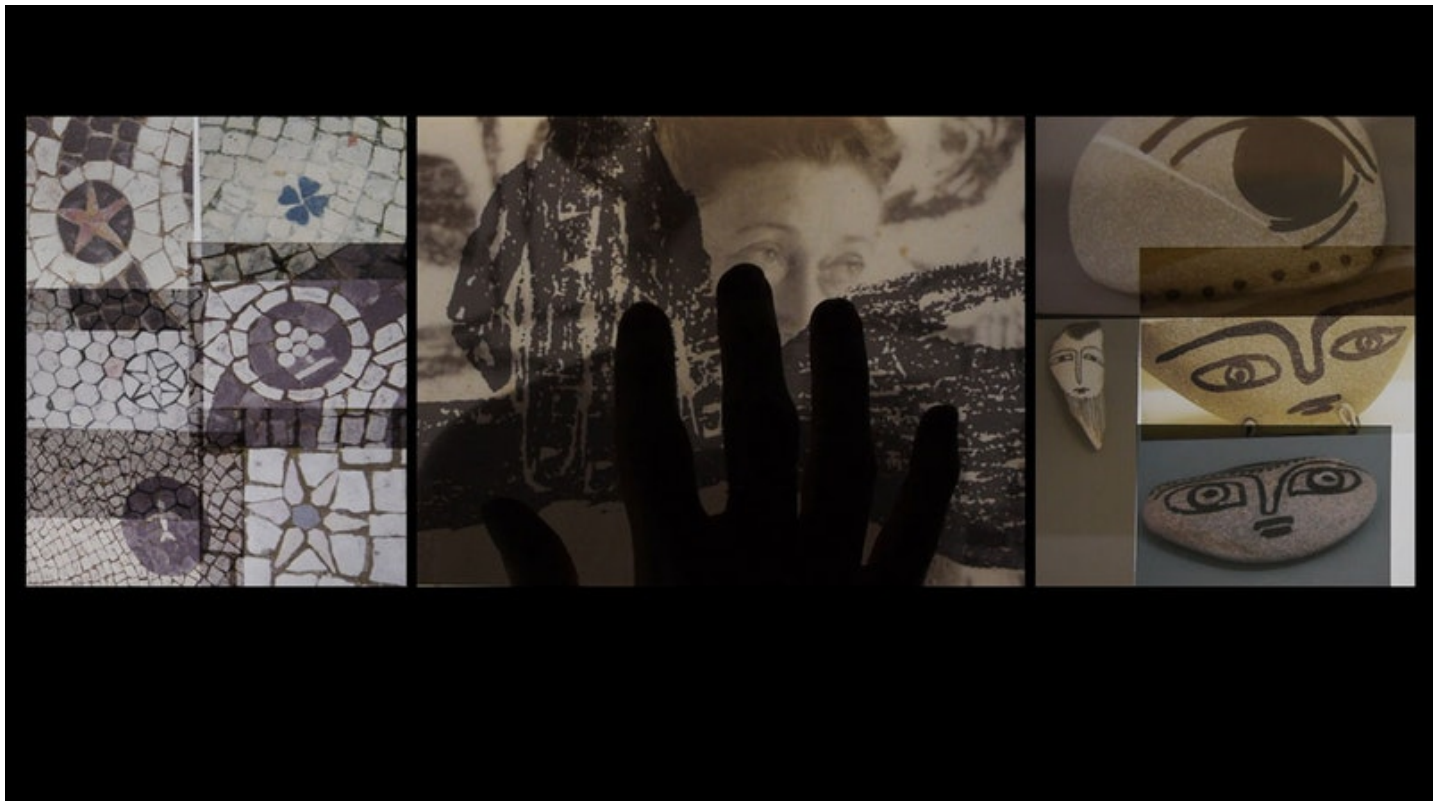


**ArtSeen**

## **Ellie Ga: *Quarries***

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By *Amelia Saul*



Ellie Ga, *Quarries*, 2022. HD video, sound, 40:23. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.

