

PERROTIN

Julian CHARRIÈRE

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JULIAN CHARRIÈRE | EVEN IF WE'RE JUST DANCING IN THE PALEOLITHIC DARK

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FLAUNT

JULIAN CHARRIÈRE | EVEN IF WE'RE JUST DANCING IN THE PALEOLITHIC DARK

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Written by Julia Smith



Julian Charrière. "The Blue Fossil Entropic Stories III" (2013). Copyright The Artist; Vg Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

At the intersection between medieval structures and the scarred marks of modernity, visible through a vanguard of power plants and wind turbines on the horizon, a minimalist steel and glass concrete block sits nestled in the hills. Here, among various plots of fields on the site of a former NATO missile station sits the stunning Langen Foundation. The sprawling museum is currently home to French-Swiss artist Julian Charrière's exhibition, *Controlled Burn*.

Controlled Burn is just the latest in the Berlin-based artist's exploration of nature and how our ideas of it have transformed. Frequently collaborating with composers, scientists, engineers, art historians and philosophers, Charrière's work is an interdisciplinary reflection of the natural world across time and space, addressing pressing matters of ecological concern.

At its core, the exhibition explores humanity's relationship to the flame. An all-consuming love affair, and one that has been dictated by the industrial champions when the fire turns to ash. Regardless of how we choose to frame our relationship with the natural world, the flame has always been the point of combustion, from the cave hearth to the burning of fossil fuels. Charrière's exhibition invokes these overlapping and at times conflicting narratives, reconsidering the Anthropocene as a pyroclastic event.

Charrière's work is a form of poetic archeology, often thinking through geological strata to the very earliest days of our planet. A modern-day explorer deconstructing the supposed courage of those in the Age of Discovery, his work involves a considerable amount of fieldwork in remote and critical locations. Encountering sites where temporalities and histories converge, it considers if there are some truths that can only be uncovered by experiencing such territories firsthand.

We sat down with Charrière to discuss this very conscious approach to the natural world, climate change, and the pursuit of the eternal flame.



Julian Charrière. "Aomen I – Terminal Beach" (2016). Copyright The Artist; Vg Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

A lot of your work examines the millennium-long exchange between humanity and nature, how do you describe your relationship with the natural world? Has it changed in the process of working on these different pieces?

A recurring question in my work is how that relationship changes—how our ideas of what constitutes as *nature* and the natural world are cultivated and transfigured. Many of my projects explore the entanglement itself and the reciprocity between human time and geological time. Nature during the Renaissance

for instance, or as part of Modernism or the technological industrialization becomes conflated to serve the ideals of that era. It becomes tinged by a moment in time and by the specificity of a place. This is evident even with something like the Anthropocene, where nature like a cell divides into ecosystems and biomes, prominently featured as an environmental victim and measuring stick for the onslaught of humankind and our ever-expanding sphere of our influence. But this too becomes overextended and diffuse. In my practice, I try to foreground that ultimate inaccessibility. Whether we frame nature as embodied and enchanted or a bewildered other, we are in the end too closely knitted into whatever weave of life and liveliness makes up planetary being to know it properly. In my practice I look at singular threads of this, trace loops in the fabric; try to listen and find new languages not only for interpretation but for communication. And hope that through these novel sensibilities, we can become more empathetic co-habitants of this planet.

It's often said that humanity was born in the hearth of the flame. Where do you think the mythos of fire began? How has it evolved?

Fire is truly a faithful and fated companion to our species. The obfuscated beginnings of that relationship might be part of what builds the mythos. Because while there is no hard consensus on how fire might have defined our physiognomic development or emerging intelligence at that time, it undoubtedly acted as a kind of accelerant that opened new doors for living, eating, socializing and communicating. It was this elemental tool with which we could manipulate our surroundings and transform raw materials, which Lévi-Strauss speaks about in his book *The Structural Study of Myth*. How it represents the spark of technological progress, but just like it was for Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, it carries with it severe consequences. That narrative has prevailed, whether used in the context of nuclear weapons or in burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas to generate energy. But we often forget it has been a highly reciprocal relationship, where we also propagated the fire; melting our way into new territories where we kept finding new materials to burn. It was a co-expansion. Because while fire is a biochemical reaction and we are animals, there exists an intimate kinship between our paradoxical natures: we're both forces capable of creation and destruction. However, in a present rampant with erratic wildfire and global warming, it does feel as though fire has taken the lead.

