

Iulia Nistor

by Jurriaan Benschop

September 2017

REVIEWS

canvas were then decorated with metallic foil, in a process similar to gilding. Taken as a whole, the works in this show consistently develop Reyle's project of the (aesthetic) transfiguration of the everyday.

—Jens Asthoff

“Jaguars and Electric Eels”

JULIA STOSCHEK COLLECTION

The second exhibition of new media works drawn from the Julia Stoschek Collection, presented in its new Berlin exhibition space—formerly East Berlin's Czech Cultural Center—includes thirty-nine works by thirty artists. Curated by Monika Kerkmann, the show focuses on contemporary artists' engagement with nature, and its title, “Jaguars and Electric Eels,” is taken from Alexander von Humboldt's 1853 narrative of his explorations in the Americas, during which he developed an early ecological concept of the natural world.

It was particularly drawn to Juan Downey's *The Laughing Alligator*, 1979, part of his 1973–79 “Video Trans Americas” series, shown here on a monitor. Downey and his family lived with the Yanomami Indians in Venezuela for several months, and the video alternates footage of Downey among the Yanomami with shots of the artist back home in New York. This work poses acutely the problem that the exhibition engages: Who is speaking? How does the artist engage with other cultures? Should the camera be given to the people she or he observes, for example?

Many of the works on view explore the porous boundaries of the art and natural worlds: In the Warhol-inspired video *Empire*, 2004, Paul Pfeiffer uses a stationary camera to document the construction of a wasps' nest over a hundred-day period (which also happens to be the duration of a Documenta). Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson's film *Swamp*, 1971, takes the viewer on an excursion into a New Jersey reedbed, the camera's erratic movements motivated by Smithson's voiced directions. Simon Martin's video *Untitled*, 2008, reanimates images of a poisonous tropical frog as if it were the subject of a nature documentary, intercut with fictional text passages, thereby foregrounding the constructedness of his work. Cyprien Gaillard's *KOE*, 2015, tracks flocks of immigrant green parakeets across the Düsseldorf skyline, as if they were digitally superimposed on previously filmed footage. The trope “as if,” by which animation tricks the eye into constructing a seamless natural whole, is also present in Bill Viola's early work *The Reflecting Pool*, 1977–79, even if contemporary

Simon Martin, *Untitled*, 2008. digital animated HD video, color, sound, 16 minutes.



viewers might struggle with what appears as a lack of definition in the early video image.

The exhibition has a great sense of humor, exemplified by Björk's music video *Wanderlust*, 2008, produced by the New York-based Encyclopedia Pictura collective, which used computer animation techniques to create an outrageously campy landscape of rivers and mountains amid which the singer performs. Isaac Julien's three-channel video installation *True North*, 2004, also concerns an expedition (echoing Humboldt's explorations): The work stages a reenactment of Admiral Robert E. Peary's 1908–09 journey to the geographic North Pole, in which African American Matthew Henson was the first person to set foot on the pole. In Julien's case, the natural world is created from dramatic scenes staged in Iceland and northern Sweden, feeding our imagination of an idea of the North “truer” than the pack ice that actually covers the geographic North Pole. Sturtevant's four-channel video installation *Finite/Infinite*, 2010—a three-and-a-half-minute loop of a dog running across a landscape—conveys something of the energy of the exhibition and reiterates a key issue, that of the animal trapped in the artist's and viewer's gaze.

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques* was published in 1955 to immense acclaim. It began the critical and theoretical adventure of structuralism that has informed the work of subsequent generations of artists, critics, and theorists. The tropics are *triste*, sad, because Lévi-Strauss senses the degradation of this non-Western world even as he is observing it. “Jaguars and Electric Eels,” however, is not so melancholic, and one can be encouraged by the range and intensity of the many artistic engagements with the questions first posed by Humboldt nearly two hundred years ago, even if the natural and human worlds he observed no longer exist.

—Mark Nash

Iulia Nistor

PLAN B

The work of Iulia Nistor focuses on the unseen and the hidden rather than the obvious or the representational. It suggests that omissions in visual availability can evoke a sense of the real. Considering the proliferation of digital imagery in recent years and the daily flood of representations, the medium of painting enables a different take on what matters. The main body of Nistor's exhibition “canary in a coal mine” was formed by eleven small panels, each titled *Evidence* and no bigger than about twenty by sixteen inches, creating a modest and intimate space. The most expressive actor in the paintings was probably color, which was festive, bold, and explicit. But in terms of content, of motifs, the works were introverted, alluding to the unseen and undefined.

What we saw were layers, sometimes dense, sometimes very thin and translucent. Parts of the paintings had been scraped or sanded back, sometimes so much that the physical structure of the wooden support was part of the composition. Occasionally there was a fragment of representation, a form like a mouth, maybe a wall, part of an animal, a tribal sign, a celestial body. But it never developed into a narrative or a fully defined scene. Rather, these vague indications of form floated or rested calmly in a space. This turned the paintings' atmospheres, whether of restraint, tension, or fluidity, into their primary content. The works' materiality—the many things to discover on and in the surface—merged with their mental content. These aspects supported and reinforced each other, became the inseparable body and soul, so to speak, of the paintings—at least in the best instances. It didn't work every time; in fact, some paintings looked more like attempts or efforts at such union than embodiments of it.



