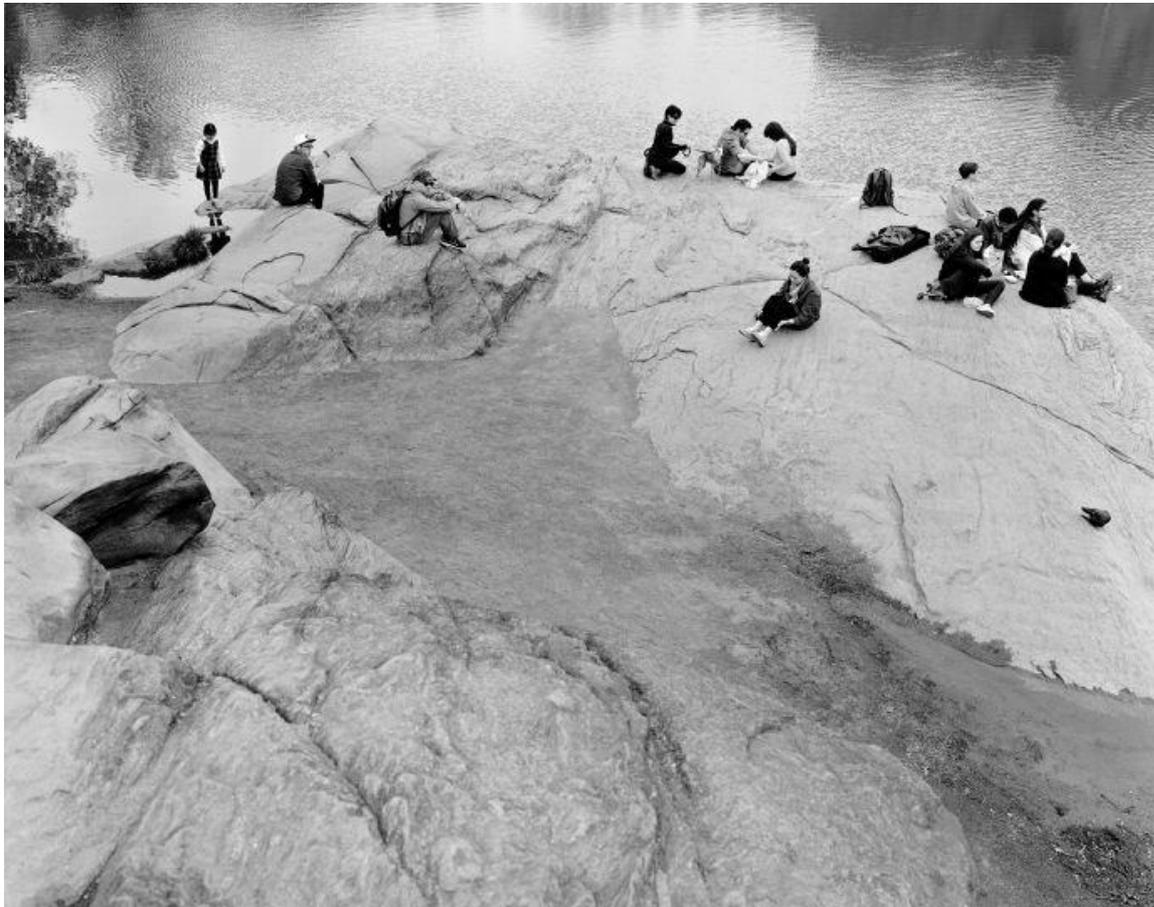


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NEW YORK CITY, IN BETWEEN ROCKS AND CLOUDS

By [Max Campbell](#)

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In the winter of 2014, the photographer Mitch Epstein was recovering from a torn Achilles tendon. Along with the ability to move around, inspiration seemed to have left him, and his

photography had halted completely. “Every couple of days,” he writes, “I worried about how I’d keep working over the next year.” An essay by the artist Robert Smithson about Frederick Law Olmsted eventually shook the stagnancy. Smithson considered Olmsted not only a landscape architect but an earthworks artist; Epstein came to appreciate how Olmsted, in designing Central Park, “had moved huge erratic rocks there and uncovered mammoth geological formations, which he curated to add a primeval quality to the Park’s fields, forests, and ponds.” He used rocks, as Epstein puts it, “to communicate ancient time.” Soon enough, Epstein himself was in Central Park, not yet free of a boot cast, investigating a new project: photographing rocks. To counterbalance this ancient and solid subject matter, he wanted something that “would convey the city’s flux”; a friend suggested that he turn the camera up, to the clouds floating above the city. Thus began Epstein’s project “Rocks and Clouds,” made throughout 2014 and 2015 in all five boroughs of New York City. It is a continuation of his previous series, “New York Arbor,” for which he spent two years making portraits of trees throughout the city.

Trees, rocks, and clouds may seem like simplistic material for a photographer whose work has previously addressed topics like energy consumption and his family’s declining businesses. But as we move back and forth between his unchanging rocks and his ever-evolving clouds, Epstein’s historical, temporal, and social preoccupations begin to reveal themselves. Through his large-format pictures, we look into his clouds as if laying on our backs underneath them, and see a range of contrasts and likenesses as the forms cover, abstract, and mirror the city’s built environment. In one photograph, a cumulonimbus seems caught mid-gesture, unfolding its fingers toward a cargo container off Staten Island. In another, a hunk of bedrock sitting in an enclosure looks like an animal that has outgrown its pen in the zoo. It is a little funny, and then surprisingly sad, to see a caged rock. Above all, Epstein

establishes a rhythm between his subjects, allowing us the time to look up and then down until we begin to see the horizon through detailed sketches of what sits on top of and beneath it. As Epstein writes, that space in between is “where humans and the things we make simultaneously cleave and connect ground and sky.”

“Rocks and Clouds” will open at Yancey Richardson gallery on September 8th, and Steidl will publish a volume of the work this fall. An image from the series, “Clouds #67,” was featured in the August 22, 2016, issue of the magazine.