

PERROTIN

Julian CHARRIÈRE

The Brooklyn Rail,
Julian Charrière with Hearne Pardee

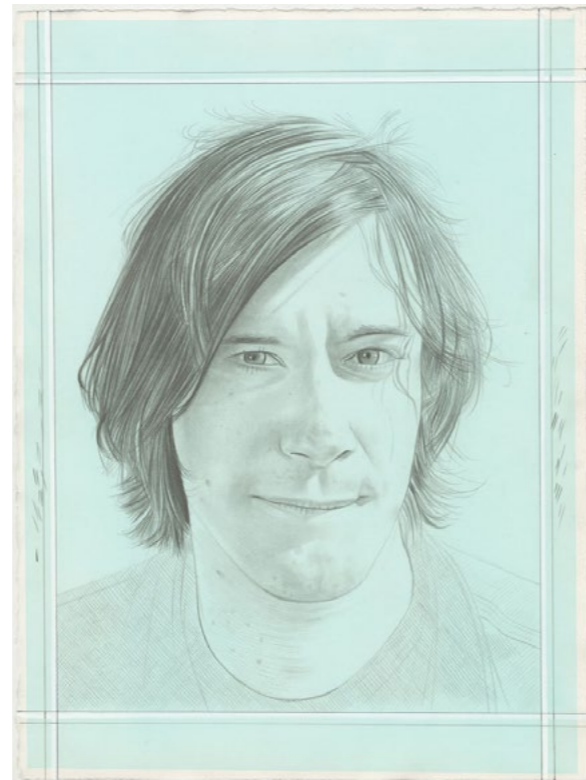
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BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art | In Conversation

Julian Charrière with Hearne Pardee



Portrait of Julian Charrière, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

To investigate the world's formation and future, Julian Charrière explores landscapes through the lens of geological history and discovers poetry in material processes that connect us to the natural world. In his vision, science verges on the uncanny, a mystical fusion of light and materials. Charrière traveled to Iceland as a student in Olafur Eliasson's Institute for Spatial Experimentation and his installation at SFMOMA, *Erratic*, combines landscapes from the Arctic, Antarctica, and his native Switzerland in projects that span the past decade. The title of his film *Towards No Earthly Pole* (2019) quotes Alfred Lord Tennyson's epitaph for Arctic explorer John Franklin, who perished on a quest for the Northwest Passage in 1847, linking it to the romantic era of exploration, when science and art were intertwined; Charrière's work both extends and distances itself from that tradition, stressing fresh personal immersion in threatened environments.

Nominated for the Prix Marcel Duchamp in 2021, Charrière also revisits the confluence of art and science Duchamp encouraged in 1930s Paris, where his International Surrealist Exhibition playfully responded to the lighting generators at the popular Palais de la Découverte by providing flashlights to visitors in darkened galleries. For Charrière, art and science are imaginative tools for constructing the cultural fiction called "reality." He's displayed frozen plants in refrigerated containers, stacks of salt from lithium mines, and lava lamps glowing with palm oil, pursuing connections that emphasize mutability and fragility. I spoke to Julian in Mexico, where he is developing new projects, via Zoom.



Installation View: Julian Charrière: *Erratic*, SFMOMA, San Francisco, US, 2022. Featuring: *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories III*, 2013; *Not All Who Wander Are Lost*, 2019; *Towards No Earthly Pole*, 2019; *Pure Waste*, 2021. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany. Photo: Katherine du Thiel.

Rail: Before discussing the works at SFMOMA, I'd like to give a broader sense of your work's scale and urgency, and ask how you decided to study art rather than science.

Charrière: In Europe you are compelled to make a decision on the direction of your studies early on, and this was a difficult choice for me. In the end though the advantage of art is its mutability, where it could bring together many of the other domains that interested me. As a scientific researcher, you often delve deeper and deeper into a specialized topic, whereas the arts allow a certain porosity. Its ambiguity is rare in a world where you can get an answer to almost any question through your smartphone. Being unbound by the regulations and obligations of the hard sciences imbues it with a kind of magic.

