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Julian Charrière: For They That Sow the Wind review - bracing and beautiful



'Charrière stood on this iceberg all day, in brutal conditions, trying to melt the ice with a blowtorch': The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories 1, 2013 by Julian Charrière. Photograph: Courtesy of collection Lars Dittrich, Berlin

Julian Charrière is the ideal artist for the start of a new year. His work is bracing, beautiful, quick with ideas and driven by a highly adventurous curiosity.

He has gone beneath the blazing sands of Bolivia to find the lithium that powers our batteries, and scaled the volcanoes of Mexico to inscribe them with riddles. He has been to Stalin's nuclear test sites in Kazakhstan, unchanged in half a century, and to Chernobyl to record the eerie super-fertility of that tragic wasteland.

Charrière is in some ways a land artist for the 21st century, out there on field trips rearranging the natural world. This young Swiss artist – Charrière was born in 1987 – brings back news from nowhere, returning with the very essence of the wild places he has travelled in the form of physical souvenirs: pans of briny lithium, translucent blue and green; fragments of ancient icebergs; pillars of twinkling salt. But he is far more than a messenger, and what you see in the gallery represents deep thinking, a sculptor's touch and a feeling for metaphor that makes Charrière more like a poet.

Take the vast photograph of a tiny black figure standing on the summit of an iceberg with the dark ocean spreading all around it. The image immediately invokes those black-clad wanderers in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, looking out across the German sublime. But this little man is an actual person: Charrière himself, and he is not staring at the landscape so much as planted right in it, attempting to change it with a blowtorch.



Tropisme (detail), 2014. Frozen plants, refrigerated showcase. Photograph: Clémentine Bossard/Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne

Charrière stood on this iceberg all day, in brutal conditions, trying to melt the ice with his fire. The surface would pool momentarily only to refreeze almost immediately, an experiment that proved absolutely futile. Or did it? The Icelandic berg is more than 30,000 years old, a monument of time and tide, tinged the blue of pure light, dense with physical knowledge and completely resistant to this absurd man perched upon its surface. It cannot be altered so easily.

The image of Charrière takes you straight into the scene, however. It – or rather he – humanises this alien place. The work may be an elegy for the iceberg's eventual melting (or a skit on global warming: Charrière is never conventional), but his presence there brings the unfathomable past right into the present as you wonder how he got there, whether he's about to sink into a hole and how he will ever get off.

There is a strain of tragicomic humour in the pillars of Bolivian salt Charrière has erected in the gallery, which resemble nothing so much as the high-rise towers of some utopian architect. Bolivia is too underdeveloped to mine the lithium that lies among that salt like buried treasure, and even just to mine the salt requires extensive rehydration of the desert, producing a feedback loop in which something removed must constantly be replaced. In the meantime, the country's infrastructure remains cheap as salt.

Salt is also ancient, of course. Charrière is compelled by the idea of time condensed, or compressed, in the world around us – that the Jurassic era is in the earth beneath our streets, and not just Chesil Beach; that the orchids we nurse in contemporary apartments are a throwback to the Late Cretaceous epoch. Shock-frozen at minus 196C, and displayed by the artist in glass cases at the Parasol Unit, these plants suddenly look like ghostly fossils of themselves.

Charrière is in some ways a land artist for the 21st century, out there on field trips rearranging the natural world or transforming its elements back home in the gallery. Certain configurations – especially the shimmering blue lithium trays among the salt – are irresistibly reminiscent of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in Utah. Indeed both Smithson and Charrière were inspired by JG Ballard's short story *The Voices of Time*, featuring the tranced wanderings of a loner on an island once used for nuclear testing, which sent Charrière to the radioactive site known as Semipalatinsk-21 in Kazakhstan.



We Are All Astronauts, 2013. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

There he made a haunting film of the landscape, which shows the bizarre architecture still standing in the fields – fin-like towers with the tips broken off, ruined houses where the Soviet scientists watched their experiments, an archaeology of Ozymandian relics. Most artists would leave it at that, but Charrière, in his protective clothing, bends down for a handful of radioactive dust that he wipes across the undeveloped negatives from his camera. The resulting stills are like nothing else: scratched, scarred, with spectral clouds bursting in the skies as if what happened long ago was happening even now. History is mysteriously fixed in the experiment.

Charrière – a student of Olafur Eliasson, of the much-loved rising sun at Tate Modern – will undoubtedly go on to greater projects in both senses. He has already made the tourists of Venice look differently at pigeons, singling out certain birds for transformation with kingfisher colours; and *We Are All Astronauts*, displayed in this show, is a most beautiful meditation on international politics featuring 10 globes – or more precisely, globes and the mingled coloured dust from their maps.



One of Charrière's coloured pigeons in flight in Venice as part of the 2012 Architecture Biennale. Photograph: Tony Gentile/Reuters

But the simplest piece here is among his smallest and best. In a darkened gallery on its own stands a glass case containing a miniature monument, something like a classical amphitheatre. It seems to be made of white marble. Yet even as you look the stones are somehow beginning to merge, as if the building was decomposing. And at the same time, the object is turning into something else – an ancient structure slowly changing colour and growing into an abstract form for the present. This is sculpture as organism, a measurement of entropy and time, simultaneously living and dying.