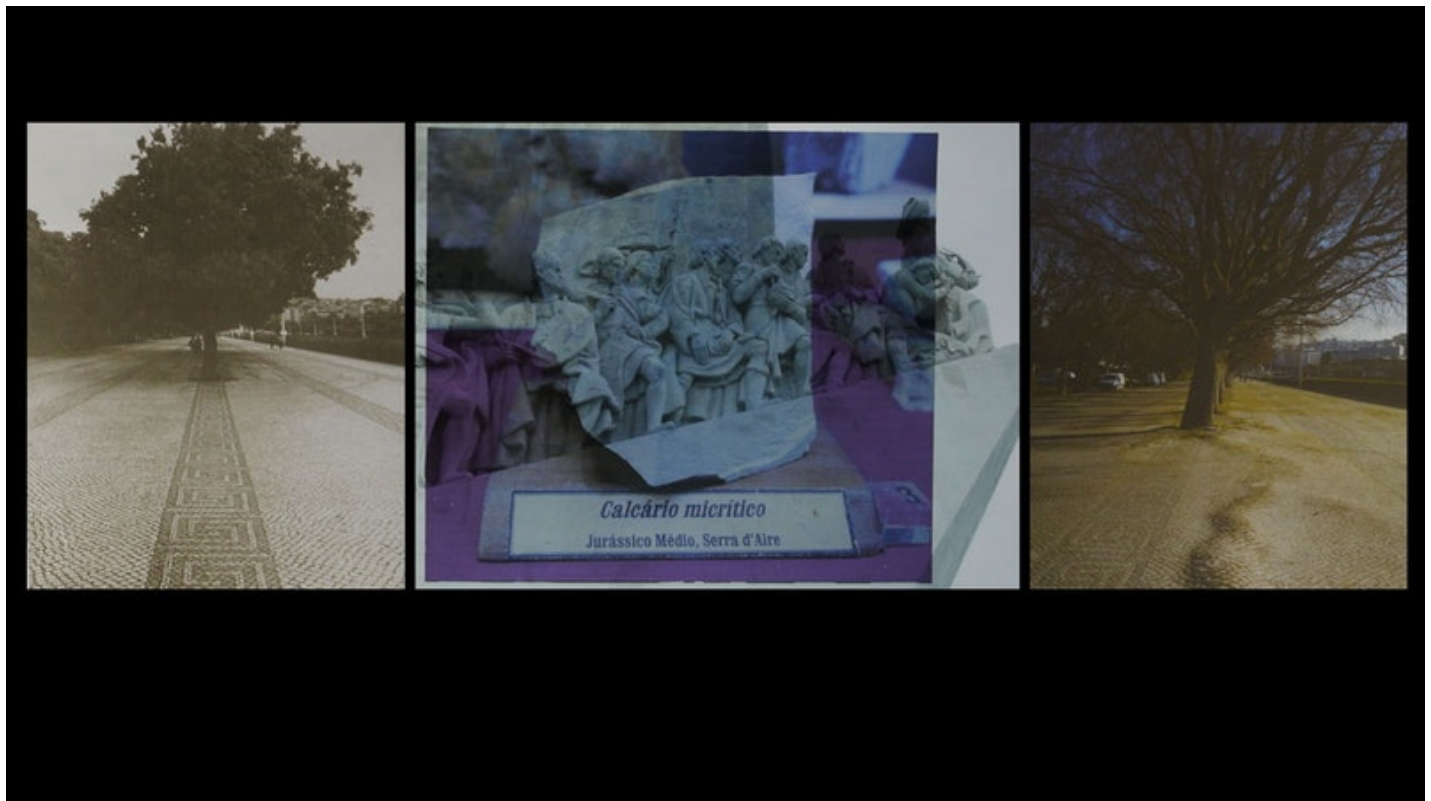
She says, "I walk into my brother's room. He has not used his hands in over a year. They look really strange." But we don't see her brother or his hands. Instead, the silhouette of Ga's fingers pushes a photograph of a single flower on a windowsill and the white curtains of a hospital. She says, "She escaped by climbing over the Pyrenees, in the winter, dragging her wooden leg. She ended up in Lisbon." And though Lisbon does appear, the seaward edge of it, the topic has changed, a baton passed from her brother to the escaped spy to her next subject, a Portuguese colonizer. She says, "When I'm gone, there'll be no one else to teach. This knowledge will soon be lost." On the screen, a man's work-hardened hands nimbly chip away at stone. But one's mind is elsewhere: something she said earlier about prisoners escaping mingles, and one sees the knowledge itself disappearing into a crowd.

The world of Ellie Ga's *Quarries* is almost entirely after the fact, in a time when current events have hardened into history or dissolved into personal memory. Her video, which is now on view at Bureau Gallery, is formed of tensions and lacuna in that remainder-world: tensions between what

is seen and what is said, or between what is explored and what is left as a dead-end; and the lacuna made of forgetting and omission.

Her narratives display a sensibility I've read or heard nowhere else: she can flow from the movements of a type of knowledge to the disappearance of a person, and into a book. Here's an arc: Like the spy who escaped over the Pyrenees, Ga goes to Lisbon to learn how to make the mosaic *calçadas* that so beautifully pave the city. She has signed up for a class that usually people take only when forced by the city. But it is canceled: "Jorge, the teacher, is dying. Instead, I follow itineraries in this old book I found," which show the city via the history of those stonemasons' work. And it turns out prisoners were marched out in chains to arduously chip and set these pathways, while onlookers watched, for public humiliation. But then one time, some of them got away, and really the photographs in the book are so beautiful, who took these beautiful photographs and what was she thinking, she wonders? So then she googles the name (she does not show an image of a screen), and she tries to find the photographer, so she asks a friend in town... And so the world branches off from its appearances, a story turns as delicate as a twig, then a leaf, it's as though she could also have found a dozen other pathways by which she can fall to the pavement and be swept into the current and out to sea.