Rail: As an example of how you base your work in personal experience of remote places, I'd like to get back to your project *An Invitation to Disappear*, and to the era of romantic exploration in science.

Charrière: *An Invitation to Disappear* is a film I made in 2018, which was born from my fascination with a particular volcano in Indonesia; the mountain Tambora. I first learned about it from my friend, the nature philosopher Dehlia Hannah, who told me about the 1815 eruption. This event put the world into a volcanic winter for almost four years. At the time, those climate changes were not fully understood, nobody knew why the Thames froze over or why there were suddenly these strangely intense sunsets and sunrises, which are in the end captured in paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner. Those artworks, which are now so closely associated with Romanticism, had as co-creator this eruption. It was dubbed the "Year Without a Summer," and was devastating for many people, with loss of life both in the immediate aftermath of the eruption and in the mini ice age that followed. I therefore find it interesting how there are contemporary scientists and geo-engineers seeking to recreate this same kind of cooling effect through the injection of sulfate aerosols into the higher stratosphere. A lot has changed in two hundred years.

But yes, this was the beginning of *An Invitation to Disappear*. Dehlia was writing a book about the consequences of this eruption and our climate aftermath, called *A Year Without a Winter*, so we decided to climb the volcano. Due to the ash they expunge, the woodlands surrounding volcanoes are often incredibly fertile. And so on our way to the mountain, we encountered immense palm oil plantations. Entire Indonesian

forest ecologies are under threat from succumbing to these monocrops, with masses of primordial woodland burnt down to make way for oil production. At the time, I was relatively aware of this botanical oil spill pouring through the world, seeping through our society in the form of soaps, foods, and fuels. But nothing could prepare me for how these plantations feel and smell and sound, not to mention the scale. You can drive through them for days, with the sun rising and setting, it had a huge impact on me. The volcano itself seemed to act as a strange temporal node, where a fiery eruption first caused a small ice age and now here we are burning what the mountain grew, only to cause the world to heat up.

The film itself is an expedition into the heart of this palm oil plantation. There are no people, just the point of view of the camera slowly, slowly moving through a labyrinth, with time passing weirdly around it. In the end, it arrives at an unpopulated rave. I wanted the viewer to feel trapped in a time loop, as we too are lodged in the cycle of consumer goods, culminating in a desolate and dystopian party among the palms.



Julian Charrière, *An Invitation to Disappear*, 2018. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

Rail: Are you connecting it to the culture of nightlife in Berlin?

Charrière: Not broadly to nightlife, but organizing parties and being involved with the scene in Berlin has played a role in my work. Especially with *An Invitation to Disappear*, it's about my interest in systems of chaos and order. The music scene in Berlin can be thought of as an unruly presence inside a more organized structure, in the organic sense a sub-culture growing beneath it. Including a rave in the plantation, I was thinking about how the West has historically framed the jungle and the brash quest of making order out of its imagined chaos. It reminds me of the Peruvian rubber baron Carlos Fitzcarrald. In 1894, he drags a disassembled steamboat over mountains in the Amazon, hoping to use the bounty from the journey to build an opera house in the rainforest. The fact that opera is so representative of high art and sophistication makes it all the more potent. It is part of the colonial mythos, this narrative of the cultivated explorer desiring to impose structure onto the disorder of the othered wilderness. But in *An Invitation to Disappear*, there are no people. The order is the brutal geometrical grid of the plantation, carved into the flesh of the rainforest itself.

Rail: That's an interesting connection. The total absence of people is uncanny—the camera's slow progress through the grid of palms recalls Michael Snow's film *Wavelength* (1967), but bursts of light at the rave suggest the violent destruction of the forest. The relentless drumming on the soundtrack made me think about *Heart of Darkness*.

Charrière: There is something very rhythmic about these plantations—from the rhythm of the passing trees to the rhythm of chopping them down.

Rail: Your dystopian fantasy is tempered by the poignant way the light transforms the landscape at dawn—I'm reminded of a quote from cinematographer Raoul Coutard—cited by photographer Robert Adams—as to how “daylight has an inhuman faculty for always being perfect.”

