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Press Kit
Berlin, 25.5.23

Julius von Bismarck, Landscape Painting (Bismarck Sea), 2022. Courtesy Julius von Bismarck;
alexander levy, Berlin, und Stes + Hölbe, Düsseldorf. © Julius von Bismarck, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023



Julius von Bismarck

When Platitudes Become Form

26.5. – 14.8.23

**BERLINISCHE
GALERIE
MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART**

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Julius von Bismarck

When Platitudes Become Form

26.5. – 14.8.23

Julius von Bismarck explores in his art how people define their place within their immediate environment and how society negotiates the concept of nature. He frequently uses deconstruction as a tool to question how, as a society, we evaluate nature as landscape and who asserts the right of interpretation. The title “When Platitudes Become Form” alludes not only to our tendency to reduce perceptions and meanings to simplistic clichés but also to the iconic exhibition “Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form” of 1969. For his exhibition at the Berlinische Galerie, Bismarck has, for the first time, chosen a biographical approach and included some family history in work that centres on the interplay between how nature is seen and how history is written.

The eye-catching prologue is an abstract representation, on a cloth measuring nine metres by twelve, of moving water in that part of the Pacific Ocean marked by colonial mapmakers as the Bismarck Sea. Alongside it is a photograph of this Landscape Painting floating on the surface of the waves. Here Bismarck references both the appropriation of the place by German colonialism and, interwoven with the impact of that history, Oceania’s present-day condition as a watery island world confronting climate change and slowly rising sea levels.

The exhibition opens with the series “I like the flowers”. The big sculptures consist of dried plants pressed so hard that their third dimension has apparently been squeezed out of them. Their ornamental character reflects the decorative function of pot plants originating from non-European regions that would not survive in our climate if they were left out in the open. Bismarck is alluding here to the frequently platitudinous notions of such regions that treat them as exotic backcloths or escapist projections. At the same time, he references a practice common among scientific institutes and museums: the construction of a herbarium where nature can be catalogued and classified, but which often ignores the colonial background to botanical collections and the crucial role played in the history of colonialism by the trade in plants.

The large spatial installation that follows is a recent work. Once again Bismarck explores our frequently oversimplified views of nature and how these can influence past and present discourse about politics. In the middle of the main exhibition space a life-size giraffe faces a smaller version of the equestrian statue of Otto von Bismarck that stands today in Bremen. The two figures have been broken down into

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segments rather like push puppets, and the impression that they constitute an intact whole is quickly dispelled. Unlike the children's toy, where the animals collapse and can be righted with ease, these figures must be arduously reconstructed limb by limb. The work can be interpreted as a comment on the debate about how to deal with memorial statues in the public space. At the same time, the artist has combined his ambivalent family history with a societal approach to the history of thought that draws on powerful stereotypes and begins to instil them in early childhood.

In the adjoining room Bismarck presents a video inspired by BBC nature documentaries. "Geh aus mein Herz!" is the bird's-eye view of a landscape, set to the music of a hymn – which lends the work its title – sung by members of the artist's family. Is it the singers' breathing or the viewers' gaze that is causing these ripples of movement? What might seem at first to be an extract from a documentary celebrating an "untouched" Swiss landscape with great pathos reveals upon closer scrutiny that the motion has been triggered by downwash from a helicopter. The scenery perceived and recorded as tranquil and picturesque is actually the effect of destructive human behaviour. This hypnotic work vividly demonstrates the dangerous consequences of human activity and the boundaries of individual perspective.

In the last section of this show, Bismarck illustrates how the media influence our perception of landscapes. The works on display were co-authored in a variety of constellations with Julian Charrière and Felix Kiessling. All three artists studied under Olafur Eliasson at the Institute for Spatial Experiments. Placed prominently centre stage is the installation "Joe is dead", where tumbleweed scrambles along a conveyor belt. This plant spreads by letting the wind blow it along the surface of the ground. Tumbleweeds have become a cinematic topos and are often used to symbolise a desolate place or landscape. Alongside this installation there is another work, "I am Afraid I Must Ask You To Leave" (2018), which simulates the detonation of natural monuments in the United States. Bismarck and Charrière had replicas of several striking rock formations built to original scale, then blew them up and leaked the videos. As a result, some people believed that these detonations really were happening in US national parks. The display features not only big, highly aesthetic photographs of the explosions but also screens with TV news coverage of the events and comments on social media. The exhibition ends on this note by asking how meanings are assigned and why some aspects of nature

are considered to be more valuable, more beautiful or more worthy of protection than others – and who by.

