Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Eastern Utah

The *Natural Copies* are recastings of "natural casts" of dinosaur tracks found in the roofs of coal mines in central Utah, which are produced through a process of natural fossilization as follows:

(a) by dinosaurs walking over spongy beds of decaying vegetation (peat);
(b) by the footprints being filled with sand,
(c) by the accumulation of thousands of feet of additional sediment, which compressed the peat to help form coal and solidified the sand to sandstone;
(d) by removal of the coal in mining operations so as to leave the tracks protruding downward into the mine; and finally,
(e) by the geologist brushing away the residue of coal to expose the white sandstone filling the original track.[1]

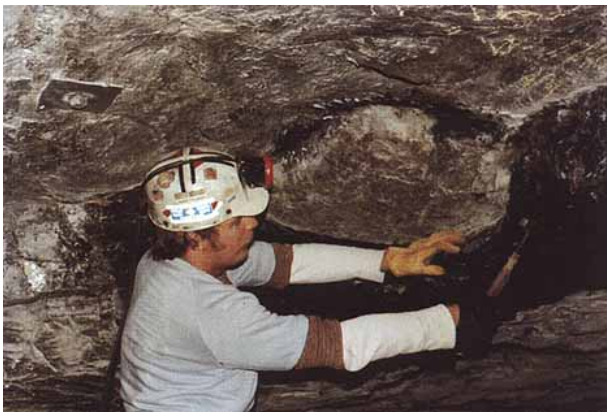
Dinosaur track casts chiseled down from the ceilings of local coal mines and donated to the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum by the families of the coal mine workers.

The museum generously allowed McCollum to have rubber molds made from the tracks; these were moved to New York in 1994, new production molds were made from them, and the *Natural Copies* for this exhibit were produced in early 1995.

In addition to the *Natural Copies*, a series of essays and articles from popular and scientific sources on the history and significance of the dinosaur track natural cast phenomena,

Discovered during the process of mining coal, the natural casts are not only studied by scientists, but are commonly chiseled down from the ceiling by the miners themselves, and sometimes displayed as front yard ornaments at their homes and also as conversation pieces in reception areas of some of the businesses in the coal mining towns.

In 1990 the artist Allan McCollum discovered a collection of over forty of these fossils on display at the small but impressive College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum.[2] in the city of Price, Carbon County, Utah — a museum that was founded in 1960 through the volunteer efforts of the Price community, including the local geology club and some local mining companies, who have supported the museum in part by encouraging their employees to remove the dinosaur track casts found in the mines, and donate them to the museum's collection.



Excavating a Cretaceous duck-billed dinosaur track in a coal mine.

researched and compiled by the artist, accompanies the project in the form of photocopied handouts available free to viewers.

The relatively large quantity of *Natural Copies* made by the artist might be seen as simply the most recent chapter in a narrative which stretches from prehistoric times to the present and recounts the different incarnations of an unusual kind of "trace fossil." The original 65-million-year-old track casts, discovered since the 1920's by coal miners working in central Utah, are clearly artifacts in a story of natural history; but this narrative intersects with another one, the local history of a particular community. The footprints found by workers in the roofs of coal mines, valued as objects of curiosity or aesthetic beauty, were additionally understood as specimens of some scientific merit, and were sold or donated to the local paleontology museum by their original owners. This suggests a complex network of related stories involving community relations and museological practices.

The *Natural Copies* are offered as an allegorical presentation of the narrative attached to other kinds of collectibles and fine art objects: in their various modes of production, exhibition, distribution, and collection; their use and exchange value; their function as markers of natural history or embodiments of cultural memory; their ambiguous status as found objects, cultural artifacts, scientific specimens or fine art objects; and their relation to local lore and folk stories of the region.

By reproducing the natural casts as artworks, another narrative intersects into the story. Originally discovered in the roofs of underground mines, the foot-prints' inverted position offers the eerie experience of a dinosaur walking on the ground above one's head, already suggesting the realm of the fantastic: monsters and exotic creatures from a primeval and forgotten past, treasures produced over the millennia and un-earthed from the subterranean depths through the competitive and determined search for "the rock that burns." The evocation of this narrative in

the fine art context immediately transforms it into a metaphor for romantic views of the archaic and unconscious sources of human creativity, and at the same time suggests a symbolic shadow narrative that might underlie all social relations in communal labor.

Integral to the exhibiting of the *Natural Copies* is the accompanying display of multicolored photocopies of didactic literature, available as handouts in galleries, museum, and also downloadable from the artist's website. This accompanying display of "copies" reiterates the metaphorical references to community organization, production, and dissemination in the real time of the display itself; it not only suggests an alternative to the convention of the expensive fine art catalogue, it simultaneously presents an exuberant, allegorical drama of repetition and production which imagines an uncanny continuity between the geological (natural) copying of tracks and traces from a prehistoric past and the mechanical and electronic endless copying of today.

The *Natural Copies* were produced with the help and cooperation of the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum in Price, Utah, with additional help from Art Resources Transfer Inc. in Los Angeles and the National Endowment for the Arts. They were cast in polymer-modified glass-fiber reinforced gypsum in cooperation with Essex Works, New York City

1. "Essentials of Earth History," by W. Lee Stokes, Prentice-Hall, 1982; p. 127.
2. In addition to the track casts, the CEU Museum also houses a good number of fully articulated dinosaur and prehistoric mammal skeletons from the region, as well as an excellent display of Fremont and Anasazi Indian artifacts; in addition, the museum sponsors and operates a large number of paleontological and archaeological digs in the area.