Charrière: Some of the dystopian or unsettling feeling of the film might be this strange light, which has a rhythm of its own in the film. As someone with a background in photography and sculpture, rather than videography, my fascination with the history and technology of photography is reflected in my work. That monotony of very slight and gradual change which you describe, which becomes extremely rich over time, is grounded in my experience as a photographer.

Rail: You test Coutard's idea further in the starkly minimal prints you made out of tar sand in the Canadian oil fields for *A Sky Taste of Rock* (2016), using the primitive photographic process that Nicéphore Niépce invented in the 1820s.

Charrière: Photography is not neutral: every image has a shadow. Every digital image made today exists as a negative in the form of fossil fuel being burned somewhere; of the flash of electricity needed to generate them. Think of every selfie we take and never look at again—it is a huge amount of energy. This is a recurring fascination of mine, all the shadows and negative spaces of image making. So that was what brought me back to Niépce, who used bitumen, in other words coal tar, to create his early photography. This material history is reflected in the imagery of *A Sky Taste of Rock* as well. These are snap shots of the tar sand mining in Canada, which remains one of the dirtiest forms of fossil fuel extraction happening today. But beyond the atrocity of the extraction process, you can think of the open pit mine as the ultimate photographic plate. A plate never developed, where every day the sun rises and sets, imprinting its passage within the photosensitive hydrocarbon. Each time we extract that top layer to make fuel, it is as though we would be preparing a new photographic plate. There's no way to develop this photograph, and I like that because it links to the one-to-one map in the story of Jorge Luis Borges.

Rail: Yes, the story of the map coextensive with the country it depicts.

Charrière: Exactly. To make the heliographs for the series an emulsion was made by mixing this local tar with lavender oil. It is a very slow and alchemical process, with the aerial perspective of this industrial mining operation and the perspective from below, eyeing the passage of the sun above. In the final diptychs you see on one hand the mine and on the other the line of the traversing sun, caught through the aperture of a pinhole camera. It is a slow production process; I like the temporality of that as a counterweight to the immediacy of the digital world.

Rail: Those are wonderful. They connect to your recent project about plants and carbon: a room illuminated by near infrared light, like a darkroom with plants that have ancestral lines dating back to the Carboniferous era, on a floor of polished coal.



Julian Charrière, *Panchronic Garden*, 2022. Installation view, *Controlled Burn*, Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany, 2022. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany. Photo: Till Bovermann.

Charrière: Yes, *Panchronic Garden*, which is on view as part of my exhibition *Controlled Burn* at the Langen Foundation. The artwork really intimately interfaces with the surrounding landscape: the Ruhr coal region. It has a long and intense industrial story, being both the cradle of the combustion engine and home to some of Germany's largest coal mining operations. The museum itself has this very striking Tadao Ando architecture that aesthetically fulfills the modernist ideal of monumental and cold combinations of concrete, steel and glass. It first seems like some extraterrestrial vessel has landed in the fields, but really it is made entirely out of construction materials that don't occur naturally, and would not exist at all were it not for combustion.

We owe all this oddly to trees, to the vast scale of tree forests that grew on this land some some four-hundred million years ago, during the Carboniferous era. Those ancient biomes are what constitute our petro-valuables today, and it was with those plants I wanted to commune, inviting the visitors really down into the coal seam and through deep time. Inside is a lush and reverberating forest, lit by near infrared lights, which every now and again are lit by bright white flashes. I wanted it to be like a cosmic snap-shot, as if being inside the body of a camera. It plays on the idea of photosynthesis as the transmutation of light into material, so photosynthesis is actually image-making and plants are image-makers. The materialized light becomes buried, forming the fossil fuel deposits that we depend on today. I like that idea, of coal being a form of fossilized sunshine.

