

**Patrick Nagatani**

**Artist Statement**

From [www.patricknagatani.com/pages/excavations.html](http://www.patricknagatani.com/pages/excavations.html)

### **Excavations (1985-2000)**

The Nagatani / Ryoichi Excavation project is built around a narrative that offers an account of excavations undertaken by an enigmatic Japanese archaeologist, Ryoichi. In 1985, Ryoichi and his team received a set of maps which were interpreted as pointing to sites scattered throughout the world. The sites were in areas with significant archaeological or historical remains - Chaco Canyon, Herculaneum, Stonehenge - or with monuments to our own technological age - The Very Large Array, Kitt Peak National Observatory. The archaeologists spent the next fifteen years secretly excavating the sites excavated by Ryoichi's team, I present evidence of an alternative past, one in which a Jaguar automobile was ceremoniously buried within the foundations of the Observatory at Chichen Itza in the Yucatan, and a Ferrari emerges from a volcanic shroud at Herculaneum. My field photographs are the only record of Ryoichi's excavation campaign that remains.

My photographs of Ryoichi's excavations present a temporal paradox - evidence of an automobile culture which seems to parallel that of our own twentieth century, but found in widely disparate places and times. I follow Ryoichi's single-minded, almost obsessive campaign until the team confronts the last site. We read and come to know "deep history" - past before written record - from archaeological sequences read as text. The maps, the site plans, the careful record of successive layers of habitation - photographed, these elements of archaeological evidence insist on their truthfulness as scientific discourse and photographic record. I layer the elements we accept as scientific record to construct an alternate reading of the past, and alternative stratigraphy of truth and illusion. With this project I hope to challenge us to examine the ways in which photography creates, recreates, or supports a particular history. I want to consider what we accept as evidence and why. I hope to orchestrate our understanding of the archaeologists' quest and suggest that it may have meaning for our own approach to the unknown.

This project expresses my interest in testing the realities that can exist within the realm of photography and physical documentation. I am interested in how the photograph is also recognized less as a window on the "real," and far more as a malleable picture space - constructed and contrived for the purpose of examining representation rather than reality. I am interested in the potential of photography to tell a story.

## Hoax and Patrick Nagatani

by Kathleen Rick

From [www.patricknagatani.com/pages/excavations.html](http://www.patricknagatani.com/pages/excavations.html)

Clarifying the descriptive terminology of Patrick Nagatani's work is important because although his work might at first appear to some as no more than a practical joke, further examination reveals a greater purpose. The detail and complexity of the artifacts, stories, and fictional histories indicates a greater effort than that involved in an ordinary prank. These attempts at complexity and detail elevate the work to the level of an elaborate hoax. Although various definitions of hoax exist, the description best suited to the purposes of this presentation is included in the 1808 Oxford English Dictionary where a hoax is described as "Contriving wonderful stories for the public." Public is the keyword in this definition as hoaxes, unlike practical jokes, are deceptive acts played out before a public audience.

More specifically a hoax is a deceptive act that plays on the credulity of others. Great hoaxes manage to create a sense of wonder and astonishment, forcing people to deal with their assumptions, to question what is real and what is not. This coupled with the photograph's inherent assumptions of veracity is an important facet of Nagatani's work.

Hoaxes unlike frauds, are not motivated by financial gain or personal fame. A hoax is also not an urban legend like the woman who was charged \$250 for a cookie recipe by Niemann Marcus and then went online giving away the expensive recipe. On the surface such stories appear to be hoaxes, but they are not because they have no identifiable author or creator.

The word hoax first entered the common vernacular in tandem with increased importance placed on the public and public opinion during the Enlightenment. The long held belief that legitimate authority lay in arbitrary power as kings and monarchs was being challenged by the idea that the people were the only legitimate authority and that power was granted by the public. In this environment, hoaxing emerged as a way of forcing false or self-proclaimed authorities to stand before the scrutiny of public judgment. Jonathan Swift and Benjamin Franklin were two embodiments of this new sentiment. They perpetrated hoaxes constantly as methods of exposing to the public what they believed were false or outmoded beliefs.

