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Hore-Thorburn. "As We Used to Float: An Interview with Julian Charrière," *Berlin Art Link*, September 12, 2018.



Julian Charrière is the 2018 recipient of the GASAG Art Prize. His career to date articulates the award's focus on the intertwining of art, technology and science. Since studying under Olafur Eliasson at the Institut für Raumexperimente, the French-Swiss conceptual artist has travelled to some of the most hazardous and remote locations on earth, producing poetic reportages on the consequences of atomic power and radioactivity. His Berlinische Galerie exhibition, 'As We Used to Float,' will consist of a multimedia spatial installation that takes visitors underwater, to an atomic aquarium somewhere within the deserted isles of Bikini Atoll. This is Charrière's first solo exhibition in Berlin. It will be accompanied by the release of two related books and a video installation, *An Invitation to Disappear*, at Berghain.

Charrière and his colleague Nadim Samman undertook a perilous journey to the island two years ago. As in Adrienne Rich's poem *Diving into the Wreck*, the two were armed with their own "book of myths;" a compendium of American Cold War propaganda, late capitalist fantasies of "the island," Marshallese folklore and Bikinian creation myths. Unlike Rich's diver, however, theirs was not so much a story of discovery as rediscovery. From one of the most disconnected locations on the planet, Charrière has produced a haunting body of work that resonates with the disconnectedness of our increasingly "compressed" world. We spoke to Julian Charrière about deep-sea narcosis, subjectivity, and mankind's atomic endeavor, ahead of his exhibition 'As We Used to Float.'



Julian Charrière: 'As We Used to Float – USS Saratoga' // Courtesy Julian Charrière; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

Isabelle Hore-Thorburn: Can you talk about the title of the exhibition 'As We Used to Float'?

Julian Charrière: It is the title of the exhibition, but it is also the title of a piece and the title of a book. The book is a travelogue that I have co-written with Nadim Samman. All three are influenced by the trip that we took to Bikini Atoll—the former atomic test site—in 2016. 'As We Used to Float' is an interrogation of our position in the world, and of the world as different atmospheres. I think that's something that you learn once you're diving; that you're never above, you're never underneath, you're actually within. You are within more than you are at the surface for the simple reason that the volume and the weight of your body is similar to that of the water.

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So once you actually try to move you put something into motion, so that the so-called “butterfly effect” of your movement is close to your range of action once you’re under water. If you move in one direction and there is something there, then that thing is going to move as well. Similarly, if there is a current you are going to be moved *by* it. The interaction that you have with your direct environment is increased and therefore the feeling of you belonging to the surrounding expanse.



Julian-Charrière: Navajo, First Light, 2016 // Courtesy of the artist, VG Bild Kunst Bonn Germany

IHT: You spent four weeks at Bikini Atoll, was a lot of that time spent underwater?

JC: There was a lot of scuba diving *beforehand* because we had to be certified to go 65-meters deep. I think there were six certifications we had to do. I was an “advanced diver” but that just sounds good, it doesn’t mean anything. Tech Diving is something very different because at some point you’re defining the frame within which you will evolve. At 65-meters underwater; you’re not allowed to shoot up to the surface, you’re not allowed to stress or panic. If you don’t manage, basically worst case scenario you die. But if you don’t die, you can hurt your body quite a bit. If nitrogen starts to boil it attacks your nerves so you can lose the motion of a leg or even a spleen. Once you’ve learned the principles it’s not that much more complicated than recreational diving, it’s just about planning right and being extremely accurate once down there.

I was with Nadim because we started to dive together for a different project and I thought it would be a great opportunity to push this kind of “companionship.” With diving it is always about buddies and bodies. What is nice about the book is that we are always talking as “we.” It’s not like two different people, it’s more like two bodies in the water; a diving companionship.

IHT: Tell us more about the book.

JC: The book is something between a sea story in the tradition of adventure literature (the trip was actually quite an epic adventure from the beginning to the end, we went through really harsh sea and weather as the trade winds pick up over the Pacific in November) and it’s also about a live digestion of feeling in terms of space and thinking. It is theory, dream and adventure. Diving is also about narcosis, and within our narcosis we understood a lot of things. When you go down that deep, nitrogen is filling in your blood and nitrogen is not so good for your brain... it’s like being drunk or drugged. The further down you go, the drunker you become. At some point you are not even able to do 4 + 4: so if you want to act you need to make your body work like an automatic mechanism. In a way, it is like everyday life: we are all in a narcosis and we forget to come up to the surface to oversee our actions. This is something we try to dissect in the book,

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how to not only drift in the flow, but to instead reflect on the drift. One of the dilemmas of contemporary culture is that the amount of technology and speed doesn't allow us to stop. We are constantly connected and constantly being moved around by some current and some mood and so we are never able to stop. It is like narcosis under water.

At the end of a deep dive, when you come up to the surface you first need to hang from a bar to get the gas out of your body: that's the moment of reflection. It's quite boring but you slow down and let your body adapt to another atmosphere. In the world we live in, we tend to forget to go "on the bar" and readapt. A lot of problems and dilemmas are bound up with that.