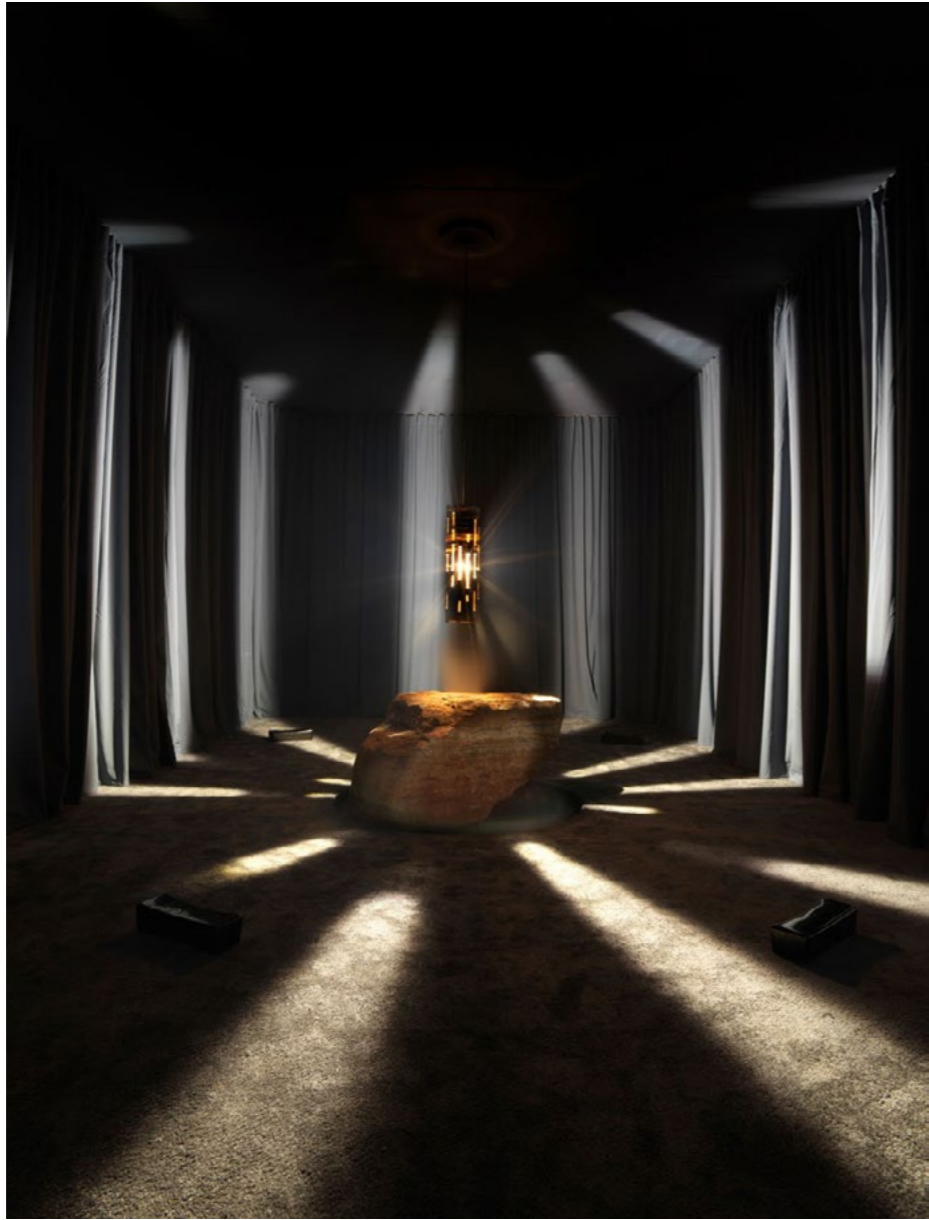


Installation view: Julian Charrière: *Controlled Burn*, Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany, 2022. Featuring: Julian Charrière, *Mining The Sky*, 2022; *Beneath It All Flows Liquid Fire*, 2019; *Pure Waste*, 2021. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Rail: In another interview you talked about mysticism and materiality in your work. *Vertigo* (2021), a recent project related to altered states of mind and science fiction reinterprets poet Brion Gysin's *Dream Machine* (1962)—a stroboscopic light generator designed to regulate people's consciousness.