The artist

Julius von Bismarck (*1983 in Breisach am Rhein) grew up in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). He lives and works in Berlin. His artistic practice, which combines visual art with themes from the natural sciences and humanities, takes a variety of forms: installations, happenings, sculptures and land art.

The exhibition has been supported by the Karin and Uwe Holweg Foundation. We also thank the galleries alexander levy in Berlin and Siese + Höke in Düsseldorf for their organisational support.

Catalogue

A catalogue on the exhibition is expected to be published by Distanz Verlag in mid-July 2023. With essays by Thomas Köhler/Anne Bitterwolf, Laura Seidel, Violeta Burckhardt, Timothy Morton, Paul M. Farber.

Press images

berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/julius-von-bismarck

Online tickets

bg.berlin/en/tickets

Social Media

#JuliusvonBismarckBG
#berlinischegalerie

Biography

Julius von Bismarck (*1983 in Breisach am Rhein) grew up in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). He lives and works in Berlin.

- 2012-2013
Universität der Künste Berlin, Germany, Meisterschüler professor Olafur Eliasson
- 2009
Universität der Künste Berlin, Germany, Institut für Raumexperimente, professor Olafur Eliasson
- 2007
Hunter College New York, USA, MFA-Program
- 2006
Universität der Künste Berlin, Germany, Visual Communication, Digital Class, professor Joachim Sauter
- 2005
Universität der Künste Berlin, Germany, Visual Communication

Grants / Awards / Residencies

- 2018
Award of the Shifting Foundation, Beverly Hills, USA
- 2017
Junge Stadt sieht Junge Kunst, Prize of the City of Wolfsburg, Germany
- 2013
IBB Photography Award, IBB Atrium, Berlin, Germany
- 2011
Prix Ars Electronica Collide@ CERN, Linz, Austria, CERN, Switzerland
- 2010
Beep Electronic Art Award, Madrid, Spain
- 2009
Prix Ars Electronica with the

Perpetual Storytelling Apparatus, Linz, Austria;
Selection of the Jury - Japan Media Arts Festival 09, Tokyo, Japan

- 2008
Award Golden Nica with the Image Fulgurator at Prix Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria

Solo exhibitions

- 2022
Whole Earth Archive, alexander levy, Berlin, Germany
- 2021
NEUSTADT, with Marta Dychenko, Emscherkunstweg, Duisburg, Germany;
Landscape Paintings, Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, Germany
- 2020
Feuer mit Feuer, Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, Germany;
Berliner Luft, Folge 12, with Julian Charrière, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin, Germany
- 2019
Art Club#28, Villa Medici, Rome, Italy;
I Am Afraid, with Julian Charrière, Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, Germany;
Baumanalyse, Haus Mödrath - Räume für Kunst, Kerpen, Germany;
Die Mimik der Thetys, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France
- 2018
Immer noch der Lauf der Dinge, alexander levy, Berlin, Germany;
Objects in Mirror Might Be Closer Than They Appear, with Julian Charrière, Swiss Institute, New York, USA;
I'm afraid I must ask you to leave, with Julian Charrière, Kunstpalais Erlangen, Germany;
Public Face, with Benjamin Maus and Richard Wilhelmer, Hamburg, Germany
- 2017
Gewaltenteilung, Städtische Galerie, Wolfsburg, Germany;
Talking to Thunder, Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, Germany;
Good Weather, Marlborough Contemporary, New York, USA
- 2016
Approximately Three Dimensions, alexander levy, Berlin, Germany;
Desert Now, with Julian Charrière and Felix Kiessling, Steve Turner, Los Angeles, USA;
Objects in mirror might be closer than they appear, with Julian Charrière, Villa Bernasconi, Grand-Lancy, Geneva, Switzerland;
Fade Into You - A Series of Film Screenings, Kunsthalle Mainz, Mainz, Germany
- 2015
Landscape Painting, Marlborough Chelsea, New York, USA;
Tiere sind dumm und Pflanzen noch viel dümmer, Kunstverein Gottingen, Germany
- 2014
History Apparatus, Kunstverein Arnsberg, Arnsberg, Germany
- 2013
Unfall am Mittelpunkt Deutschlands, alexander levy, Berlin, Germany;
Les bêtes sont bêtes et les plantes le sont encore plus, Galerie Ilka Bree, Bordeaux, France;
This is so romantic, IMO Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 2012
Punishment I, alexander levy, Berlin, Germany;
LE DICTATEUR: These Peanuts are Bullets, Family Business, New York, USA
- 2011
5 Minute Museum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands
- 2009
Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Exhibition texts