Given the vast enormity of geologic time, how did you go about selecting these pieces to tell the story of this pyroclastic anthropocene?

The story is told through the exhibition *Controlled Burn* which was staged inside the Langen Foundation. The building itself is an archetype of Modernist architecture, which was designed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando, consists of minimalist steel and glass and concrete, materials that come into being through heat. It is nestled in the rolling hills of North Rhine-Westphalia, which is an iconic coal region in Germany, and has a horizon dotted by power plant towers and wind turbines. Furthermore, it is built on what was once a NATO missile station, and neighbors motor factories where the earliest combustion engines were developed. Being there you are entirely steeped in these overlapping fuel histories. It made me think in terms of geocultures and how the transmutation of materials through geological time expresses itself in our present. For the exhibition, I wanted to include works which reflect on this slowness and acceleration and on the seemingly gravitational force which fossil fuels seem to have; bending reality around themselves. There is for instance *Pitch Drop*, which gestures to the geological timescale. It plays on an experiment initiated in 1927, where through a cylinder you can witness the fluid dynamics of tar. It will create a drip only once a decade and so becomes a kind of slow-motion theater that plays out over centuries. With it I wanted to draw the viewers' attention not only to the uncertain materiality of tar, but to its existence beyond our instrumental uses for it as a building material and source of petroleum. *Panchronic Garden* is another artwork in the show which instead travels back in time. It is an immersive installation that invites you into a darkened woodland of plants ancestral to those that grew in the Carboniferous era some 300 million years ago. I wanted to reveal this local connection as a reminder of how what today constitutes our fossil reserves was once alive—it was forests. It is easy to forget how plants are the true custodians of this planet, having evolved for hundreds of millions of years before human beings came along, manipulating the atmosphere and intervening in their surroundings. Their ability to materialize sunshine through photosynthesis and effectively fossilizing that sunshine in the ground as coal is the foundation upon which our pyro modernity is built. *Panchronic Garden* is a temporal portal into that process; a carbonic time-machine.



Julian Charrière. "Controlled Burn" (2022). Film Still. Copyright The Artist; Vg Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

We entered the industrial and technological era through baptism by fire. But as your exhibit shows you also explore the future, and even beyond human construction. Where do you see humanity's relationship with the flame going?

As long as there are plants and oxygen, the flame itself will for sure keep burning. As for our relationship to fire this was something which I explored with the film *Controlled Burn*, which became also the namesake of the exhibition. It is intended as an incendiary odyssey through the industrial and technological era, shot with drones flying through an aerial landscape of imploding fireworks. Through the smoke you catch glimpses of structures built for fossil fuel extraction and its conversion into energy. So, you have the off-shore oil rig and the cooling tower of a power plant and of course the open pit coal mine, representing the built histories of different geocultures. Throughout you have unfurling ferns and fluttering moths, which are the subliminal spirit guides of the film. These are organisms with lineages reaching back hundreds of millions of years, and evolved as con-temporaries of the coal forests. But these are creatures still around today, and their presence speaks to the resilience of planetary life. And while the reversed fireworks do play on our desire to turn back time—to put the fire back in the hole, so to speak—and halt the onslaught of anthropogenically caused climate change, they are also celebratory. The rig, the cooling tower and the mine in the film are all decommissioned, heralding a progression out of fossil dependencies. Instead, it proposes an elemental allegiance with wind and water and solar powers and the possibility of living in equilibrium with this planet.

Your work is sometimes described as a form of poetic archeology. Has your work ever made you realize that the history books and mass media have been wrong or held an incorrect assumption about humankind's technological history?