Charrière: The original invention was a device developed and dreamed to replace television by modulating our brainwaves with light. Instead of seeking outward stimulation, we would look within and lose ourselves in light patterns. I found this to be a very powerful idea, and being inspired by Gysin's apparatus, I made a reinterpretation of the machine. In *Vertigo*, it is constructed from a large block of onyx—a mineral with very eerie qualities, being a precipitation of calcium carbonate. Something we also find in our bones. I wanted to stage a space wherein you could meditate on this lost lithic link and mineral dependencies. If you consider the evolution of living things on Earth, it begins with a thin skin of microbes on a stone. And we are not much further along than this, just a few inches of flesh on the calcified rock that constitute our bones.

Rail: The translucency of the onyx transforms light and inspires fantasy. You also had pillows made of stone for people to lie on while they were experiencing the strobe effects.



Julian Charrière, *Vertigo*, 2021. Installation view, *Controlled Burn*, Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany, 2022. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Charrière: These are made from anthracite coal, so you rest your skull on a fossil fuel. There is also a mist in the room with dissolved calcium carbonate, giving the room a taste and smell of minerality. All the while, you have a rumbling in the background, where a speculative conversation was staged between two volcanoes in Iceland and Ethiopia—representing the voice of the Earth. What they are discussing is beyond our realm of comprehension of course, but the work explores the material commonalities we share. But the rockbound meditation of *Vertigo* is only the starting point of a much larger project, building an entire volcanic parliament.

Rail: I'm curious as to how you prefer to see your work displayed? Putting it between the wind turbines and the coal pit seems ideal.

Charrière: In the case of the Langen Foundation, the fact that it was located between these emblems of green energy and the mining facilities definitely provided an additional layer of interpretation. Since many of my artworks explore the construction of reality through images, it can be very productive to place works in places not coded for art. It is my aim to try and hack these often-arbitrary frameworks that have come to dictate how we perceive and represent the natural world. Some examples of this are the projects *I Am Afraid I Must Ask You to Leave* (2018) made together with Julius von Bismarck, and also *Beneath It All Flows Liquid Fire* (2019).



Julian Charrière, *And Beneath It All Flows Liquid Fire*, 2019. Video still. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

Rail: *And Beneath It All Flows Liquid Fire*, a baroque fountain in flames—

Charrière: Yes, it was a public intervention in Lugano, Switzerland in 2019, which then also became a video work. The fountain as a symbol has this potent history, where along with the manipulation of fire, the control of water was a fundamental achievement of human civilization. You have the original spring fountain, providing vital water, and then the ornamental versions, that with their jets publicly display technical achievements and overflowing wealth. To set it alight for real was central to the intention of questioning the paradigms of thought and the consumption of resources which structure our reality. It is on one hand hypnotic, but also a memorial against the hubris of our species.

Rail: You got some unexpected publicity, when a cannon you made to shoot coconuts was confiscated by the German police.

Charrière: Yes, *The Purchase of the South Pole* (2017), was a project where I was attempting to link the rising of one landscape with the sinking of another, both imbalanced by anthropogenic interference. The title is a play on the novel by Jules Verne, wherein a secret society digs a cannon barrel into Kilimanjaro, knocking Earth's axis so that the North Pole, believed at the time to be a continent, once melted could be mined for coal.

For the first Antarctic Biennale, I proposed to invert this, and shoot a coconut at the South Pole. Once melted, maybe a palm tree will grow there. The coconut itself has been a recurring symbol in my work, beginning with my expedition to the Bikini Atoll, where during the 1950s the US conducted some of the most intense nuclear detonations in history. Bikini, or *Pikinni* in Marshallese, means coconut place, and though the island is now uninhabitable for the original islanders, coconuts still grow. Except these are inedible, due to the traces of radiation which remains. The intention was to weave a fable together with the melting Antarctica, a place which has also been radically altered by human actions. Rather than a cannonball, the catapulting coconut would have been a hopeful and peaceful intervention, literally seeding the possibility of change. But yes, it was confiscated by the Berlin Police before embarking on its journey.