About this exhibition

Julius von Bismarck explores in his art how people define their place within their immediate environment and how society negotiates the concept of nature. He frequently uses deconstruction as a tool to question how we evaluate nature as landscape and who asserts the right of interpretation. The title “When Platitudes Become Form” alludes to our tendency to reduce perceptions and meanings to simplistic clichés. It is also a nod to the iconic exhibition “Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form” put on at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969.

For his exhibition at the Berlinische Galerie, Julius has, for the first time, chosen a biological approach and included some family history in work that questions how nature and history are constructed.

Julius von Bismarck (*1983 in Breisach am Rhein) grew up in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). He lives and works in Berlin. His artistic practice, which combines visual art with themes from the humanities and natural sciences, takes a variety of forms: installations, happenings, sculptures and land art. Note: These wall panels refer to the artist, at his own request, simply by his forename, as in this exhibition “Bismarck” stands for Otto von Bismarck.

I like the flowers

The series “I like the flowers” consists of big sculptures of dried plants. Like the flowers that children like to press between pages, these shapes have had their third dimension squeezed out of them. Beautiful they may be, but they express the brutality of exploiting and appropriating nature. Their ornamental character reflects the decorative function of pot plants originating from distant parts of the world. The work plays with our often simplistic perception and romantic depiction of exogenous flora to serve escapist dreams or exotic backdrops. At the same time, the artist is alluding to the practice in scientific institutes and museums of creating herbariums where nature can be categorised and classified – while often ignoring the colonial background to these botanical collections.

Many plants are still known by the names of Europeans who are credited with discovering them, even though they already had local names long before their appropriation, names that are often forgotten. The *Bismarckia nobilis* or Bismarck palm is a good example. The plant originates from Madagascar and was named in the late 19th century after the one-time Chancellor of Germany.

The Elephant in the Room

The series “The Elephant in the Room” was developed for this exhibition. The first two works are a life-size replica of a giraffe and a downsized version of the equestrian statue of Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) that stands in Bremen. The series explores how monuments function in public space and how they contribute to constructing a social identity. Here the inspiration came from the mechanics of a toy called a push puppet. Similarly, these two sculptures break down limb by limb and they only appear to be whole on first sight. In fact, they continually collapse and can only be righted by arduously piecing themselves back together.

Otto von Bismarck was the first Chancellor of the German Reich. He held the office from 1871 to 1890. He was also the artist’s great-great-great-uncle. Under Bismarck Germany became a colonial power, ruling by force in its colonial territories and committing many crimes such as land grabs, exploitation of labour and genocide. Even in Germany today, he is honoured by countless monuments and street names. Here in the exhibition, he is slowly dismantled until he falls from his horse and loses his head.

The artist has chosen the giraffe to illustrate our problematic attitude to nature and the way Europe’s colonial powers appropriated animals, plants and natural resources by force. Still the symbol of numerous zoos and animal parks today, here it becomes a monument to an exoticized nature, separated from human beings.