The word hoax first came into popular use in the late 18th century. It was thought to be a contraction of the conjurer's term hocus pocus, itself a distortion of the 'hoc est corpus' used by priests in the transubstantiation of the host. Edgar Allen Poe called the first part of the 19th century the 'epoch of the hoax. While the 18th century had idealized the public, the 19th century realized what it meant to dwell within a mass democracy, and to see both the possibilities and the dangers that such a democracy posed. The experience of this mass

democracy meant that people became aware that they were part of a culture of millions. Small towns and remote villages began to disappear, while newspapers and other literature were produced by machines in enormous volume. In this atmosphere, a number of ingenious hoaxes were perpetrated including the Cardiff Giant, the Great Moon Hoax, and the Kinderhook Plates. This was also the era of the most famous hoaxer of all time, P.T. Barnum. Barnum was celebrated as an entertainer, and also mistrusted because of the authority he seemed to wield over the credulous masses.

Twentieth century hoaxes have dramatized our reliance on new communication technologies. Modern hoaxes have mutated from the 'contriving wonderful stories for the public' of the 18th century to increasing emphasis on frauds and scams perpetrated for the purposes of financial gain or media attention. Thus Nagatani's work is in essence a true hoax in that it has an identifiable author or creator, it is designed as a wonderful story for the public, and it is not constructed for personal or financial gain.

The hoax of this artist however has a greater depth and purpose than simply a glorious snipe hunt. It operates on many different levels and as such a more intense examination of hoax as an art form is required. This examination begins with the presentation of two tales of archaeological hoaxes, past and present, designed to further delineate the nature of the Artistic Hoax.

The year is 1726 and a prominent scientist at the University of Wurzburg has just published his Magnum Opus. The life's work of Johann Beringer, it is a huge treatise on remarkable discoveries the scientist has found. It is a beautiful work impressively illustrated with meticulously engraved plates. The work contains discoveries important enough to change 18th century's views of archaeology, anthropology, geology, history, and theology. Dr. Beringer has found strange creatures buried in the ground. He has found "fossils", stones carved by God himself as a kind of divine sculptor's first draft model for the creatures he intended to create. German Protestants of the time, as well as many modern American Fundamental Christians, could not believe that fossils were relics of life that flourished millions of years ago, but were rather creatures that perished in the great Flood of Noah. Dr. Beringer is ecstatic when he and his helpers begin to find carvings that seem to support his hypothesis. The stones bear the impressions of strange insects, birds, and fish never seen on earth. One is a bird with the head of a fish- obviously one of God's rejects. Other stones show roughs of the moon, of stars, the sun, of comets and one was carved with the name Jehovah, the signature of the artist Himself in the ancient alphabet of the Hebrews. Beringer's colleagues are not impressed and try to convince him that he is being tricked. Beringer dismisses these efforts as criticism of his work from vicious rivals. He is sure that his contemporaries are jealous to insanity over his impending fame.

Suddenly and inexplicably, Dr. Beringer changes his mind.

Rumors begin to spread and he is said to have found a stone with his own name carved on it. An inquiry is held and one of Beringer's assistants confesses to being an accomplice in an elaborate hoax staged by two peculiar colleagues. One is a librarian and the other a professor of geology. They admit to carving the stones themselves.

The shattered and disgraced Beringer spends the rest of his ruined life, and savings, buying up copies of his beautiful book and burning them. Twenty years after his death a new edition of Beringer's findings is published, and in 1963 the University of California Press issues a handsome translation. Johann Beringer has become immortal, not for his findings, but as the victim of a cruel hoax.

Imagine walking into a room in a museum, the track lighting is warm and inviting, images and text are masterfully displayed on multicolored walls. These elements, evoke familiar memories from childhood field trips to the Museum of Natural History in Chicago. People gravitate from picture to picture reading, remarking, and pondering. You are in an archaeological exhibit. Each of the images are tastefully framed with site images, scientific data, journal reproductions from the archaeologist, images of artifacts, and are official looking with museum textual terminology.

