

SEAN KELLY

“Q+A with Julian Charrière, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.” *Aesthetica*, September 27, 2016.

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Polygon XXVIII, 2015, medium format black and white photograph, double exposure through thermonuclear strata, on Photo Rag Baryta, Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons test site in Kazakhstan .© Julian Charrière /VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy: DITTRICH & SCHLECHTRIEM, Berlin and Sean Kelly, New York.

Swiss artist Julian Charrière attended the École cantonale d'art du Valais and the Berlin University of the Arts, and has since been the recipient of the 2014 Prix culturel Manor Vaud. His new show opens this Autumn at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York: Freeze, Memory showcases three different bodies of the artist's work together for the first time, each exploring humanity's inevitably tangled relationship with the surrounding landscape. We catch up with the artist to discuss the works in Freeze, Memory, and the inspiration behind them.

A: Could you talk about the relationship between human civilisation and the natural landscape and how this connection is integrated into your work?

JC: What interests me about this relationship is the way that the human perspective affects our projections onto the natural world. We have created a complex interaction between preexisting natural landscapes and ones manufactured under the influence of culture, an interaction more complex than nature itself. Of course, this has been the case since the beginning of civilisation but, as time and society progress, this impact grows stronger and stronger.

My work reflects on the various meanings we ascribe to these landscapes, something which eliminates any kind of neutral landscape. There is a constant need to reinterpret our surroundings in order to adapt to our ever-changing culture, which you can see shifting throughout history. In my work, I address this idea that the landscape is the arena in which a multitude of meanings converge.

A: Why do you think our surroundings are so important in terms of the way we perceive our own lives and process the way in which we communicate with one another?

JC: Our environment is a very sophisticated but highly subjective notion, not only from era to era but from individual to individual, as we perceive the world through different bodies and experiences. And so everyone builds his or her own construct of reality differently although with major similarities. The mountain which I see today is a different mountain for me than it is for anyone else. However, the idea of what a mountain is has been so crafted that despite our different experiences we are able to refer to it as such. This has a lot to do with language, which is a way to bridge the gap between our different realities in order to communicate with one another.

A: Could you discuss your photographic series Polygon which is featured at Sean Kelly Gallery – how it came into being and how the work of JG Ballard has influenced the processes behind it?

JC: I have always had a strong interest in geology and its different stages, as well as our ways of interpreting it. Lately, I have been most interested in what one could call the “age of civilisation,” which can be further split up into different epochs. These ages of civilisation have always been connected to certain organic materials, from the iron age to the atomic age, which have a connection to biological and geological processes.

JG Ballard’s collection of short stories, *The Terminal Beach*, depicts a post-atomic, almost post-human scenario in the Marshall Islands. The island acts as metaphor for a lost paradise which has been forever changed through human implication. I have always been strangely attracted to territories like that. There is something terrifying yet fascinating about a place that has been altered by humans in a way that goes beyond any timespan. These places have witnessed the past and their aura continues to expand towards the unknown future, becoming involuntary monuments in the process.

Whilst thinking about all of this I came across Semipalatinsk, also known as The Polygon, a nuclear test site in Kazakhstan which was top secret and so had been rarely documented. Interested in seeing the way humanity’s presence had created a place where human life could no longer exist, I decided to travel to the site and investigate The Polygon myself.

A: How does this body of work contrast with the *Tropisme* series?

JC: If Polygon is a moment frozen in time then *Tropisme* is a moment frozen out of time.

Polygon captures a moment of an entropic landscape shaped by the force of humanity, a suspended fragment of a reality that only exists in the eye of the camera. As with all photographs it documents the memory of a reality that I may have seen but truly only existed before the camera’s eye. By exposing the film to the radiation, I was able to expand upon that subjectivity by showing the presence of something that cannot be seen. In a way, it is a stolen moment within the narrative of a land defined by its nuclear past in a way that it will carry through to the future, almost as though time is running in two directions.

Tropisme is different because the flower, frozen in liquid nitrogen, is a stolen moment from a lineage of flora and fauna that exceeds our understanding of time. These plants have preceded human existence but it is not guaranteed that they will succeed us, while the nuclear radiation in Kazakhstan only exists as a result of human existence and will most assuredly succeed us. Polygon remains within the context of the history of the land, acting as a documentation of sorts; the flower in *Tropisme* has been completely taken out of its natural realm and is less of a documentation than a manipulated floating moment.

