

International Edition

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Her Life. Her Style. And her Art:
Interview and artist's pages

Bad Boy

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Bernhard Willhelm

Light up your life!

With Friedrich Kunath, Julian
Charrière and Vera Lehndorff,
a.k.a. "Veruschka"



Back from the future

Julian Charrière clammers onto icebergs and visits hell on earth in Kazakhstan, searches for lithium and rare earths, and makes eternity the theme of an art for and against the digital age. A portrait of the highflier

TEXT ELKE BUHR

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Julian Charrière working in his studio



Radioactive in Kazakhstan: Detail from Julian Charrière's "Polygon", 2014

Barren steppe as far as the eye can see. The odd concrete structure rises up out of the brownish ground. Mysterious monoliths, towers, like witnesses of a past civilization. The camera pans across the ground, as though looking for tracks, turns up to the sky and encounters a blinding glow. The picture begins to flicker, and the sun becomes a symbol of what has happened here. The Soviets used to test nuclear weapons here in the restricted military zone that goes by the enigmatic name of Semipalatinsk-21 Polygon in Kazakhstan. Between 1949 and 1989 nuclear warheads were detonated in the region, contaminating the landscape for millennia to come. "During the Cold War for the Western world this place was a metaphor for hell on earth," says Julian Charrière. "Everyone knew it existed. But no one had seen it."

Charrière traveled to Kazakhstan, obtained the necessary permits, and entered the site clad in a protective suit, camera in hand. For 90 minutes – the maximum exposure time to radiation. He shot a film, "Somewhere". And took photographs. He collected a few stones wherever he took shots. Then, when he developed the photos, classic Ilford films in black and white, he put a few stones on each of the negatives, so that the material was double exposed: radiation from the stones changed the picture, eating holes in the landscape.

This is just how Henri Becquerel discovered radioactivity in the late 19th century: with a uranium sample that he wrapped up together with a photographic plate. Despite being shielded from the light, an image of the sample nonetheless appeared. "I wanted to capture the invisible force," says Char-

rière. The result is the melancholy image of a landscape that seems to have fallen out of history.

For Charrière, *Semipalatinsk-21* is a piece of science-fiction turned reality. In 1964 British author James Graham Ballard sent a distraught protagonist to a Pacific island devastated by nuclear explosions. In the short story "The Terminal Beach", the post-apocalyptic landscape with its bunker ruins becomes a mirror of the inner world: "The island is a state of consciousness," according to the story.

**"The vertical, the drilling, is objective", says Charrière.
"Historiography is horizontal, subjective. Each nation, each individual has their own. But the vertical does not lie"**

In his geological expeditions, Julian Charrière likewise uncovers inner landscapes. Not that his stance is romantic or his cause narcissistic. The young artist from western Switzerland finds ciphers for an epoch that some today call the Anthropocene, namely that phase in earth's history when man is irreversibly changing the planet. Climate change, nuclear waste, radioactive contamination, the elimination of biodiversity – even if humanity were to suddenly vanish today, its traces would remain.

At the same time, among all his devices modern man is losing sight of the material basis of his existence. There is always that screen between his hand and the world. Charrière turns back to the ground we stand on, literally. In 2012 he burrowed into the ground in Addis Ababa until he disappeared, then discussed what he was doing

with passersby. In 2013, he drilled 80 meters down into the ground directly in front of his studio, compressed and shaped the sediments he unearthed to form elongated, rod-shaped sculptures that link the fossil layers to the present. "On the Sidewalk, I Have Forgotten the Dinosauria" is the name of the Berlin exhibition that presented the pieces. "The vertical, the drilling, is objective", says Charrière. "Historiography is horizontal, subjective. Each nation, each individual has their own. But the vertical does not lie."

Like geological layers, the various concepts of time are also a central topic for Charrière. When he went to Iceland in 2013, climbed onto an iceberg and stayed there for the next eight hours using a cutting torch, he melted his way through the traces of centuries. "Future archeology" is what Charrière calls this practice. His installations look like the excavation findings of a time traveler from the future. He constructs the ruins of tomorrow, today. Or freezes plants in the manner of specimens for a distant future and presents them in display cases. Mysterious, beautiful objects covered in white.