*The giraffe skin is from a Belgian zoo where the animal died some years ago.

Maybe everything was different

In this room Julius explores how landscape is appropriated – in films, for example. The works were co-authored in a variety of constellations with Julian Charrière and Felix Kiessling. All three artists studied under Olafur Eliasson at the Institute for Spatial Experiments.

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In the middle is the installation “Joe is dead”, where tumbleweed scrambles along a conveyor belt. This plant is an invasive species not native to the United States that spreads by letting the wind blow it across the ground. Tumbleweeds have become a cinematic topos and are often used to symbolise a desolate place or landscape.

The second work is called “I Am Afraid I Must Ask You To Leave”. It seems to show natural monuments in the United States being blown up. Working with a team in Mexico, the artists built replicas of rock formations to original scale and then made films and photographs of the detonations. By circulating the material they created the impression that terrorists were at work in US national parks. The screens show TV news coverage of the incident and comments on social media.

were made into prints during the colonial era and asks how pictures like this serve to appropriate the world.

Engravings, photographs and paintings of the archipelago named after Bismarck conveyed ideas of an exotic island setting – but by and large they blotted out the crimes committed under German colonial rule. Even today there are mountains in Papua New Guinea named after Bismarck’s family. The original local names have sunk into international oblivion and independent local history is still ignored.

Label texts

Geh aus, mein Herz!

In the video we see a bird’s-eye view of a landscape. The musical accompaniment is a hymn by Paul Gerhardt (1607–1676) and the opening line means “Go forth, my heart, and seek delight”, praising the beauty of nature. It is sung here by members of the artist’s family. Is it the breath of the singers or the gaze of the viewer that sets the trees in motion? At first the scene seems to convey the pathos of a nature documentary, but on closer scrutiny we realise that the movement is caused by downwind from a helicopter. So the tranquil, picturesque scenery is the result of destructive human activity. This hypnotic work vividly demonstrates the dangerous consequences of human behaviour and the limitations of individual perspective.

Landscape Painting (Bismarck Sea)

The prologue to the exhibition is a cloth measuring nine metres by twelve with an abstract representation of the moving surface of the so-called Bismarck Sea in the Pacific Ocean. It is accompanied by a photograph of this “Landscape Painting” that shows it floating on the surface of the sea off Papua New Guinea. Here Julius has in mind the engravings that

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Julius von Bismarck When Platitudes Become Form



Julius von Bismarck, *I like the flowers (Strelitzia Nicolai)*, 2017, Courtesy Julius von Bismarck; alexander levy, Berlin, and Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf © Julius von Bismarck / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023



Julius von Bismarck, *Landscape Painting (Bismarck Sea)*, 2022, Courtesy Julius von Bismarck; alexander levy, Berlin, and Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, © Julius von Bismarck / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023



Julius von Bismarck und Julian Charrière, *Grand Staircase Escalante, We Must Ask You to Leave (mountain view drive)*, 2018 © Julius von Bismarck / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023



Julius von Bismarck und Julian Charrière, *Canyonlands, We Must Ask You to Leave (vertical viewpoint)*, 2018 © Julius von Bismarck / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023



Contact **Berlinische Galerie**

Ulrike Andres
Head of Communication and Education
Tel +49 (0)30 78 902 829
andres@berlinischegalerie.de

Julia Lennemann
Communication
Tel +49 (0)30 78 902 831
lennemann@berlinischegalerie.de

Contact **Press**

Bureau N
Friederike Wode
Tel +49 (0)30 62736102
friederike.wode@bureau-n.de

Contact **Programme**

Christine van Haaren
Head of Education and Outreach
Tel +49 (0)30 78 902 836
haaren@berlinischegalerie.de

Katrin-Marie Kaptain
Education
Tel +49 (0)30 78 902 837
kaptain@berlinischegalerie.de

Berlinische Galerie
Berlin's Museum of Modern Art,
Photography and Architecture
Alte Jakobstraße 124–128
10969 Berlin
Tel +49 (0)30 78 902 600
berlinischegalerie.de