Moving Mountains
Glenn Adamson

“Rocks and stones they explained to correspond to the teeth and bones of living things. From these things they judged that the earth must be quick and must have life in some way, and they knew that it was of a wonderfully great age and of a mighty nature.” So wrote Snorri Sturluson, the 13th century Icelandic historian and lawspeaker, in the prologue to his *Prose Edda*. This precious repository of mythology is not only the most complete account of the adventures of the Norse gods and goddesses – Odin, Thor, Loki, Freya, and the rest – but also a complete cosmology of the Norsemen. Sturluson followed traditional accounts in his description of the world’s origin: a primordial realm of fire, Muspelheim, and a land of ice, Niflheim, joined together by the gods.

It is easy to see where that imagery came from: the Nordic regions cycle through seasons of heat and cold, endless day and perpetual darkness, and Iceland itself is a glacial landscape pockmarked by volcanos and geysers. Sturluson and his contemporaries would have endured even more extreme conditions than what we see today, living as they did at the onset of a “little ice age” which settled across Northern Europe. And perhaps they had some intimation of a still deeper, more ancient freeze. Sturluson relates the tale of Ymir, a frost giant whose body furnished the materials for the world itself: “Out of his flesh was fashioned the earth, and the mountains were made of his bones; the sky from his skull, and the ocean out of his blood.” Modern geologists tell the story, no less strange, of a vast ice sheet that once stretched from present-day Missouri all the way to the Arctic Circle. Atop what is now Canada, it was fully two miles thick. As this massive carapace advanced and then retreated, over and over, it gouged out mountains, lakes, and ravines, and left behind moraines – dispersed deposits of gravel, rocks, and boulders – in its titanic, tumultuous wake.

This epic landscape, in both its legendary and literal dimensions, forms the backdrop of the newest and most monumental creations of Egeværk, the studio of Danish designers Mette Bentzen and Lasse Kristensen. Their name simply means “oak work,” a phrase that aptly describes both their daily activity and the objects that they create. Having trained at PP Møbler, the storied Copenhagen cabinetmaking shop – known particularly for its collaboration with Hans Wegner – they have a formidable understanding of timber’s materiality. This skill set has been put to extraordinary use in their works, which variously evoke geothermal fissures, calving glaciers, and windswept snowdrifts. As Bentzen and Kristensen carve, they respond sensitively to the contours of the wood, answering its inherent rhythms in a reactive choreography of positive and negative space. Sometimes they create thin, sinuous sheets, as in their *Glacier* lighting fixtures, which are illuminated from within through the crevices between the discrete elements. Other designs are more seismically active, recalling a line from the novelist Jane Smiley: “Ice, as every Greenlander knew, could suddenly begin heaving and exploding into the air as if flung up by the curses of witches and trolls.” Elsewhere in their repertoire we find purely sculptural creations like the *Flow* series, in which timber is made to unfurl in luxuriant vertical ribbons; intensive material investigations like *Suspended*, basket-like cylinders composed of boiled, shredded strands of oak; and unexpected notes of the futuristic, like the

Fluid chairs, in which a tinted resin membrane is propped up on slim copper legs, to arrestingly alien effect.

Nothing in Egeværk's extensive oeuvre, however, rivals the sheer magnitude of their two most recent creations. Executed in white oak, they tower above you, friendly if slightly intimidating presences. It comes as a surprise to learn that their forms are based on small stones, no bigger than the palm of the hand, which they gathered on the shore of Lake Ontario. "We collected many of them, and fell in love," they say, adding that the stones themselves were migrants, having likely traveled many hundreds of miles since they were first torn from bedrock. The super-sizing of these found forms draws attention to their subtle, soft shapes, which were sculpted by the inexorable forces of this glacial flow; implicitly, Egeværk are inviting us to notice the evidence of nature's power, which lies all around us on the ground. The first of the *Ontario Stones* – as Egeværk have titled them – has a single slim drawer, which can be pulled out and out and out some more, giving the measure of the object's unseen interior. The other anchors a cantilevered ellipse, cast in translucent resin and carved with a convex pattern so that it resembles a levitating lake.