The people continue to roam slowly through the exhibit, reading the captions, examining the artifacts and site images, murmuring together in soft interested voices. There is a call for attention, the lights are dimmed, and a slide projector and screen are brought forth. There will be a lecture tonight by the eminent archaeologist whose project is depicted in the exhibition. A kimono clad Japanese man is introduced. He is Ryoichi, a 55 year old archaeologist. The lecture begins as Ryoichi, voice wobbly from speaking a second language adjusts his trifocals and begins to show slides. When the lecture is complete, the lights go up and there is polite applause. It is now question and answer time. Some of the questions are sly and savvy, others naive and earnest. Though the good Ryoichi answers all questions with equal seriousness the very earnest questions are met with titters from other audience members. The earnest questioner looks suddenly shy, bemused, and a little defensive. As if they have understood that they have been tricked. The questions subside and the gallery patrons return to the exhibit.

In the safety of a one-to-one encounter, the earnest questioners approach Ryoichi once again. They are startled to see the Japanese scientist slightly change his smile, take off the kimono, and put on a baseball cap. He transforms himself into another persona and is certainly not a Japanese archaeologist. His hoax has been revealed. As realization gradually dawns, the reactions are strangely mixed. Some say that although they were fooled, they enjoyed the ruse

immensely and return to the exhibit with a much different perspective. Others are outraged at being taken for a ride. One man grills the "scientist" as he tries to explain the points he was trying to make by constructing such deceptions. The exasperated patron finally remarks "I don't think I can believe ANYTHING you say!" and storms off. Others, even when told of the ruse, refuse to accept it as a falsehood. Some still truly believe the 'facts' perhaps because they refused to believe they were fooled. Some say they were never fooled for a minute. The varying degrees of response are from the left brain thinkers, right brain thinkers, and some with those delicate connections utilizing both sides, mostly these are women. The general feeling is that somehow everyone was duped to a certain degree by an artistic hoax.

The common element in these two tales is the archetype of the trickster, the jester, and the charlatan. Each of these tales has elements of parody, satire, and irony. One results in a rather tragic outcome for the victim, the other with a less dramatic consequence. In each case the target of the hoax is tripped up by their own intelligence into believing something patently strange. This belief can be a less dramatic consequence. In each case the target of the hoax is tripped up by their own intelligence into believing something patently strange. This belief can be so strong that the victim will often refuse to accept they have been hoaxed, even when confronted with evidence and confession from the perpetrator.

By means of a subtle transformation in the ways artists deal with their audiences people mistrust a good deal of art. The public's mistrust of artists is not a recent development. Almost every new movement in the world of Art was met with some amount of mistrust and skepticism. The works of the dadists, Picasso, Pollack, Kline, Warhol, the musical works of Schoenberg and Webern and the free verse of Cummings all were met with the skeptical "who are they trying to kid?" and "My three year old can paint better than that!"

It may be that some element of the "put-on" has always resided at the base of art, but it has taken a contemporary sensibility to turn facetiousness into a full aesthetic. The suspect is not only art but also all experiences. While a healthy amount of skepticism is necessary to function in the modern world an overall lack of trust is detrimental to a healthy community. The survival of society depends on some degree of mutual trust. The hoax might therefore be a device born out of exhaustion and desperation to force people out through the confusion, mistrust, and loss of confidence towards a greater reliance on critical thinking and self-confidence.

This initial review of the meaning and origins of the hoax is presented to establish a perspective from which to discuss and critique the work of Patrick Nagatani. The overall analysis of Nagatani's work is to discover why this artist expended great effort to create fine art only to display it in a venue of faux science, irony and trickery. In essence- Why is he working this way?

Patrick Nagatani's work has always existed in the realm of fantasy and political irony. His Nuclear Enchantment work was a darkly humorous look at our love/hate preoccupation with the bomb and popular culture. In his new work *The Ryoichi/Nagatani Excavations* exploits the realms of science as a platform form which to launch his story. Nagatani's interest is in how the photograph is "less recognized as a window on the 'real' but far more as a malleable picture space." Nagatani demonstrates how this space can be constructed and contrived for the purpose of examining representation rather than reality.

