

Artist's Statement: Stones and Ciphers Taney Roniger

"There is a haunting if deceptive modernity in the notion, so often celebrated by baroque poets and thinkers, that arteries and the branches of trees, the dancing motion of the microcosm and the solemn measures of the spheres, the markings on the back of the tortoise and the veined patterns on rocks, are all ciphers."

George Steiner

For the past several years I have sought to address in my work the relationship between two very different worlds. The first of these is the world of organic form (both biological and otherwise), where dynamic processes such as wave patterns and cloud formations hold particular interest for me, and the second is the world of the digital computer, whose various manifestations are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in contemporary life. The impetus for this body of work was the observation that the digital computer is radically changing human relationships—including, most significantly, our relationship with nature. By bringing the two worlds together in an extended series of abstract paintings my aim has been to suggest something of the complexity of this evolving shift in our attitude toward the natural world.

While at first glance the two worlds—organic and mechanical, natural and artificial—seem to be antitheses, they have a strong commonality, and this is the conspicuous role that pattern plays in each. In both, the presence of pattern signifies a kind of hidden code operating invisibly in the background, determining everything we see in the empirical world. Because of this link, it was by way of pattern that I began to explore these ideas in 2006 with the Stone Series. In these paintings the patterns are meant to evoke both natural forms such as molecular structures, markings on seashells, botanical life, etc., and the circuitry and strings of code we associate with computation, while also alluding to the cryptic nature of each of these languages and the strong sense of mystery they exude.

As the Stone Series evolved, I became increasingly interested in several phenomena that were becoming prominent in the paintings: the dynamic tension between order and disorder, the appearance of "emergent properties" (forms that emerge "accidentally," or without my conscious direction), and the arising of complexity from interactions between extremely simple individual components. Intrigued by these phenomena, I began to make them the central focus of the work, and a new series, the Ciphers, was spawned.

In the Cipher Series, which began in 2008, the overall patterns and gridded compositions so prominent in the Stones gave way to much more irregular and dynamic forms. To date, all of the Ciphers have been inspired by images culled from a new branch of science called Complex Systems Theory, in which computer-generated imagery plays a vital role. Seeking to connect disparate phenomena by finding similar patterns among them, scientists in this field generate and study complex patterns and configurations that often resemble strange new life-forms, adding further intrigue to the question of a hidden connection between computation and the workings of nature.

In both series, contrasting pairs or dichotomies such as analog/digital, randomness/order, parts/wholes, and stillness/movement are prevalent. By invoking these oppositions, my intent is to move the viewer into an experience that transcends the fixed constructs of logic and language, and to point to a place beyond the dualisms where another way of knowing might exist.