

Julian Charrière's *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories III*

Julian Charrière; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

# FIRE AND ICE — AND HUMANS

DMA show takes you deep into remote locations where the natural world dwarfs humanity

The work of artist Julian Charrière is filled with improbable, otherworldly imagery.

An ornate fountain simultaneously spews water and fire. A solitary figure stands atop an iceberg in the middle of the ocean. Tropical plants are frozen in time, encased in thick layers of ice. A spotlight dances across the sea, illuminating ice floes in an otherwise pitch-black landscape.

These may seem like elements of a science-fiction movie, but they are real-life scenarios crafted by Charrière that explore the Anthropocene, a proposed term used to describe the current geological age during which humans have become the planet's dominant source of environmental and climate changes.

Charrière's first American solo exhibition, "Towards No Earthly Pole," is on view at the Dallas Museum of Art.

"Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time, and yet its scope is one of the hardest



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things for us as humans to understand, as it operates on a temporal and geographic scale that dwarfs us," explains Anna Katherine Brodbeck, the DMA's Hoffman Family senior curator of contemporary art.

"On the surface level, Julian creates gorgeous, seductive visualizations of the clash between human and natural worlds. But on a deeper level, he is sensitive to the danger of simplifying such a complex issue."

The title, "Towards No Earthly Pole," is derived from a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson to commemorate Sir John Franklin, the leader of an ill-fated 1845 expedition to the Northwest Passage in Canada. Franklin's ship became mired in ice, and the entire crew succumbed to the elements over an excruciating period of time, forever trapped within the Arctic.

While Charrière's works are far from bleak, they embody the vast uncertainty of traveling to remote and unknown locations — places that most people will never experience firsthand. It's precisely this disconnect that the artist seeks to resolve, contending that the public vision of such places is misaligned with reality because it is based on a relatively small selection of fixed images and secondhand descriptions.

"We construct our world by putting pictures together like architects, which become the foundation of visual culture, and the visual culture of a particular place," says Charrière, a Berlin-based French-Swiss artist. "But this imagery is not changing very fast, and the places are changing at such a rate that our way of representing and imagining them and the way they actually appear are drifting apart, leaving a gap in the middle."

Charrière expresses this disconnect through works such as *Not All Who Wander Are Lost*, which features two "erratic" boulders — stones that were displaced from their original locations by glaciers — that the artist core-drilled and set atop their conical innards, like packages waiting to be sent down an assembly line.

In *Tropisme*, he froze tropical plants by dipping them in liquid nitrogen and suspending them in glass vitrines. These are presented in

front of a window looking out at the museum's decorative entrance fountain. The frozen plant fronds resemble the fountain's watery arcs.

The exhibition's opening piece, *And Beneath It All Flows Liquid Fire*, features video documentation of a performance during which Charrière set a neoclassical fountain on fire. It's a dance of powerful natural elements consuming a human-made structure.

The exhibition's title piece, an immersive video shot in multiple locations, presents an inky oceanscape lit by a single spotlight. Charrière crafted the work by flying drones outfitted with cameras and lights during the night, illuminating individual icebergs as a museum would a sculpture. A soundtrack of roaring wind, cracking ice and flowing water backs the alien vista, reminding viewers that the Earth is a living beast, the oceans rife with ancient mysteries.

This tour de force of technology underscores the sheer amount of willpower and drive it must take to be an explorer, charting new terrain while being completely vulnerable to the elements.

As striking as all of these works are, I continue to be haunted by the artist's 2013 photographic series "The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories," a triptych of photographs showing the artist atop an iceberg in the middle of the ocean, attempting to melt it with a blowtorch.

I was initially shocked by the sight of a person deliberately melting a precious piece of ice — which, Charrière assured me, refroze as fast as he could melt it — but now I see it as a reconciliation of sorts. It's an acknowledgment on behalf of humanity that, try as we might to conquer the natural world, our efforts are in vain.

*Danielle Avram is a Dallas-based arts writer and curator.*

## Details

"Julian Charrière: Towards No Earthly Pole" runs through Aug. 8 at the Dallas Museum of Art, 1717 N. Harwood St. Free. 214-922-1200. dma.org.



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Nan Coulter/Special Contributor

**Above:** Julian Charrière.  
**Left:** *And Beneath It All Flows Liquid Fire* (video still)