Like the 18th century perpetrators of the hoax, Nagatani seeks less to fool, but more to "contrive wonderful stories for the public." It is difficult to conceive of a gallery patron mistaking Nagatani's *Excavations* for reality. The premise of *Excavations* is to suggest an alternate past where automobiles were viewed as revered and sacred objects. In this alternate history the automobile somehow existed unscathed in the pasts of the world's great civilizations. The great society of Egypt, the peoples of Stonehenge, the Anasazi of the Chetro Ketl Kiva, or the ancient peoples who watched the heavens at the Caracol in the Yucatan, were all connected with the automobile. In Nagatani's work an "automotive culture" appears inexplicably at various points of earth's past. Such an alternative reality is as believable as the suggestion that human evolution is based on visitations from aliens from outer space and alluring and entertaining.

Nagatani creates the fictitious philosopher/archaeologist Ryoichi by donning gray hair and kimono. Nagatani uses journals, field notes, and other writings of his scientist to propel the narrative of the show. Nagatani also makes a point of including both the fictitious Ryoichi and the real Nagatani into the work. Hence the title of the work *Ryoichi/Nagatani Excavations*.

A short summary of the narrative of the work has Ryoichi receiving a set of thirty mysterious maps covering various locations all over the planet. Each of these locations has some great import, whether historic, scientific, or cultural. These sites are both ancient and modern. What links such disparate sites together is the rather unique unearthing of automobiles during the archaeological excavations suggested by the mysterious maps. The Ryoichi team meticulously document the proceedings with journal entries, drawings, rubbings, maps, sample taking, dendrochronology, AMS carbon dating, and most importantly, photographs. Then they carefully entomb the evidence providing an explanation as to why no one has known about these silent excavations until now. The philosophical discourse regarding scientific practice and ritual/myth shift with the archaeological group. The project itself becomes back-grounded to a complex set of issues that many scientists are moralizing today.

Nagatani brings this secret archaeological project to light by working with Ryoichi, Ryoichi's journals, and photographing the sites excavated by Ryoichi's team. Nagatani's photographs of

the field sites and of recovered artifacts are the only record of Ryoichi's excavation campaign that remains. As one explores more of Nagatani's narrative of the Excavation project, similarities with the Beringer Hoax come to mind. Nagatani states that his photographs of Ryoichi's excavations present a temporal paradox, evidence of an automobile culture which seems to parallel that of our own twentieth century but found in widely disparate places and times.

Beringer also confronted and managed to rationalize away a similar temporal paradox regarding fossils created by God himself. Nagatani's purpose with the Excavations project is manifold. Nagatani wants us to consider what we accept as evidence and why. He is also interested in testing the realities that can exist within the realm of photography and physical documentation. Particularly how the photographic record, especially in the case of archaeology, provides a stamp of truthfulness to scientific evidence. For instance, the pre-history of our world is derived from examining the layers of archaeological evidence (maps, site plans, artifacts) derived from these explorations are photographed, their truthfulness is further enhanced. In the Excavations project, Nagatani chooses to layer these elements that are accepted as scientific record to provide an alternative reading of the past. The ultimate goal being a fabric produced by knitting together truth and illusion.

Patrick Nagatani is first and foremost a consummate storyteller. Narrative is his primary concern. This was true in his earlier work with Andree Tracey where the viewer must make narrative-sense of the witty one-liners. In the Excavations work Nagatani has presented himself not only as storyteller but also as documentary photographer. There exists, in this piece, and underlying conflict between the fictional nature of the storyteller and the factual nature of the documentary photographer.

Much like Juan Fontcuberta, Nagatani's photographs are seamless, lending themselves to what photography is allowed to do best. Which according to Fontcuberta, "The photographs allow the direct observation of nature and the rigor and precision of science, providing the only access to a confident knowledge of the physical world." Nagatani's project is presented in a museum format with text panels, documentation, journal entries, false personae, and found objects. There are however, subtle but important differences. At times Nagatani wears his contrivance on his sleeve. Upon careful examination one can detect scale differences and automobiles in too perfect preservation. This must be an obvious intention. Somewhere in the middle of the reality and illusion is the Michael Crichton, Timeline-like premise that time travel is possible although Nagatani suggests that time might not be linear but that a space time continuum exists within a looping time theory.

