

THE WANDERLUST

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Julian Charrière: Art's natural witness

Julian Charrière is an artist who believes that exposing himself to intrepid and potentially dangerous experiences is a driving force for his art. Whether it's the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean where the US carried out nuclear testing in the late 1940s/1950s or Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni salt flats where lithium is being mined, his subjects of investigation relate to mankind's impact on nature and geology.

TEXT

ANNA SANSOM



Ed Davenport & Julian Charrière
Photo © Johannes Förster



'The fact that we're surrounded by different atmospheres and timescales creating a complex, ungraspable reality is something that I want to address in my work,' says Julian Charrière, 31, whose work featured in last year's Venice Art Biennale, curated by Christine Macel. 'I'm fascinated by places where one can sense a friction between ourselves and the environment and that leave a symptomatic scar of our passage here, like a witness of our civilisation.'

The Swiss artist's latest work, a film titled *An Invitation to Disappear*, leads us into an oil palm plantation in Southeast Asia,

resembling a dense, lush, tropical forest where line upon line of palm trees stretch out interminably. As the light begins to wane and dusk gives way to darkness, the pulsating beats of a techno rave beckon, the fronds of the palms swaying to the music. Billowing smoke and flashing lights engulf the forest in a psychedelic atmosphere. Yet the empty stage of loudspeakers and a nocturnal scene devoid of any people denote that the trees are the only revellers. As the weak light of dawn emerges, the night of reverie and synthetic beats fades, the returning stillness mirroring the moment when clubbers step out of a venue into the daylight.



First Light, Aspen, 2016
© the artist, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

Indeed, the entrancing film interweaves a rich web of ideas, from monoculture and industrial agriculture to the burning of rainforests and climate change through to rave culture and electronic music. 'It's all about the moment when Adam and Eve got kicked out of the Garden of Eden and how Homo sapiens subsequently became gardeners; what we call today's ecological crisis is rooted in this melancholic moment of the fall of Eden,' Charrière explains. 'Palm oil plantations are characteristic of a local continuation of the colonial enterprise and the western world's yearning for the Garden of Eden.'

As with many of Charrière's works, the point of departure was a field trip. In this case, he headed to the Indonesian island of Sumbawa to ascend Mount Tambora, whose eruption in 1815 had such a destructive, chilling effect on the Northern Hemisphere that the following year of 1816 became known as the 'year without a summer'. It was climbing up the volcano's slope and gazing down on the palm oil plantation that set Charrière's mind working.

'The plantation has a strange, magnetic power, making you feel simultaneously fascinated and repulsed, and the almost prehistoric presence of the geometrically arranged trees in this seemingly endless maze leaves you breathless,' Charrière recalls. 'I started to reflect on what I could do. For a long time I'd wanted to work with music and find a way to re-enact the myth of Fitzcarraldo in a contemporary context.'



Fitzcarraldo, 1982
Directed by Werner Herzog and starring Klaus Kinski
© Fitzcarraldo

The film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), directed by Werner Herzog and starring Klaus Kinski, is about the Irishman Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald who travelled to the Peruvian jungle with the dream of building an opera house. Charrière's film replaces the high culture of opera with the underground subculture of techno, whilst continuing the intention of displacing western music into tropical territory during an expedition. 'I've been organising techno parties and have been quite involved in Berlin's electronic music scene, so it felt natural to bring this into the project,' says Charrière, who collaborated on the 80-minute-long, continuously looped film with the British producer and DJ Inland (real name Ed Davenport). After premiering at Kunsthalle Mainz in Germany earlier this year and Art Basel in June, when it was shown in the Natural History Museum as part of the off-site Parcours programme, *An Invitation to Disappear* is being presented at Berlin's Berghain nightclub on 26 September 2018.



As We Used to Float - USS Saratoga
© the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

As winner of the GASAG Art Prize 2018, worth €10,000 and awarded every two years to a Berlin-based artist whose work intertwines art, technology and science, Charrière is having an exhibition this autumn at the Berlinische Galerie. The spatial, multimedia installation promising to take visitors 'underwater in the Pacific Ocean' is the culmination of Charrière's trip to Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands and a series of deep dives to shoot his film. On view besides this film and a new video work, *As We Used to Float*, is Charrière's series of photographs, *First Light* (2016), depicting the vibrant sunsets and lapping waves on Bikini Atoll's beach. Charrière placed the negatives on the irradiated sand, capturing on film 'the radioactive reality' of the place that is invisible

to the naked eye. Eerily marked with white blotches, the ensuing images convey the enduring damage inflicted on the idyllic scenery to satisfy nuclear ambitions, the tropical paradise being an ever-tainted, uninhabitable paradise lost. After almost four decades under US administration as part of a UN agreement, the Marshall Islands (consisting of 29 atolls and five individual islands) attained independence in 1986 yet compensation claims as a result of US nuclear testing on some of the islands between 1947-1962 still continue.