Iulia Nistor, *Evidence*
E1 W4 A3, 2015,
oil on wood,
15 1/4 × 19 3/4".

Here, painting did not depict external reality, or it did so only faintly; rather, representation seemed to take place almost inadvertently, as a by-product of the absorption of layers of time, experience, and thought. The paintings were collections and subtractions on wood, you could say, making memory part of their essence. For the artist, what is taken away in the process of making might be more important, but for the viewer the focus is on what is left and the differences in touch and sensibility that differentiate the works, or areas within a work.

In a separate room hung three big paintings, connected through their green-grayish palette and pensive mood, variations on a natural theme. Some wavelike forms suggested water, the colors pointing to landscape, some drawn shapes evoking human presence. These paintings were sewn together out of multiple pieces of fabric. Again, there was the absorption of paint, but the works were much looser in production method, with less time invested, compared with the smaller panels. These three paintings might have been bigger, but they were less specific, possessed less presence, and tended to the decorative. The small panels felt more autonomous. Although one could find in them echoes of early modernism, and especially of the theosophically inspired painting that was so widespread then—symbolic abstractions that invite us to float through higher spheres—Nistor doesn't really seem to be looking for higher spheres. Rather, she is looking for earth, for soil, for a grounding of experience through painting. Hers is an act of reconnecting, of touching base, rather than of representing.

—Jurriaan Benschop

COLOGNE

Claus Richter

GALERIE CLAGES

"Everything I do here I do with pleasure, and I admit I'm a bit ashamed of that," says the Cologne-based artist Claus Richter. And a visit to his exhibition "Living in another world" offered a similar experience of guilty pleasure. I laughed at the kitschy plastic orchids in his *Singing flowers/Omi Ursula* (all works 2017), which hop up and down while singing in what sounds like a squeaky girl's voice (actually the artist's), and at the robot in *Your little helper (Robot)*. The latter is a beat-up R2-D2-like mechanical butler whose loose wires hang out of its insides and which kept assuring me, with breathless evangelical fervor, in German, "I'll be right there"—despite the fact that it seems ready to

completely fall apart at any moment. I smiled at the red noses on the cuddly bears in *To-Do-Bear (1-2)*, who sit with their legs dangling over the edges of tall plinths, each placidly reading a book titled *1001 Fun Things to do Today*. The naively innocent gaze of the *Greeting Bunnies (1-2)*, with their heads sticking round a door, seemed to whisper, "Come with us into another, better world"—for Richter loves the world of Disney above all else. I empathized with the boy lying on the floor in checked pajamas in the sculpture *4.00 am*, staring mesmerized at a MacBook screen showing that most Romantic of images, a river landscape in winter. Who hasn't tried to escape the loneliness and desolation of a sleepless night this way?

I laughed, but as I did so a vague sense of shame crept over me: How could I, an adult possessed of a critical gaze, enjoy this unspeakable kitsch and silliness? And yet the answer was simple. All the tableaux that Richter stages have this in common: They awaken the child in us and with it the unbiased pleasure with which we once encountered the world. And yet at least since Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published in 1865, it's been clear that the unprejudiced child possesses a sharp eye that can penetrate deep into those cracks in reality that the adult gaze ignores.

In this exhibition, laughter also lured the viewer into cracks where things became less fun the farther one traveled down them. These included, along with the red-nosed *To-Do-Bears* teaching themselves how to have fun, the flat cut-outs of faceless adults waiting at a train stop in front of a brown LED panel announcing NEXT TRAIN IN 15 MINUTES in *Haltestelle (Train Station)*. Is the train ever going to come at all? The people waiting no longer seem to think so, having long ago abandoned themselves to their fate of having to wait indefinitely. And what about that lonely and desolate boy who, unable to sleep at four o'clock in the morning, uses an unromantic electronic medium to bring Romantic nature into his bedroom? Why is the boy lonely? Why is he accessing nature over a laptop? Why is the assistant saying, "I'll be right there" when it clearly can't do anything anymore? These are questions one might raise as a child. But what about as an adult?

In the end, it is not because I laughed that I felt ashamed, but rather because I first had to adopt the child's gaze in order to pose such questions. That's why "Living in another world" was not as crazily out of kilter as it might have seemed at first sight. It is life in this, our own world: happy and sad, lonely, desolate and sometimes also broken. Give me your hand and follow me into this world; I promise we won't only laugh.



Claus Richter, *To Do Bear (1-2)* (detail), 2017, steel, fabric, motor, wood, rubber, plastic, 110 1/4 × 27 1/2 × 27 1/2".

—Noemi Smolik

Translated from German by Nathaniel McBride.

GENEVA

Bernard Voïta

GALERIE LAURENCE BERNARD

Two unexpected objects awaited us at the entrance to Bernard Voïta's exhibition "*Hétérotopies* (Heterotopias)." On the left wall, a ribbon of shiny red metal folded out into the room from a metal frame like a