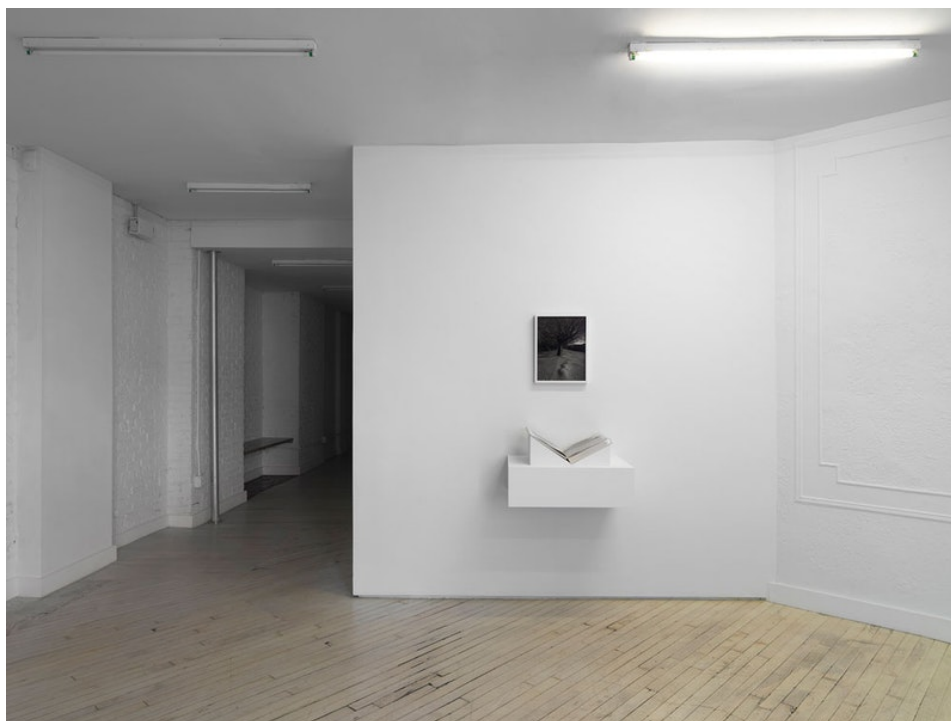
And the sea is always there; It was the main character in her 2019 Whitney Biennial elegiac *Gyres 1-3*; it is less central but omnipresent in *Quarries* too.



Ellie Ga, *Quarries*, 2022. HD video, sound, 40:23. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.

The triptych of *Quarries* recalls a European altarpiece composition—a resonance that might point to Ga's personal grounding in European and American art, even as she weaves colonial narratives into her perambulations. This framing doesn't end up seeming religious even though the audio feels incantatory and sorrowful.

Though the moving image segments are beautiful, the story is propelled by its still photos placed on the type of light boxes a doctor might use to find a fracture. On these, the transparencies slide on, are swiped away, replaced or overlapped, loosely matching the narrative, an intrepid flâneuse recounting her voyage. The artist's hand, silhouetted by the light box, moves the images about with efficient swipes, minor corrections. The images themselves relate to the narration directly, and the voice and the images seem to need each other, as if not trusting entirely that they are more than fictions, needing proof. Sometimes, an image lingers in mind but is no longer on screen because of the sudden darkness when the white light cuts to black. At some points, a thick stack of transparencies land and skid over the surface of the light board. They overlap, obscure each other, the colors of each photograph accumulating into black-overlapping. Then, as the narration continues, the hand disentangles the images, straightens and arranges them across the screen. Here, darkness is multitude, not vacuum; obscurity is a story's vanishing point, and denotes a journey.



Installation view, *Ellie Ga: Quarries*, New York, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.  
Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Ga tracks stories that operate between registers of personal history and markers of the wider migratory and colonial past. Her sensibility feels like a weather balloon, one that tracks remote or traumatic experiences, drawing arcing paths across the world. While Ga does clue us in when she switches between different characters, her brother, the stonemason, etc., most remain semi-anonymous, there is the sense of a slight similarity of these people—and of everyone. In *Quarries*, she speaks as if 'chipping away at sentences,' it sounds a lot like someone playing absent-mindedly on a thumb organ.

Although the elements of Ga's videos have remained the same for a while, one gets the sense that her multiple screens, the light boxes, her plethora of photographic transparencies, and the silhouette moving the images on and off could last her forever. Periodically, a clip of video comes into play, snippets of field recordings. The play for Ga is in the form of the narrative, in the musicality of her speech, and in the structure and dissolution between disparate threads of text. Add to that, one thinks enviously, in the voyage she takes along the way.

## Contributor

**Amelia Saul** is an artist who lives in New York.