Julian Charrière: Iroojrilik, 2016, film still // Courtesy of the artist, VG Bild Kunst Bonn Germany

IHT: What had originally drawn you to the Atoll of Bikini?

JC: There were a few things that drew me to Bikini, one was the short story by J.W Ballard, 'Terminal Beach', which I found very interesting. Then there was this particular moment when I was looking into the iconography of the twentieth century and obviously the "Whole Earth" from above, which brought us towards ecological consciousness and eco-activism, the earth as finite (we're on a spaceship like R. Buckminster Fuller). But then there is this kind of destruction; the image of *Vernichtung*, which is the German word for "total destruction" the end of history. Basically, the atomic bomb.

I was interested in this image because it changed the way Western civilization saw itself. So there was a self-reflection based on the image but then I thought "Ok but this image is also a kind of paradise;" the image and the setting. It is something that we have inherited from colonial times— it has been summoned from the first moment we discovered the world to the moment when late capitalist society tried to sell it to us as the "ultimate need," as something to wish for. They want me to think that's what I wish for, and to have this bomb there.

As I was digging into this idea I began to understand that the actual architecture had only been built for the purpose of "the image." The bunkers and all the infrastructure that was leftover was actually image-making architecture. I understood radioactivity and I understood that you could not somehow document the scale of the atrocity that was being deployed on the beach. I understood that the climatic scale of the nuclear endeavour was only possible to document through a camera, which needed an extra body; exactly as I needed an extra body under the water, the camera needed an extra body to handle the level of radiation and the brightness of the thermonuclear reaction. It needed a bigger body

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covered in lead, meaning an expansion of the camera toward architecture. It was now something quite radical in the scaling of image-making.

I was interested in the fact that Bikini Atoll is so known, first of all because of the swimming suit. Some know that it's related to an island and a lot of people know about this image, a lot of people know about the testing, but nobody knows where it is. It's a kind of non-place, a geographical non-space that only exists through these images, and the images kill the space. This kind of tension was interesting enough to go there and work with that, because there was plenty to explore.



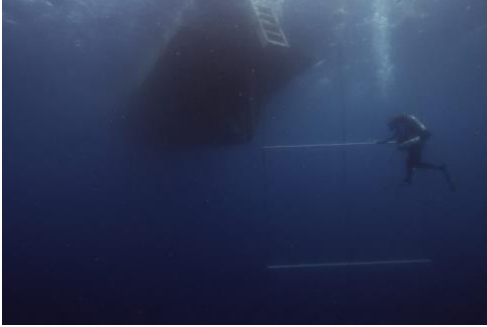
Julian Charrière: Iroojirilik, 2016, film still // Courtesy of the artist, VG Bild Kunst Bonn Germany

IHT: You have described your strategy as similar to that of the Situationists in terms of how your actions are dictated by the place itself. Can you talk about the mythologies that you went to Bikini with, and how they affected your experience of the place?

JC: I'm always interested in places that have a layering of different meanings, different views through different cultures and different times; a different prism. I wanted to start a dialogue with all these different meanings that are overwhelmingly compressing the space itself. If you take Bikini: it is shrinking through the amount of mythology and amount of understanding and storytelling that have been photographed and said about it, in its physicality. I'm always interested to first go to a place and start a dialogue, to feel it and be there and be exposed to it. In this case I was exposing myself to radioactivity, but actually it's not so radioactive. It's not about that, it was about exposing myself to the space and situation and, from there, weaving a story together. The fact that this place has been described as a paradise was very interesting because the conceptual background of the work was related to the idea of the Garden of Eden and the Forbidden Fruit of Knowledge. A lot of things that have happened in the contemporary world—one of them being quantum physics and the atomic testing program—are reenactments of this mythos; that when you bite into forbidden fruit of the atomic age you might get in trouble and perhaps kicked out of the garden.

I knew that there were also sunken ships that had been brought to the atoll for political reasons. For 70 years without anyone living there, a lot of pieces of complicated architecture and engineering, left alone, rotting, in the middle of a place that doesn't exist anymore, has become this new landscape of friction.

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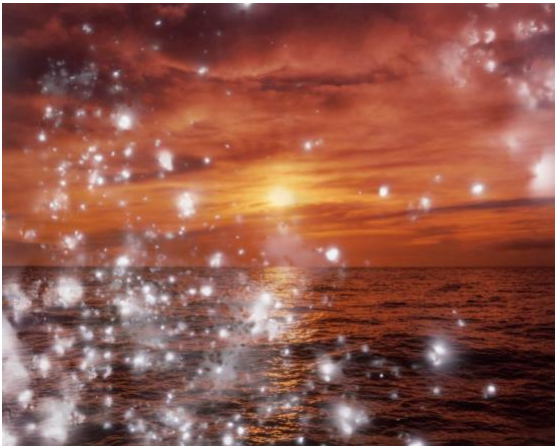


Julian-Charrière: As We Used to Float USS decompression bar// Courtesy Julian Charrière VG Bild Kunst Bonn Germany

IHT: Can you talk about the coconuts?

