

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



## **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

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in German and English published by Distanz Verlag. Edited by Berlinische Galerie, with essays by Thomas Köhler, Anne Bitterwolf, Violeta Burckhardt, Timothy Morton, Paul M. Farber a.o. Distanz Verlag, 176 pages, ca. 80 colour images, 21,7 x 28 cm, Hardcover

## Press images

[berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/julius-von-bismarck](http://berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/julius-von-bismarck)

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