The spirit of discovery is deep-seated in him: Born in 1987 in Morges, western Switzerland, even as a child he ran tirelessly through the woods collecting everything he could and kept specimens of every single native Swiss frog species in countless terraria in the basement at home. "I work a little like a journalist", he says when we meet at a restaurant in Berlin. "I read a lot. When something sparks my interest, I go there and research it."

Yet the resulting films, photographs and sculptures not only reveal the natural scientist's curiosity, but also demonstrate a resolute aesthetic will. Charrière's former hero was Robert Smithson, and the aesthetics of

PORTRAIT Julian Charrière



Julian Charrière's drilling finds: "On The Sidewalk (Geneva)", 2014

PORTRAIT Julian Charrière

Arte Povera likewise had a strong influence on him. He developed this synthesis of form and research in his first year at Olafur Eliasson's Institute for Spatial Experiments (ISE) at the Berlin University of the Arts, to this end joining forces with fellow students such as Felix Kiessling, Julius von Bismarck and Andreas Greiner. Part of the mix is always a healthy portion of cockiness and wit.

The portfolio which Julian Charrière submitted when applying for admission to the ISE included piles of rubble coated with white powder and photographed as though they were the Alps. Together with Julius von Bismarck he made a pigeon-dyeing machine and sent rainbow-colored birds out into St. Mark's Square in Venice. He has decades' worth of ideas, and the enthusiasm that he

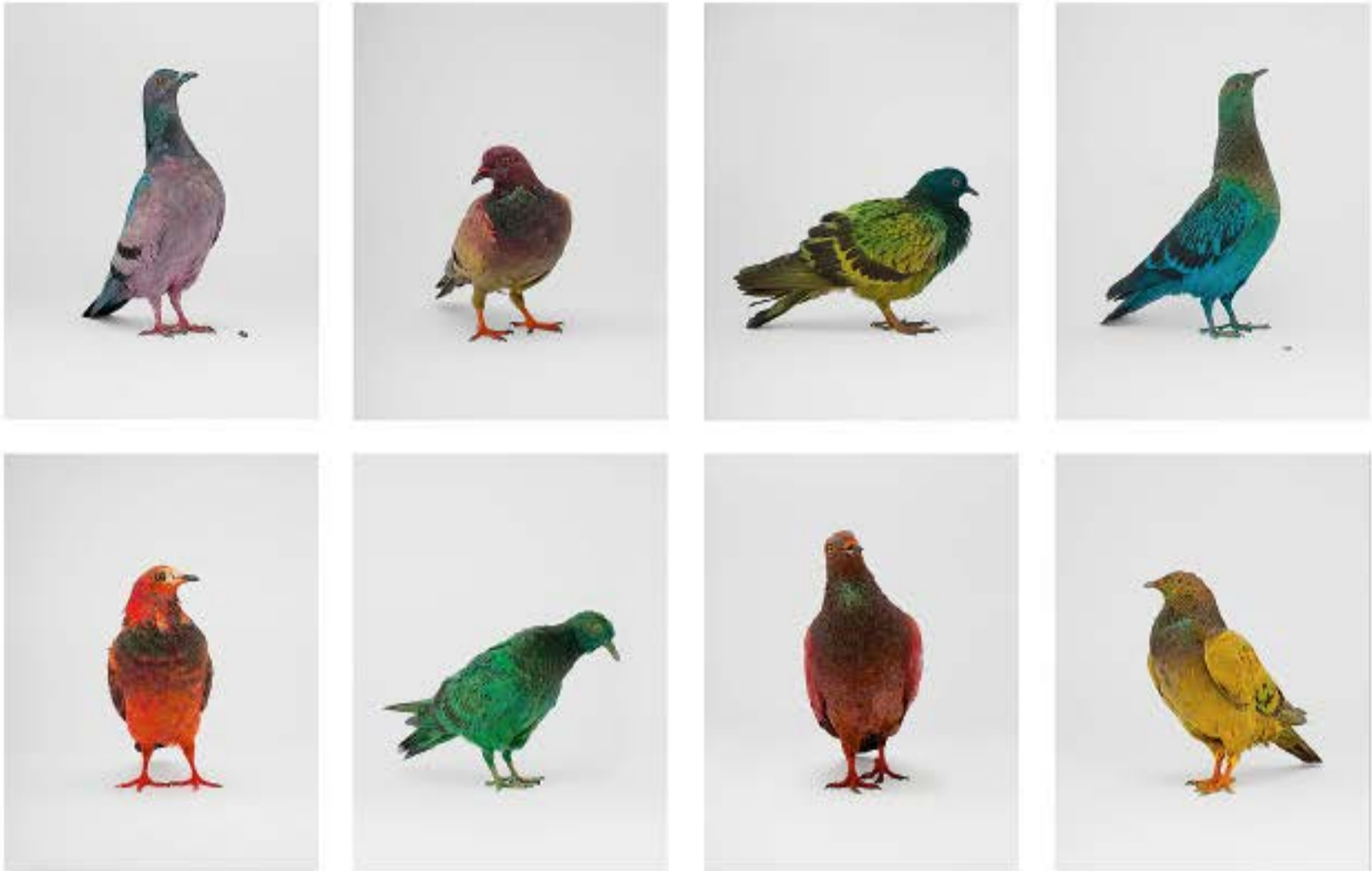
can now realize a great many of them virtually radiates from his eyes.