JC: While digging into the whole story of Bikini I ended up reading the Bikinian myth of creation. It was interesting because there was a fish coming out of the ocean and walking on two legs and becoming a man, as well as a woman giving birth to a coconut; so there's Darwin and a coconut. After all, the coconut was providing almost everything for the community; the coconut tree was providing shelter, providing food, providing drinks. It was crucial to Bikini and its people, but it was not endemic. It was brought over millennia from one island to another and became the entity sustaining life on the atolls. Yet we assume that they were there from the beginning, but no, the palm tree on the beach is a cultural construction.

The coconuts are now radioactive because the plants go deep down in the coral sand and mistake cesium for potassium. The plant becomes a kind of mutant, which comes back to this idea of the "forbidden fruit."



Julian Charrière: Nectar, First Light, 2016 // Courtesy Julian Charrière VG Bild Kunst Bonn Germany

IHT: You've said that you are interested in the future of archaeology, how does "the island" as a concept, and the physical island of Bikini, function within that exploration?

JC: Future archaeology is something I said at some point and now people ask me about it all the time. For Bikini Atoll as a principle it works very well. America took the island over, displacing its Indigenous population (who had their whole history bound up with it). This kind of killed that cultural link to the place itself. Then, the atomic testing happened, which made cultural rehabilitation impossible. In a physical and cultural way, the place is cut from the rest of world, to

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a certain extent. One could even say it is cut twice because it's also out of the 48 hours travel pattern. Now the world has been compressed by the fact that you can reach anywhere within 48 hours. But for Bikini, the island is kind of floating out of space. The atoll became a place that seems a speculative apparition of the future. You can look at something that no one is looking at anymore because it doesn't exist, but is still being discussed. In 70 years, nobody has been there, it's very luxurious. We have the oppressive feeling of the radioactivity and history, which is dark and heavy on our shoulders. Then, we have the magnificent pristine coral reefs or the coconut groves that are re-growing. You always have the sensation of looking into a speculative future. It's a place that is bound with the past, bound with the future and actually very present in an encapsulated reality. So, while you are there, you can describe yourself as a future speculative archaeologist.

IHT: 'As We Used To Float' is a physical, three-dimensional experience. Can you talk about the decision to present your work like this?

JC: 'As We Used To Float' has four different parts. In the physical exhibition you enter within 'Iroojrilik' which is a film I shot under and out of water in Bikini; the movie being a sort of aquarium. An aquarium is always about a "cut," a slice of reality contained behind a glass plate. When you look at the aquarium you always have a view of the over-water world and the underwater world. The diving mask is in itself a device, allowing you to see the world as an aquarium. Coming into the movie you are in the atomic aquarium space, you are above and beneath but you are mostly within. Once you get out the video room you actually "dive in" to the exhibition space.

It's very complicated to work in this space that is extremely long. I didn't want to create a panopticon where you come in and you see everything at once. So I decide to build a video space right at the front, forcing the viewer to come into this very dark space and enter the main space from behind a screen, which I don't think has ever been done before at Berlinische Galerie. This is a good thing because everybody in Berlin knows this space very well and I wanted to try to reinvent it.



Julian Charrière: Cedar First Light, 2016 // Courtesy Julian Charrière VG Bild Kunst Bonn Germany

I say there are four parts because you can't cut the exhibition from the three publications that are going to be released on that same day. The travelogue is a conceptual extension of the exhibition, and it is the first time I've entered the space of literature.

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There is also another another publication “second suns”, which is actually a box containing two books: one about Bikini and one about Semipalatinsk. It is a collection of almost every picture made during my two visits to these two former atomic test sites. The pictures have been exposed to some radioactive material. For me this is almost an exhibition in itself.

This exhibition is not so much about radioactivity on Bikini as it is about the technological apparatus, the feeling of being underneath, the feeling of different atmospheres. For example, the diving bell was the kind of first piece of architecture that you put around your body to expand it. That then being counterbalanced with the plastic bags, which are also an extension of our bodies. I didn't want to make a point about the radioactive, sensual space of Bikini. It's much more about the broader themes, therefore I made those two books that tell more about this part of the story.

The last thing, which will happen on the 26th, is the projection of *An Invitation to Disappear* at Berghain, followed by a proper party. Obviously this work is visually very different to the body of work displayed at the Berlinische Galerie. But conceptually there are a lot of links; it is also an introspection into a kind of climatic scale of mankind's endeavour and its repercussions. Again, this idea of the Garden of Eden. Once you are in the plantation, it seems to be architectonic, seems to look like a cathedral and the cathedral architecture is that of the canopy. It is about the Garden of Eden, about humans being the new quintessential gardener, trying to make the world a bigger garden.

Exhibition Info

BERLINISCHE GALERIE

Julian Charrière: 'As We Used to Float'

Opening Reception: Sept. 26, 2018; 7pm

Exhibition: Sept. 27, 2018 – Apr. 08, 2019

Alte Jakobstraße 124–128, 10969 Berlin, [click here for map](#)