop layers of fabrication, colour and texture of finish. Looking closely, we notice how uncomfortably the structure fills the space of the gallery. It is a compressed but full-scale house, an accessory dwelling unit (ADU) developed for the Los Angeles backyard landscape. It is not made of megalithic stones, but of materials that are environmentally responsive and efficient for construction. Composed of spaces flanked by infrastructural blocks, the plan mimics the punctured perimeter enclosed by a dolmen's orthostates. The U-shaped shafts could house a kitchen, bathrooms, storage and other possible utilities. These are capped by a monumental terrace that folds to provide a gap for drainage; its form is a nod to the broken capstone of Vaour.

opposite: The house is capped by a monumental roof terrace measuring 16 x 31 feet (4.9 x 9.4 metres). Like the capstone of the Dolmen of Vaour, it too is broken and tilted, revealing a gap for drainage. The wood strands that wrap around the foam within the SIPs are finished in 'black forest' high-gloss paint, simulating a stony texture from afar.

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opposite top: The house is composed of several U-shaped SIP 'cores', each one designed to support a utilitarian function, such as a kitchen, bathrooms or storage. Several vertical elements protrude beyond the perimeter of the roof, allowing for the illumination of the photographs on display.

The primary building material for the house is a structural insulated panel (SIP), composed of 4- and 8-inch (100- and 200-millimetre) thick slabs of expanded polystyrene (EPS) sandwiched by two ¾-inch (19-millimetre) sheets of oriented strand board (OSB). The 4 x 10 foot (1.2 x 3 metre) SIP modules are splined with wooden posts and beams: 3 x 4 and 3 x 8 inch (75 x 100 and 75 x 200 millimetre) dimensional lumber, used throughout the walls and roof respectively. These are bound together with an array of 10-inch (254-millimetre) SIP screws at those corners where panels abut, exposing the bleached flesh of insulation foam. Along the continuous surfaces, however, smaller screws are inconspicuous, masked by torn pieces of tape, camouflaging in the rough grain of the OSB's wood strands. The rough surface is sealed with 'black forest' tinted high-gloss paint, diluted three-to-one with water. This turns the surface finish both transparent and reflective, emulating a stony texture for the house inside and out.

With megalithic heaviness transposed onto modern lightness, simulated materials confuse contemporary construction with analogical prehistoric assembly, capturing both moments simultaneously. Their aesthetic is at once streamlined and crude, minimal and textured, high and low; their form moves us to consider its hybrid origin. Updated to our environmental standards, the dolmen comes pre-approved as a standard plan, registered by the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) for construction. As ADUs inspired by rude stone monuments begin to populate the backyards of LA, they propagate the *rude forms among us*. ▢

Notes

1. James Fergusson popularised the term 'rude stone monuments' with the title of his book, *Rude Stone Monuments in All Countries: Their Age and Uses*, John Murray (London), 1872.
2. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, 2nd edn, G Crès & Cie (Paris), 1924, pp 106–7.
3. *Ibid*, p 235.
4. Eugène Trutat, *La photographie appliquée à l'histoire naturelle*, Gauthier-Villars (Paris), 1884, pp x–xi (translated by the author).