In his first few years in Berlin techno parties were one outlet for his boundless energy; today it takes him around the world. Last year alone he conducted research not just in Kazakhstan, but also in Argentina, Chile and Bolivia. He increasingly participates in group exhibitions, and his first major solo show at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne was complex and impressive in equal measure. In the new year he was off to Mexico, where together with von Bismarck he prepared new works for the Zona Maco fair. And on top of all that his works will be on show in the spring at Kunsthalle Wien and Stiftung Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, among other venues.



On the iceberg: Julian Charrière's "The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories", 2013

PORTRAIT Julian Charrière



Julian Charrière and Julius von Bismarok, "Some Pigeons Are More Equal Than Others", 2012

He himself, devoting so much energy to 'time' and its various manifestations, has become a hurtling particle. "That is what's called the end of geography", says Charrière. "The relationship between body, distance and time is increasingly disintegrating. We take Valium, get up again and are in Mexico. We have Skype, Google Earth, all these tools that expand our senses. We can act at 1,000 places at once. In the past this was only possible on a spiritual level; people took hallucinogenic mushrooms to make their spirit take flight and cast a glimpse at the global whole. Today we turn on our iPhone. That's what I want to reflect in my work."

Charrière's most ambitious project to date concerns reconnecting screens with their roots in earlier geological eras. In Argentina, Chile and Bolivia he went in search of lithium, without which no cell

phone battery will function. The metal is obtained in salt flats there, in basins where a solution containing lithium crystallizes. Charrière shaped the salt blocks that result

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from slabs being cut from the basins to create towering sculptures that look like ruins of a distant civilization. In-between them



Julian Charrière, "Tropisme", 2014, cryogenized plants, chilled cabinet

the lithium solution shimmers blue in rectangular pools. "Future Fossil Spaces" is the name of this piece from 2014 – in its original sense "fossil" means everything that is excavated.

In the summer Charrière plans to travel to Inner Mongolia, where the world's largest deposits of so-called rare earths are to be found – metals used among other things for the production of hard disks. Again he will make his way into the distant past of our planet to bring to light materials of the future.

It has been a long time since the sublime was a meaningful category in contemporary art. Yet in the oeuvre of Julian Charrière it is unexpectedly updated. He shows

the selfie age that there is something that is greater than the human ego. Something that was there before. And that will outlast humanity. When Charrière dissects our relationship to nature his approach is neither moralistic nor know-it-all nor esoteric. It is philosophical in a way that always favors contemplation of the world over self-reflection. Rarely have we seen someone dig so deep in such an unpretentious way.

Julian Charrière is represented by Galerie Dittrich & Schlechtriem in Berlin. Group shows: "Rare Earth", Thyssen Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, thru May 31, "The Future of Memory", Kunsthalle Wien, thru March 29