Rail: On Bikini Atoll you also made the film *Iroojrilik* (2016) and the photo series “First Light” (2016).

Charrière: Yes, the photo series were made with a plate camera that documents a sunset over an idyllic Pacific Beach laden with coconut palms. But I wanted to give a visual presence to the invisible radioactive decay, which I did by gathering contaminated sand and scattering it onto the plate negative in a portable dark room. This causes a double exposure, giving the appearance of bursts of light on the photographs. The tropical imagery is highly paradisiacal, but then you have the presence of the radioactivity, effectively co-producing the work. This was central to the project, to stage an encounter with the radiation as a way of acknowledging its agency.



Julian Charrière, *Castle Bravo - First Light*, 2016. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

Rail: How long could you safely stay there?

Charrière: A month, trade winds and storms have washed away much of the radiation, though the underlying soil remains contaminated, making it impossible to farm. The US army did quite the cleanup, burying much of the radioactive material under a giant concrete dome. With rising sea levels however, there is now also the threat that it might collapse and release this toxic material. In that sense, the Bikini Atoll is a tragedy that unfolds through time, it is not limited to the trauma of the people who once lived there, convinced to leave on the basis that their absence would facilitate the end of all wars. Of course, what was really happening was the US military documenting their military dominance, and producing an imperialist iconography of power and violence. The exact consequences of those actions are ongoing, and wait for us in the future.

Rail: The underwater footage in the film anticipates the disorienting editing of *Towards No Earthly Pole* (2019), filmed in polar darkness, and also reflects your interest in science fiction.

Charrière: Bikini is one of those places animated by science fiction. In fact, J.G. Ballard's *Terminal Beach* motivated me to go—his main character washes up on Eniwetok, where the concrete dome is placed. So, it has this real quality, but is also very surreal at the same time. The Bikini Atoll is itself artificial now, with geometrical rows of coconut trees planted for the people who could never return. Yet the fact that animals still live here, and sea creatures make their homes in the ships wrecked by the detonations, is a testament to life stirring in the ashes. I see the island in this way as a phoenix.

Like science fiction, art can provide a speculative window into other times; other worlds. With *Iroojrilik*, I wanted the viewer to feel a loss of timelines, it passes back and forth like a tide. It also brings the viewer down into the sea, where you encounter these Leviathan monsters; the decommissioned warships that were sunk during the tests. These are cut together to give the feel of uncovering a sunken world, an ancient Atlantean civilization reduced to rusting metal and coral-covered hulls. It was a choice to make it uncertain exactly what you are looking at. Inviting this ambiguity was also a component of the editing for *Towards No Earthly Pole*.

Rail: I want to get to your travels in the Arctic. You first went as a student in 2011. Can you talk about that experience?

Charrière: I first traveled to Iceland just after the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, on a field trip with Olafur Eliasson. It was my first encounter with the high Arctic and one which left an intense and lasting impression on me. Where I grew up in Switzerland, the landscape is much more domesticated. But once in Iceland, the tools I would normally use to anticipate the scale and scope of my surroundings fell away. It became totally fractal, whereby the lack of landmarks created total sensorial loss. I could not triangulate between my feet and eyes and horizon line, and so had to recalibrate the entire way I saw and engaged with reality. It was an incredible experience that I have since been transpiring through my work.

Rail: These spatial dislocations, and the temporal dislocations of geological time, inform *Erratic*, your installation at SFMOMA.

Charrière: The entire show is a meditation on the polar imaginary, investigating the mythologies and images with which we have constructed our ideas of the cryosphere. Spatial and temporal dislocation plays a role in that pursuit, bucking our expectations of these regions as either frontiers of exploration, sites of resource extraction, or brittle ecosystems under threat.