There are methodologies of archaeology present in my work, as well as from other fields of science. If you look at an object through the lens of an anthropologist or a geologist, you will find it behaves very differently, and I find this very intriguing. Even something like Time: in the social sciences, time is often formalized horizontally; a timeline. But for a geologist, it is also vertical, and you divine the past in the strata. If there is a gap in that record where no fossils form it is sometimes referred to as an "unconformity." This is caused by erosion or non-deposition of sediments, ultimately removing any evidence of that particular part of the past; a blind spot. Human history also has these unconformities. What are the erosions that caused them? Working with this kind of interdisciplinarity can be a very productive tool, both in art and beyond it. In terms of history books and mass media, we know that these are always mediated, where like a photographer uses

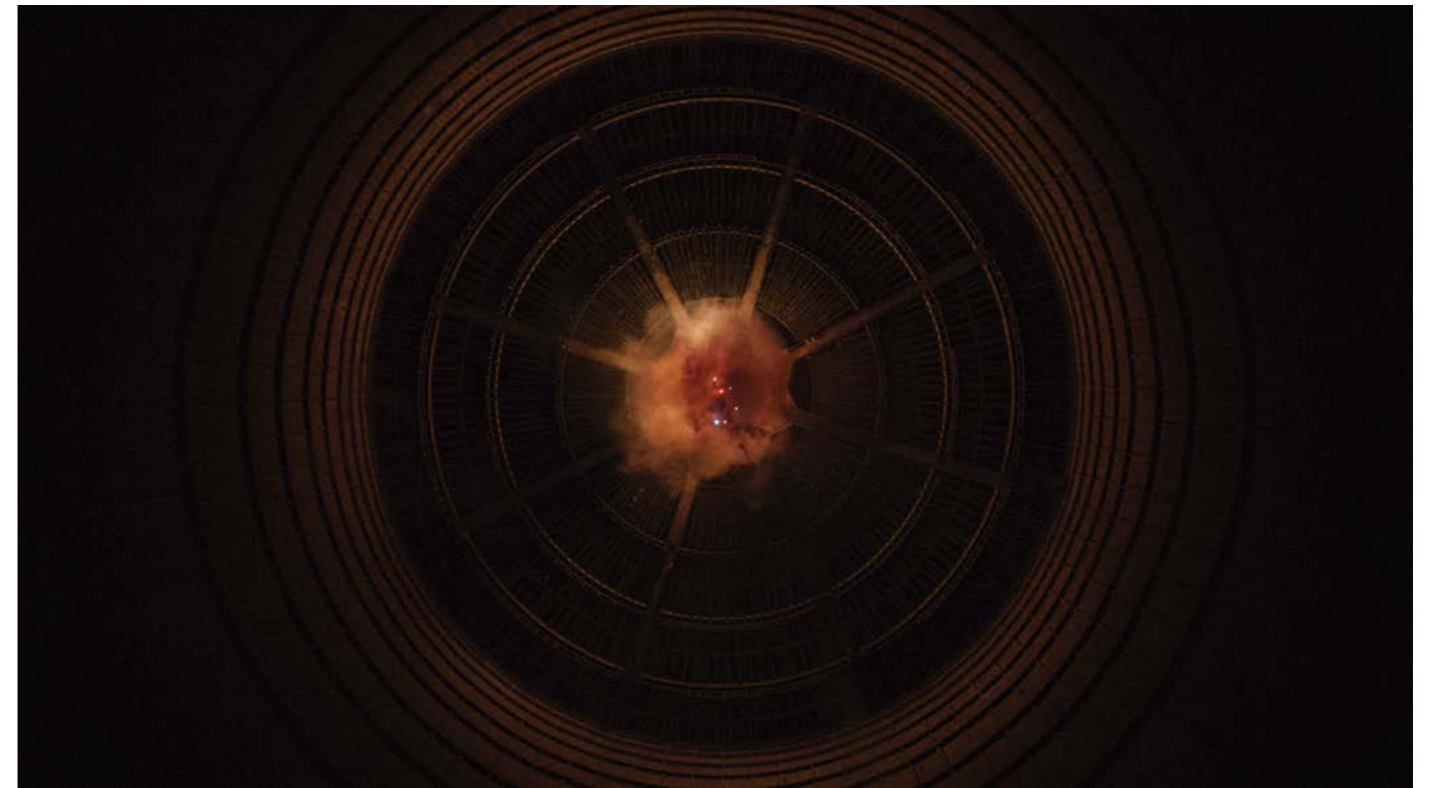
shallow depth of field it tends to selectively focus on the experience of a singular subject. The background blurs into obscurity. Often the past is viewed through an equally narrow lens. This was particularly poignant with the nuclear tests conducted by the U.S. in the Marshall Islands in the 1950s. I traveled to the Bikini Atoll in 2016 and many of my works from that period deal with the erosion and construction of history that occurred there, from the displacement of the Bikinian people to the meticulous photographic documentation of this military power display. My photo series *Terminal Beach* ought to subvert that narrative, revealing the monolithic ruins of the bunkers that still exist on the atoll. These bunkers were purpose-built to house the photography equipment needed to document the explosions, memorializing these almost impossibly destructive inventions. I splattered sand onto the raw film, which since it is to this day still radioactive, left white sparks on the images. Equally permanent seems to be the nuclear threat, established during the Cold War, while the destiny of the citizens of the Bikini Atoll appears largely forgotten.