A: In the latter you take flowers which are known to have existed 65 million years ago and freeze them into fossils, whereas in the former you document the effects of a nuclear site. How do you think the two works differ in terms of being an active agent in destroying/preserving nature?

JC: In the case of *Tropisme*, a dependency between nature and culture is outlined as the plant is removed from its natural habitat before it is integrated into our cultural sphere; it has been taken from the jungle and re-contextualized into big cities where it finds a new place within our homes and offices. This civilises or domesticates the plant, ripping away the natural context which defined it. The plant finds itself caught between two states: life and death. In order for the flower to stay frozen and in turn, intact, its fragility forces it to develop a dependency on the vitrine and the cooling system and ultimately humanity.

As the plant loses the characteristics of its own being it becomes a metaphor of itself. In comparison, the nuclear test-site finds its connotation within itself as a stronghold of violence and war. Through the impulse of the violence of culture, the place was made hostile to humans and therefore in a way protected again, because humans banned themselves from it.

A: The last body of work to be shown in the gallery is *Metamorphism*, which explores technological objects transformed back into their original geological materials. Could you discuss the inspiration behind this work?

JC: For the last three years I have intensively dedicated myself to the topics of geological, botanical, and anthropological time. Throughout my travels during this time I visited many mining facilities and became deeply fascinated by the immensity of the extreme material flows sustaining our society.

Looking back in time, one is constantly confronted with the question of what will remain from a certain time period and what that tells us about life then. In terms of the Cretaceous period these remains might be ammonite fossils, for example. And if you apply this same kind of interpretation to our time you start to think about what humans might leave behind – which isn't much. Thinking in the long term, our cultural achievements, architecture, and art will completely vanish and the only trace of our existence which will remain will be an incredible amount of materials found in places where they naturally would not have existed.

My personal key to the work was the image of an inverted Tower of Babel, which came to my mind when I visited the open-pit mine Bayan Obo in China. Instead of reaching to the sky, this inverted Babel-tower of a mine is constantly growing into greater depths. And out of the materials, which we quarry from hundreds of these inverted Babel-towers all over the world, we create alchemical crystals which are then turned into technological devices such as computer chips, transformed by the hand of humans. With the work *Metamorphism* I sought to literally melt all of these thoughts into one object and in a way return these materials to their original states.

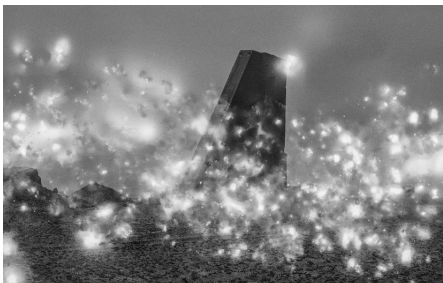
A: Is there a narrative which ties the three pieces together?

JC: The title of the show, *Freeze, Memory*, is a reference to Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Invitation of a Memory*. In his autobiography Nabokov strays away from the classic chronological, cause-effect format in favor of vignettes from certain moments of his life. The memories he references are only snapshots within the larger story that is his entire life, much as my artworks are frozen moments within a bigger narrative that exists before and after them. As with all autobiographies, a dose of skepticism is needed to account for the faultiness of the human memory and the subjectivity of the human experience. In a similar way, as my pieces look at the past and the future, the question of the truth of preservation and recollection is raised. It is easy to relate *Tropisme* back to the title which forces the viewer to think about how the other bodies of work relate to "freezing" and "memory." Looking at the different pieces one may question how memory can be used to document, how our era might be remembered, or how a moment frozen in photographic form can be transformed.

A: What do you have planned in terms of future projects/ exhibitions?

JC: For my next project, I am planning a diving exhibition down to the Marshall Islands to check out the nuclear sites at some of the atolls including Bikini Atoll where the United States tested nuclear bombs during the early years of the Cold War.

Julian Charrière, *Freeze, Memory* runs until 22 October at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. Find out more: www.skny.com



Polygon XXIV, 2015. Medium format black and white photograph, double exposure through Thermonuclear strata, on Photo Rag Baryta, Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons Test Site in Kazakhstan. © Julian Charrière /VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy: DITTRICH & SCHLECHTRIEM, Berlin and Sean Kelly, New York.



Installation view of Julian Charrière: *Freeze, Memory* at Sean Kelly, New York. September 10 – October 22, 2016. Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.