Renegotiating these narratives goes back to my photo series *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories* from 2013, which documents a performance I made climbing an iceberg and trying to melt it with a blowtorch. It is really a work that begins with the iceberg itself, as a temporally dislodged entity, floating somewhere outside of our immediate physical reality. Yet while unmoored from us, they contain archives of the past in their frozen bodies, compounding registers of primordial biomes and former atmospheres. They are time travelers, suspending thousands of years worth of climate conditions in their constantly melting and refreezing forms. In the performance, the blowtorch and the melting of the ice naturally relate to these existing ideas around the anthropogenic impact on the glacier region. But it is also an encounter with a totally nebulous and temporally entangled entity. It was therefore not only an intervention in space, but in time, creating an anomaly in an already existing system. One of the photographs of this serves as an opening to *Erratic*. The choreography of it plays on the tale of man versus nature, visually breaking up with the dichotomy that we inherited from the Romantics. So there is both poignancy and absurdity in that little fragile silhouette, even though the trampling and burning begets the very real consequences of our terraforming.



Julian Charrière, *The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories III*, 2013. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

Rail: There is also the free-standing video screen inside the gallery, displaying your work *Pure Waste* (2021).

Charrière: This was another performance, or rather a kind of alchemical intervention and reversal of matter, that became a video piece. To make it, I joined a Swiss scientific expedition to the Arctic, and used a novel carbon capture method developed by scientists at ETH Zurich to collect CO₂ molecules directly from the air, effectively mining the sky for carbon. This carbonic archive was then transmuted into synthetic diamonds, including CO₂ extracted from the exhalations of friends around the world collected during the pandemic, when travel and border crossing were forbidden. This linked the CO₂ of industrial emissions with those of the human body, as if eight billion people were exhaling together.

Rail: Your hand drops the diamonds into a glacier mill, a blue chasm of icy water.



Julian Charrière, *Pure Waste*, 2021. Video Still.. Copyright the artist; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany. Courtesy the artist.

Charrière: Yes, these diamonds become tiny tangible fragments of the often entirely intangible atmospheric carbon cycle, and much like with the radioactivity, the work is a way to commune with it and metaphorically offer some small tribute of reconciliation.

Pure Waste was an important work for me also because it realized a feeling I had first had years prior, during the shoot of *Towards No Earthly Pole*. Standing on the glacier at noon, with the sun barely climbing over the horizon line, there was an eerie blue glow suspended in the sky, but also in the ice. The boundary between the two fell away, and I felt as though I was reeling with vertigo. The revelation came from understanding that this is not just a trick of light, but you are really standing on the register of former atmospheres in the form of millions of tiny bubbles of air trapped in the ice. The memories of the sky are lodged inside it. As it melts, those memories are lost once more into the firmament above. We are so small, caught in this really celestial machinery—*Pure Waste* arose from thinking about how to embody this.

Rail: The film, with its dramatic light effects, provides a context for this science lesson.

Charrière: It relates back to my first visit to Antarctica, traveling through the Drake Passage. It was like a rite of passage. Crossing very rough seas, you are seasick and throwing up, so you arrive somehow cleansed into a totally otherworldly realm. Especially at night, it is so impenetrable it doesn't matter if you have sonar or navigational tech: there still needs to be a person with a spotlight searching for icebergs in the polar void ahead of you. The visual was formative to the work. Because while glacial landscapes hold a strong visual presence in popular culture, it is usually depicted in daylight overexposed by the sun. *Towards No Earthly Pole* is a shift in this mode of representation.

After the sun goes down, the icebergs seem to spring at you from the darkness, imposing their massive presence for only a fraction of a second, but you feel this intense loss of motion. Wanting to produce an alternative visuality, I therefore decided to only work at night. It was realized by coming up with some homemade equipment and mounting spotlights and cameras onto drones. It became a way to sculpt with light within the landscape itself, a little like how you can influence the development of a photograph in a dark room using a lamp.

Rail: In contrast to the mechanical zoom of the palm plantation, *Towards No Earthly Pole* disorients—I see it as a musical composition—you start out with the chaos of a snowstorm, like an overture, where the snow is sweeping this way and that. It gets dense and then disappears. You go on into darkness, but gradually see objects at a distance, like in outer space, and they gradually start to emerge, washed in light. It's a wonderful process that reminds me of Baroque sculpture. In the middle section, water takes over, a panoramic cascade that occupies the whole screen, and then towards the end we see wet draperies on the ice.