'I cannot start to talk about a subject without experiencing it,' Charrière insists. 'So if I want to engage with an atomic test site or a place of radioactivity, I need to go there and expose myself to understand what it means. I think it's crucial for an artist to be exposed. Obviously, sometimes this can mean being involved in an element of risk or potential danger. But in my case it's not about wanting to be an epic adventurer-artist; it's much more about the aim for an encounter which leads to a deep understanding of a place or a particular situation.'

Born in Morges on Lake Geneva in French-speaking Switzerland, Charrière studied at the Berlin University of the Arts. He completed his studies in 2013 under Olafur Eliasson's Institut für Raumexperimente,



The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories, 2013
© the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

which was affiliated with the University for five years as an experimental education and research project. What did he learn through Eliasson's Institut? 'The first thing we learnt is to look into other disciplines and, rather than be focused on art history, be freely interdisciplinary and in contact with many different fields in science and humanities,' replies Charrière, whose compelling work has been influenced by Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Donald Judd and the Arte Povera movement. 'We were taught not to walk down the street with blinkered vision but to look round all the corners.'

Among Charrière's earliest projects was an 'artistic intervention' climbing an iceberg in the Arctic Ocean and melting the ice beneath his feet with a gas torch for eight hours. The resulting images, titled *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories* (2013), loosely recall Caspar David Friedrich's romantic painting *Wanderer Overlooking the Sea of Fog* (1817-18). Charrière's motivation was to confront human and geological time whilst alluding to global warming. 'This picture is about the absurdity of the human enterprise - someone trying to nail down the ice cap and bringing the problem and its solution into one sphere,' Charrière remarks.



Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, ca 1818
Painting by Caspar David Friedrich

Subsequent artistic endeavours have whisked Charrière off to Chernobyl's exclusion zone three decades after the 1986 nuclear power plant disaster, to oil fields in Fort McMurray, Canada, and to Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat whose vast quantities of lithium might soon be mined to fulfil the demand of the new technologies industry. Towering, geological sculptures, titled *Future Fossil Spaces* in allusion to the geological transformation that the salt flat may undergo, were installed in the Corderie of the Arsenale during last year's Venice Art Biennale.



Future Fossil Spaces
Viva Arte Viva, 57th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Christine Macel



irocyrlik, 2016.
Film still
© the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany



Eneman II - Terminal Beach, 2016
© the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

Charrière has also visited the sites of both US and Soviet nuclear testing during the Cold War. In 2014, he travelled to Semipalatinsk, also known as The Polygon, which was the primary nuclear test site of the USSR from 1949 until 1989/1991 on the steppe of north-east Kazakhstan. Titled *Polygon*, the stark large-format, black-and-white images show the remaining vestiges of the defunct towers. The gritty lightspot marks indicate how Charrière scattered thermonuclear material on the negatives before developing them, the effect of radioactivity on film having first been discovered in the late 19th century.

Two years later and in a similar vein, Charrière photographed the industrial, concrete bunkers erected by the Americans on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, the arresting images depicting the structures as desolate megaliths domineering the shore. The typological characteristics of both series find an echo with the Düsseldorf School of Photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher. The latter series is named after J. G. Ballard's post-apocalyptic short story *The Terminal Beach*, whose lone protagonist becomes delirious hiding in the maze of bunker blocks built for nuclear testing; it was reading the story that inspired Charrière to embark on the project. 'What most fascinated me is that the bunkers of Bikini Atoll were built for the purpose of the "birth of an image", documenting the atomic endeavour, most likely an explosion, in order to create an iconography of the atomic age,' Charrière enthuses. 'The bunkers were designed to allow the right exposure of the negative, a sort of exoskeleton of the camera body. For me as a visual artist, this was a radical discovery.'

Charrière is currently working on a two-year-long project that involves him travelling to the North and South Poles and working in the Arctic nights. 'The project is about what these poles have triggered in the human imagination as the last kind of landscape that one could dream about or project our fantasies upon,' he says. Once again, Charrière's wanderlust-filled exploration about mankind's impact on nature is impregnated with a touch of romanticism.



Polygon X, 2014
© the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

An Invitation to Disappear is being presented at Berghain nightclub, Berlin, on 26 September, berghain.de

Julian Charrière: As We Used to Float, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, 27 September 2018 – 8 April 2019, berlinischegalerie.de

As We Used to Float: Within Bikini Atoll by Nadim Samman & Julian Charrière is published by K. Verlag, <https://k-verlag.org/books/as-we-used-to-float/>

Julian Charrière: Second Suns is published by Hatje Cantz, hatjecantz.de.

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