

SEAN KELLY

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ARTNEWS

'What Sustains this Digital World?': Julian Charrière on his Man-Made Rocks at the Armory Show



Julian Charrière's latest created, *Metamorphism*, on offer at the booth of Dittrich and Schlechtriem, Berlin.
ADAM REICH/©JULIAN CHARRIÈRE, VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY DITTRICH-SCHLECHTRIEM, BERLIN

Five glass cabinets, each containing a large molten rock, occupy Dittrich and Schlechtriem's corner booth at the Armory Show. The idiosyncratic display looks out of place beside neighbouring canvases, like it was yanked straight out of the Museum of Natural History's mineral gallery. Rather than ancient excavations, though, the rocks, titled *Metamorphism*, are the recent creation of French artist Julian Charrière.

"If you look through history we always have a material to describe the time of that civilization's age: bronze, stone, iron, and now we have digital," said Charrière, who was on hand at the fair to explain the work. For Charrière, a former student of Olafur Eliasson, the rocks represent the result of his inquiry into the material bonds of our otherwise immaterial society and deal with the question, "What sustains this digital world?"

Charrière's journey to this point began with a trip to China, arguably the global center of digital manufacturing. While there, Charrière learned more about rare earth minerals—a precious metal found in the chips of every iPhone—leading him down a rabbit hole, or, more accurately, a mine shaft. "For me, they're a kind of coliseum," said Charrière, referring to the massive open-pit mines he came across while investigating the minerals. "They're like a negative Tower of Babel. Only, instead of reaching for the sky to see the rest of the world like Babel, these mines burrow down into the ground, which enables our connectivity. In the end, they achieve the same goal as the Tower of Babel."



Julian Charrière, *Metamorphism* (detail).

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Having made this foreboding connection, Charrière began thinking more about the unnatural process of mineral displacement. Mostly, Charrière was fascinated by the fact that humans are taking stuff out of the ground without putting anything back in. With all this in mind, Charrière settled upon the idea to reconstitute the minerals into a geological form. Or, as he put it, to “try to make a chicken-egg, back-to-the-future situation.” To make his rocks, Charrière threw a ton of iPhones, hard drives, and other digital detritus into a massive pit, and covered them in molten lava. Once it had solidified, all that was left of the original technology was their precious metals.

“If you mined my stone, you could rebuild the technology,” said Charrière, likening the process to a data transfer. “The stone has the same amount of information, only now it’s stored in an abstract way, like a sort of geo-data.”



Elias Sime, *Tightrope, Trios*.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JAMES COHAN, NEW YORK

The work of Ethiopian artist and founder of Addis Ababa’s Zoma Contemporary Art Center, Elias Sime echoes this idea of geo-data. In several of Sime’s pieces from his series “Tightrope,” on display at the James Cohan Armory booth, he uses repurposed circuit boards and telephone cables to create a Google Maps–like collaged tapestry.

In both Charrière’s and Sime’s displays, the idea of perspective is present. For Sime, this is rendered visually through his creation of a macro-image of our increasingly interconnected world using the very discarded materials of its construction. In the case of Charrière’s rocks, the perspective is more metaphorical.

“If you think about the eventual collapse of humanity, there will be places where what’s left over will form new minerals not possible before humans,” said Charrière. By fast-forwarding this process, Charrière’s rocks offer a tangible glimpse into a possible future.