Charrière: Those are actually geotextiles they put on glaciers in Switzerland in order to slow down the melting process.

Rail: Like a bandage, or the draperies of the Elgin Marbles.

Charrière: Exactly, it is almost the Pietà. I always saw the glacial formation of the iceberg as the ultimate sculpture, even though you cannot bring it to the museum. But with the play of light and dark, I had the possibility to share my impression of it. The film also ruminates on the epistemology of ice—how it acts on different timescales, how it can open doors for us into deep geological time, yet exist also within human temporality. When you encounter a glacier, you can hear it crackling; you may witness it calving. You can feel the dynamism of its movements in the present, yet it is inextricably linked with the past. It trails thousands of years, through eras of erosion and ice ages. It invites us to reframe our perspective on time. This goes back to my interest in chemical cycles, how water becomes vapor becomes ice becomes sky and becomes water again. *Towards No Earthly Pole* mirrors this loop, of a world without beginning or end.

Rail: One thing I thought of, and this may be a weird connection, but I'm thinking about a project you made with Das Numen, the collective you worked with at the Institute for Spatial Experimentation, using two lights rotating in a dark room—generating disorientation.

Charrière: That is the work *Momentum*, which we made together in Das Numen in 2013. In a dark room, we attached bright lights onto the two arms of a double pendulum. It acted like a semi-chaotic machine, where the viewer could not really tell how the pattern was occurring. The arrhythmia of this would give the impression of the lights being to some degree alive. Especially as you can hear the machine, but not see how it relates to the movement. This relationship between light and disorientation has remained at the core of my work, because I don't believe it is possible to engage with the world or find our way within it if we cannot first admit that we are lost. The experience in the Arctic mirrors this, where you go hoping to learn about the world and yourself, only to return realizing you know even less. That's something which is crucial in my work.

Rail: Being lost connects directly to *Not All Who Wander Are Lost* (2019), the massive pair of boulders in the center of the gallery.

Charrière: You mentioned Brion Gysin and Shamanism, Nicolas Bourriaud made a beautiful analogy, by way of Marcel Mauss and his anthropological studies of French Polynesian culture, where Mauss spoke to a shaman about Mana. Mana is a flux of what goes on all around us, and the Shaman is able to trigger it and interfere with this flux. And if you put mana in an object it becomes magical. Artists are not shamans but making art in the Occident has a similar function, since like magic it can let what we think of as inert objects be empowered with absolute subjectivity. In a world of rigid structures where there is little space for magic, where the world we inhabit appears controlling, art makes place for crazy things to happen. And society wants it to happen—it responds to a societal need of embracing something less structured than the modern world we inhabit now. This was something I was thinking about with the erratic boulders, historically these traveling rocks moved by the immense force of ice flows. They become witnesses to the fluidity of the geological world. I add the perforations, like core samples, as a play both on resource extraction and how we gather knowledge.

Rail: You mean all the core holes drilled through them, which carve out the stone cylinders underneath them, on which they seem to roll, animated as you say by some subjectivity. Can you make those in your studio?

Charrière: Not in Berlin, but with a studio in Switzerland specializing in processing rocks. It seems that Swiss people like to drill through big chunks of rock, myself included. The aim with *Not All Who Wander Are Lost* was to foreground the velocity and the will of objects which to a human might appear static. To reveal the movement inherent even in minerals, and show that when seen through the lens of deep time, even a heavy and anchored rock can become light and nimble.

Rail: They look like sailboats—

Charrière: Yeah, they're sailboats, they are the sailing stones!

Contributor

Hearne Pardee

Hearne Pardee is an artist and writer based in New York and California, where he teaches at the University of California, Davis.

ON VIEW
San Francisco Museum Of
Modern Art
Erratic
August 6, 2022–May 14, 2023
San Francisco