In your work as an artist, you've done a considerable amount of fieldwork in critical locations in addressing these urgent ecological concerns. How do you begin to select a signal location? Where do you spend the majority of your time working and thinking? What is the turning point for you when you decide, "Okay, it's time to start this piece."

The idea of investigating a site; of encountering a place, has been central to a majority of my projects. Sometimes people think I select the destination of this fieldwork based on remoteness, which very much isn't the case. To begin with, no place is inherently remote, and it would be alienating to think of any locality that way. The Bikini Atoll, for instance, was not remote to the people who called it home. The process is more about curiosity, and it begins primarily in Berlin where my studio is based. It could begin with a book or with a story that I delve into; with research through the lens of different fields, slowly world-building. Usually, it figures around a spot where many different histories coalesce, be they non-human or human, often both. My project *An Invitation to Disappear* illustrates this process. Where I years earlier had been introduced by friend and nature philosopher Dehlia Hannah to the story of the Mount Tambora volcano in Indonesia. This was a geological hotspot which by erupting in 1815 caused a mini ice age to occur that altered the atmosphere so distinctly you could see it in the uncannily colored skies of Romantic paintings from this time. Learning more and more about this site, it eventually felt necessary to make an expedition there. Arriving together we found that the mountain was framed by an absolutely endless palm oil plantation, fertilized by the volcanic ash. I knew about these plantations before but seeing them first-hand had a profound effect. It entangled these two presences: the planetary-mass object of the volcano, which in the past cooled down the world, and then our burning of the jungle in the pursuit of a slippery domestic-industrial product, fanning the fires of global warming. I couldn't have known this before physically immersing myself in that milieu. It altered the path I thought the project would take, and so even though the kernel of the project somehow started in Europe it began in earnest in that encounter. It is not so much a turning point, as allowing yourself to travel down a rabbit hole and see where it leads.

Controlled Burn is an expansive exhibition of your work. What do you hope is the message that people leave the space with? To you, is there a utopian solution in mitigating the effects of climate change?

It is not so much about utopian solutions, but about reconnecting with the materials, processes, and the infrastructures that make the continuous flow of energy possible. The whole exhibition in that sense is the cave hearth campfire, very much still burning. It is of course particularly important to think about our relationship to fuel now since we are in a crisis that necessitates many countries opening up long-shuttered coal mining operations and nuclear power plants. But beyond that, I wanted to conjure not only the fire which we hide in our combustion engines and in the outskirts of our cities but also the proto-magical flame with which we have been fascinated since the Palaeolithic era. Each space in the show represents some smoldering ember of that relationship and dreams about the many geocultures it has propagated. It is an incredibly long-lasting companionship, and we remain as captivated now as the early hominid probably was encountering a branch lit aflame by a lightning storm. *Controlled Burn* kindles these moments together in one smoky space, encompassing both past, present, and possible futures.



Julian Charrière. "Controlled Burn" (2022). Film Still. Copyright The Artist; Vg Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

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