

EVERYWHERE, BUT NOWHERE

The Swiss-French artist Julian Charrière's search for inspiration has taken him from the sleepy village of Lully to the farthest reaches of the earth. Driven by curiosity, obsession, and a desire to escape the digital and reconnect with the physical, his works portray the delicate relationship between man and nature.

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The photographs show the silhouette of a man standing precariously on a lone iceberg in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, in his hand a blowtorch with which he is trying to melt the ice. It looks dangerous, futile, and lonely but also strangely beautiful.

Entitled 'The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories', the series of photographs was taken by Swiss-French artist Julian Charrière during an expedition to Iceland in 2013, and is typical of his work in that the images derive their power from an interaction with a faraway place.

The image of man disrupting nature is striking and one that may suggest that Charrière is making a straightforward statement about environmental issues. "When you see someone melting an iceberg you obviously think of climate change," says Charrière, "but that is not the main topic of my work."

Instead, he says, these images are about confronting the elements in "a seemingly hopeless battle" of human time against geological time. "This was a way for me to trigger an aesthetic of the romantic, but instead of having man in the distance as an observer in this natural world and its projection of the sublime, to bring man back into the picture," Charrière explains. "Icy landscapes were once perceived as something sublime, pristine but violent, dwarfing mankind – this cultural construction has shifted so that today they have become something fragile and in need of our protection. There is this huge gap in

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our understanding of what this landscape actually is or stands for, and this inherent complexity motivated me to go there, explore, and mine these layers of information."

Born in 1987 in the small village of Lully, near Lausanne in Switzerland, Charrière was always interested in "trying to escape". It was that itch to travel that took him first to Berlin to study art at the University of the Arts, and then, as he developed as an artist, to some of the most remote places in the world: the Marshall Islands, decommissioned nuclear testing facilities in Kazakhstan, deep below the ground in the salt mines of Bolivia.

TRAVEL AS AN ARTISTIC STRATEGY

That same itch has become his "artistic strategy"; a way for him to explore his varied interests and obsessions that take shape from the "mesh" of information surrounding him. It is also a way for Charrière to "escape the digitalisation" that preoccupies much of his generation and reconnect with the world in a more concrete way.

"Today we are able to be everywhere at the same time, but being everywhere at the same time means to be nowhere somehow," he says. "I go back to the landscape to re-experience my surroundings through my body, to re-create this bridge between my feet, my brain, and the surroundings."

Charrière favours remote places for his explorations because they lend themselves more naturally to fantasy. "For me, remote places – or places that are complicated to reach – have this kind of imaginary space which is inherent to them, they have something very uncanny, a strange aura, something fascinating, phantasmagorical."

Charrière treats travel as a sort of "fieldwork", where he observes, reflects, and brings something back – be it an artwork or further inspiration. He has just returned to Berlin after a month working on his latest piece in Bikini Atoll. It signals the start of a rare period of stillness for the artist, who is travelling more than he is home. Even now, sitting in front of his computer in one corner of the vast shared studio he occupies with five fellow artists, his mind continues to wander the globe as he discusses his inspirations, projects, and relationship with his surroundings.



Julian Charrière outside his Berlin studio. Previous spread: The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories (3), 2013; © Julian Charrière; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, courtesy DITTRICH & SCHLECHTRIEM, Berlin

His work is focused on exploring landscapes and how man, time, industrialisation, and the natural world interact. “I think that today it is common knowledge that there is nothing natural any more, culture has taken over,” he says, “but it is very interesting to question the concept of nature we inherited from the romantic era, to try to understand what is ‘natural’ today, what our interaction is with the world, and what the world gives back to us.”

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Top: Polygon X, 2015; © Julian Charrière; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, courtesy DITTRICH & SCHLECHTRIEM, Berlin
Bottom: Polygon XXV, 2015; © Julian Charrière; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, courtesy DITTRICH & SCHLECHTRIEM, Berlin

FROM KAZAKHSTAN TO VENICE

This complex relationship is clearly seen in many of his works: 'Future Fossils' is an expansive installation of salt blocks and pools of saline from Argentine lithium deposits which explores the tension between a very modern product, lithium, and the ancient material, salt.

'Polygon' is a series of otherworldly images taken at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in Kazakhstan, scratched and punctuated by spectral bursts created by the radioactive dust Charrière rubbed across the undeveloped negatives. The work depicts both the beginning of the nuclear age and a vision of how it could end; an eerie and provocative image of desolation.

It will also be visible in the large-scale installation he is creating for this year's Venice Biennale, which draws on elements of 'Future Fossils'. At the invitation of the curator and director of the 57th International Art Exhibition, Christine Macel, Charrière is creating a "surrounding or topography" that the viewer will have to walk through and interact with before reaching the next space. As with all his installations, the interaction between the work, the viewer, and the space is a further exploration of our relationship with the world around us, an invitation to experience something and build a connection through our feet, our eyes, and our hands.

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For many, though, Charrière's installation in Venice will be seen online before it is experienced in person – if they experience it in person at all. "Information is shared live, even quicker than reality allows us to perceive; you see the show on Instagram before you actually go through the door of the museum, and that is something remarkable," says Charrière.

Even though he goes to considerable lengths to escape digitalisation, there are elements of the online world that resonate with his hope that he can share his experiences with others. For him, sharing experiences is "a primordial mechanism of human beings" and while Charrière's works are intended to help us share experiences and interact with our surroundings, with each other, and with his art in person, sharing online may be the inevitable digital incarnation of this mechanism.

Charrière creates a bed of sand on which to rest a coconut scavenged from a recent trip to Bikini Atoll. The vitrine sculpture forms part of his 2016 exhibition 'Coconut Lead Fondue' inspired by his month-long trip to the Marshall Islands.





VIDEO: WWW.JULIUSBAER.COM/VISION