The use of the car as a object of ancient worship makes a strong statement on contemporary culture and Americans' ongoing love affair with the automobile.

Nagatani fashions a tale with which we are all familiar, but has enough twists, turns and humor to make it truly an engaging and wonderful story for the public.

As I theorized earlier in this lecture a good portion of the general public approaches modern art with a great deal of skepticism and distrust. In fact many gallery goers often approach art with the same wariness as they would a hoax, the artist is trying to pull a fast one. This hoax, however is more of a visual put-on than a wonderful story created for the public. It has the manifest object passing off the untruth as truth, and letting the victim know in more or less subtle ways that he has been taken for a ride. A great deal of modern art then becomes open-ended, where the viewer continually asks himself, what is the artist up to and how does he want me to respond. Couching the work in a veil of confusion may disguise the fact that the artist may actually have very little of interest to say and provides an ambiguous refuge for the untalented. Contrast this somewhat antagonistic relationship with the manner in which the public approaches modern science. While a healthy skepticism still exists on the part of the public, scientific discoveries are accepted with much greater faith. Science by its very nature relies upon the critical evaluation of its endeavors and very little is gained by duplicitous behavior. While there are numerous instances of fraud, deceit, and trickery throughout the history of science, these are not the chosen methods for conveying scientific discoveries. Rather it is incumbent upon the scientist to present his works in such a manner as to be understandable to an educated populace, to be able to publicly defend his work, and provide valid evidence for his claims.

Given the disparate natures of the two cultures, why then did Nagatani choose to present his work under a scientific venue?

The particular venue chosen by Nagatani, the museum or the museum exhibition, is one explanation. We have been conditioned to feel comfortable in the museum setting. The displays, photographs, and text are there to guide, inform and educate us. In the same manner that a theater production relies upon an audience for completeness, effective modern science museums go to great lengths to involve their patrons in the exhibit.

Placing the hoax then in the venue of a museum provides a way to give the viewer a foot in the door, a resting place of mutual understanding between artist and audience. It provides a staging area where a breath of relief may be taken and guards relaxed before proceeding into the "wonderful tale". This is especially true in the case of Nagatani's work where the hoax is readily obvious. As audience members we are immediately let in on the narrative. We are aware of the ruse and can experience at a deeper level the artist's intent.

The use of the scientific milieu by Nagatani also relates to the overall role of science in modern history. Science has become the great communicator of our age. While references to history, religion, folklore, and myth often are misread, mystify, and even promote highly charged controversies, science is an arena that is ever more likely to be understood. As such it provides a contemporary, pertinent and rich narrative source for artists to draw from.

The lack of a common, universal iconography is a bane for the modern artist. This presents the contemporary artist with an interesting conundrum. Assume, for the sake of argument, that a talented painter whose skill with the brush rivals that of the Dutch Masters. If he paints in the style of the Dutch masters, his art will be justifiably derided by critics as lacking contemporary significance. In order to be contemporary and thus receive some recognition he is compelled to produce material that challenges the status quo. As a visual artist he can then look, as others have, to the field of science. If however, he ensconces himself in the world of his own hoax he is no longer hobbled by the need to be contemporary. The scientific systems are already in place to develop context as well. This is especially true if the hoax has an historical narrative. Such a narrative provides the opportunity to create art based on an older, although now obsolete, narrative source. By coupling the scientific hoax with a historical aspect he can combine the contemporary iconography of science with the historical iconography of whichever period he chooses. As an artist, he can now exploit the hoax and utilize the contemporary aspects of science and how it is accepted, used, and abused. In addition he can highlight his own talents and explore creative talents as much as he wants.

Art is more and more calling upon science as a source for inspiration. Yet in spite of all the faith that the public puts in science there is fear as well. Science has developed the human genome project, which effectively allows man to play God. In light of the developments such as these what is the role of art? Could the work of Nagatani's faux science pieces serve as a cautionary speed bump for a science that might soon have the capacity to diminish humanity? Nagatani's work makes no bold claim to this but the potential for such a constructive dialogue between Art and Science, photography and archaeology is alluring.