Although nominally the great stone-shapes are usable as a cabinet and a table, those typologies have been pushed to their ontological limit. And that is most appropriate to the circumstances in which these works were created. In February and March of this year, Bentzen and Kristensen had the opportunity to inhabit the realm of a giant – not the earth-birthing Ymir, but Wendell Castle, who occupies a similarly generative position with regard to the current design landscape. Originally trained as a sculptor rather than a furnituremaker, Castle always prioritized form, concept and expression over the course of his long career. He also constantly pursued technical innovations, from his early discovery of stack lamination – in which boards are glued up and then carved, allowing freeform composition completely unlike conventional joinery – to his late-career experimentation with robotics. For him these techniques were simply means to an end: they enlarged the horizons of the possible.

As resident artists at the Wendell Castle Workshop in Scottsville, New York, Egeværk were deeply moved by this expansive spirit. There was, for them, a sense that he had only just stepped away. Some of Castle's models and finished pieces were in the studio space; his jacket hung on the back of a chair; his characterful green spectacles rested on a desk, right where he had last placed them. And so they decided to extend his legacy, explicitly paying him homage. Not only have they used his signature stack lamination technique (which, in any case, they have often used in the past); as Bentzen says, they have also created objects with "three identities," clearly related to furniture, sculpture, and geology, but also floating adrift in a category of their own. This purposeful ambiguity was very much Castle's preferred mode of operation – he may have been making clocks and cabinets, but he was thinking about Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. In occupying the same uncharted ground, Egeværk are staking out a position quite different to that of mainstream Scandinavian design, with its constant emphasis on elegant functionality. Castle would have greatly enjoyed the intentional mismatch between the enormous carcass of the cabinet and its absurdly elongated drawer, the exaggerated anchorage of the table.

This cross-generational dialogue, then, is also a conversation across cultures – one that happened to coincide with an unusual and alarming conflict in US-Danish relations. But as Bentzen and Kristensen considered the matter, they came to the conclusion that the two countries are closer than they might appear. The small stones that they found on the lakeshore look very similar to those they knew from home, which were shaped by the same awesome geological processes. An awareness of deep time is useful when contemplating our current political dysfunction; it also gave Egeværk objective distance on their own aesthetic choices. A rock's shape gives no indication of its scale, unlike that of a plant or a mammal; and while the objects they have made are much bigger than their models, from another point of view, they are vanishingly small. It is this latter vantage – the perspective of the earth itself, one might say – that was foremost in Bentzen and Kristensen's minds as they completed their work, and then "returned the original two stones to the exact place we found them, so they can continue their long journey."

For all the imposing physicality of what they have created, then, their overall approach to the *Ontario Stones* has been strikingly humble, almost self-effacing. This is most clearly indexed in the variegated pockmarks that traverse one side of each work, achieved by patient striking with customized metal hammers. Egeværk wanted a texture like that of an actual glacial stone, formed over eons of rough-and-tumble treatment, so they used a variety of ball-peen and tapered hammer heads, applying irregular amounts of force. By the accelerated standards of contemporary culture, it may seem quixotic to spend days on end like this, chipping away at the face of something they themselves had built: "It almost hurt to do that to the wood," they say, "after we spent so much time constructing it." But again, it's all relative. Compared to the formation of a single stone, a human lifespan takes hardly any time at all.

Take another (big) step back, and the nine-century span between us and Snorri Sturluson begins to look like the briefest of intervals; his *Prose Edda*, after all, furnishes the source material for many a Marvel movie. We can do better than that, though, returning to his writing – itself an accumulation of several centuries' worth of invention – to look for commonality. The questions about origin and identity that the Norsemen asked themselves, the wonder they took in their environment, the difficulties they faced in surviving it: what people have not told themselves stories about these things? This, ultimately, is the conceptual riverbed in which Egeværk's stones situate themselves. It is a moraine of the collective mind, formed by the confluence of natural forces and human imagination. It has always been with us, and always will be, for as long as there is time.