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The Creators Project

Here's What Happens When You Expose Photos to Nuclear Radiation

Julian Charrière, 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

Some artists often appear to separate their work from nature, as if they are actually disconnected from it, but for Swiss artist Julian Charrière, the opposite holds true. In recent projects he has made a point of bringing nature or Earth into the gallery, reminding visitors that the umbilical cord between humans and nature still exists. Charrière also explores time, in its geological sense, and the fields of archaeology, biology, history and physics.

Now on view at Sean Kelly gallery, Freeze, Memory, Charrière’s first New York exhibition, showcases three recent projects—Polygon, Tropisme, and Metamorphism. For the first of these three, the artist ventured into the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in Kazakhstan for a series of photographs in the analogue medium format. But Charrière didn’t just snap some photos—he also exposed the film to the site’s nuclear radiation.

“The series Polygon was initially inspired by J.G. Ballard’s short story, 'The Terminal Beach,' which depicts an abandoned atomic testing island in the Pacific,” Charrière says. “There is something terrifying yet fascinating about a place that has been altered by humans to such an extreme that humans can no longer inhabit it. By exposing the film to the radiation, I was able to reveal the landscape’s aura, which cannot actually ever be seen by the human eye.”

In Tropisme, Charrière took plants—ferns, orchids, and various succulents—that have existed since the Cretaceous period and “ripped away the natural context” that defines them. He did this by freezing the plants in liquid nitrogen and refrigerating them at –20˚C (–4˚F). The installation features refrigerated showcases in which the plants are entombed in ice, existing in state of suspended animation, somewhere between life and death. The “living fossils,” as Charrière calls them, will survive as long as electrical power remains.

The newest series, Metamorphism, explores how precious metals are mined for the raw materials in our culture’s latest technological products. Using molten lava, Charrière melted down the innards of various tech devices (hard drives, CPUs, Rams, etc., from mobile devices and laptop computers), returning to them to their original geological state.

“With the work I tried to literally melt all of these thoughts into one object and in a way return these materials to their original states,” Charrière explains. “I asked myself, like ammonite fossils from the Cretaceous, what will be left from the age of civilization once we are gone? Probably not our cultural achievements, architecture, and art. The only trace of our existence will be an incredible amount of materials found in places where they would have never naturally existed.”

The look of the pieces in Metamorphism, encased in glass, is that of a museum showcase. The only clue future humans would have these pieces had once been technological devices would be Charrière’s description of them. Otherwise, the sculptures look as if they have come straight from the bowels of the Earth.

“My work is a reflection on the relationship between human civilization and the natural landscape,” says Charrière. “I am particularly interested in the way our unique human perspective affects how we project onto the natural world. Each of us perceives the world through different physicalities and experiences and builds his or her own construct of reality.”

Charrière sees a complex interplay between the natural landscapes and the ones we manufacture that become even more complex than nature itself. He realizes this is not a new phenomenon (humans have always been technological inventors and innovators), but the impact of our technology on the environment is clearly becoming more evident.

“Throughout history, we have constantly reconstructed our natural surroundings in order to adapt to our ever-changing culture,” Charrière says. “I think that my work address the idea that the landscape is a realm where a multitude of meanings converge.”

Julian Charrière, Polygon XXVII, 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

Julian Charrière, Tropisme, 2016, frozen tropical plant, refrigerated showcase. © Julian Charrière /VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

Julian Charrière, Tropisme, 2016, frozen tropical plant, refrigerated showcase. © Julian Charrière /VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

Freeze Memory installation at Sean Kelly. Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

Julian Charrière, Metamorphism XXXXI, 2016, artificial lava and molten computer waste. © Julian Charrière /VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.