

Human Nature

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11.11.2022 – 10.04.2023

Gilles Aillaud
Ed Atkins
Valentin Carron
Gyárfás Oláh
Shara Hughes
Jochen Lempert
Otobong Nkanga
Robert Rauschenberg
Pamela Rosenkranz
Daniel Steegmann
Mangrané
Gisèle Vienne
Yuyan Wang
Luigi Zuccheri
& Vincent van Gogh

As the signs that we need to rethink the polarity between nature and culture are multiplying, and when the harm inflicted on the planet by human beings is becoming ever more apparent, this new exhibition invites us to explore the complex relationship between humanity and nature. Vincent van Gogh, an enlightened, avant-garde artist working during a time of intense industrialisation, often evoked nature and the possibility of synthesis with it. His pantheistic vision can thus serve as a lens through which to consider contemporary works, to reflect on the differences and affinities with his legacy.

Although the artists presented here seem to share the desire to foreground the urgent issues we face and to rethink our behaviours, they engage with different realms – those of dreams, of poetry, or the archetypal relationships between human beings and the plant and animal worlds. Their works capture apparently bucolic elements or evoke the disastrous effects of humanity's domination over the rest of the living world, reflecting forgotten ways of being in the world from our distant past or existential questioning that has all too often been dismissed.

By focusing on the infiltration of the artificial and the digital into every aspect of our being, certain works bring us closer to what is now both fundamental and essential.

1. Valentin Carron (*1977, Switzerland)

Valentin Carron engages a popular, even rudimentary, aesthetic. He explores different sculptural languages, where the interplay of materials and scales bring into question what we take for granted. The artist focuses here on the relationship between humans and pets.

The production of Carron's works often involves several steps: the figures in *Kid and Dog* (2021), for example, were first made from a block of modelling clay, then digitised with a 3D scanner. Data from the scan was then used to create this cast aluminium sculpture. Further in the exhibition, *The One One* (2021) is a giant head made of wood and felted wool that it is possible to sit in. The artist sees the work as a kind of refuge, highlighting the need we can sometimes feel to curl up in such a space and distance ourselves from the world.

2. Gilles Aillaud (1928–2005, France)

Gilles Aillaud studied philosophy before dedicating himself to painting. In the 1960s he became a major figure in the Narrative Figuration movement. His pictorial work had long been filled with political messages bordering on communism, but by the mid-1960s he came to focus on paintings of animals and landscapes.

The four paintings presented here, in which the artificial environments of the cages or pit take up more space than the animals themselves, verge on abstraction, resulting in paintings that are both metaphysical and philosophical. Captivity is unmistakable, even if no cage bars are shown, leading us to call into question our relationship with the animal world.

3. Shara Hughes (*1981, USA)

Shara Hughes considers the paintings and drawings that she creates to be imaginary internal landscapes that she populates with various symbols. She is inspired by Western painting but introduces formal and chromatic disruptions to create works that are original and which subvert classical depictions of landscape. Through loose, dynamic brushstrokes, she produces environments that are wilfully

devoid of any kind of realism, filled with fantastical vegetation and imagined perspectives.

4. Gisèle Vienne (*1976, France)

Gisèle Vienne studied music and philosophy before enrolling in puppet school. Since 2003 her work has focused on the creation of life-sized dolls representing teenage girls, which she then uses in performances, installations, photographs and films. In her work, the body is considered as a site for both questioning culturally constructed systems of perception.

5. Luigi Zuccheri (1904–1974, Italia)

Luigi Zuccheri spent most of his childhood in Friuli and the Veneto, two regions that would have a lasting effect on his work. After studying literature, he devoted himself to drawing and painting. By adopting techniques from both the Primitives and the great Italian masters, he developed a personal style that was informed by art history.

He discovered Surrealism while staying in Paris in the 1930s, which resulted in the human figure gradually disappearing from his work, supplanted by landscapes and depictions of animals. After World War II tiny silhouettes and figures reappeared in his work but were always dwarfed in comparison to natural elements.

6. Ed Atkins (*1982, United Kingdom)

Ed Atkins is best known for video works that use technologies associated with animation. Characterised by precise scripts and exacting sound production, they deal with concepts of death, the body, the spirit world and loss.

This Is the Truth (2022) uses a clip from the 1926 silent film *Ménilmontant* by Dimitri Kirsanoff, which starred Nadia Sibirskaja. To produce his new work, Atkins created a soundtrack for the scene consisting of realistic ambient sounds. With the help of artificial intelligence, the film was also digitised, cleaned, colourised and sharpened.

His works on paper presented in the corridor directly echo Van Gogh's paintings of worn-out shoes, which philosopher Martin Heidegger considered to be the very image of human labour and working the land.

7. Pamela Rosenkranz (*1979, Switzerland)

Through her work, which is informed by recent scientific research and speculative philosophy, Pamela Rosenkranz questions the relationship of human beings to their environment.

The series *Firm Being* (2011–2020) is made up of plastic bottles filled with liquids in the shades of human skin. Their presentation, under glass, on plinths, emphasises and extends the myth of purity constructed by brands. Recontextualised in this way, these consumer products question the commodification of the viewer: the bottles themselves resemble unidentifiable bodies.

On the second floor, with her installation emitting an intense, artificial, almost supernatural blue light, Rosenkranz transforms the exhibition space, suggesting a symbolic link between the blue light of medieval stained glass windows and that of our computer and smartphone screens. The resulting environment, as chimerical as it is contrived, challenges our habits of visiting and perceiving.

8. Jochen Lempert (*1958, Germany)

Jochen Lempert began his professional life as a biologist. In the late 1980s he turned to experimental cinema and then dedicated himself to photography. His photographic works are acutely attuned to living things and the coexistence of different life forms. Here, the fifteen photographs he has selected for the exhibition form an ensemble that echoes Van Gogh's *Trees* (1887).

9. Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008, USA)

Rauschenberg's work reflects multiple influences – including Dada, Surrealism and the indigenous art of North America – and influenced American Pop artists as well as French New Realist painters.

The collection of the Fondation Vincent van Gogh Arles – known as the "Collection Yolande Clergue" in honour of the woman who created the association that gave rise to the present foundation in 1983 – originated from the donation of works linked to Van Gogh by numerous artists, including Rauschenberg. If the sunflower incarnates here the Dutch artist and his vulnerability, today it can also echo the feeling of melancholy we may feel when faced with the ecological crisis.

10. Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890, Netherlands/France)

This painting has been made in July 1887, while Vincent van Gogh was living in Paris. It belongs to a group of works based on the motif of undergrowth that are among his most impressionistic. His interest in this subject is linked to the work of Claude Monet – especially his views of the banks of the Seine – with which we know Van Gogh felt an affinity. He chose to capture the vitality, strength and power of vegetation with a pointillist touch that verged on abstraction.

During his stay in Paris, Van Gogh sought to capture the small areas of countryside that persisted in a city disrupted by the industrial revolution and by modernity. It was this quest that brought him to the south of France in February 1888, where he would paint more undergrowth, notably in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

11. Yuyan Wang (*1989, China)

Within audiovisual installations, Yuyan Wang presents films created from found footage, combining clips from both personal videos and videos sourced online.

One Thousand and One Attempts to Be an Ocean (2021) was produced during the first Covid-19 lockdown: it uses a selection of the videos of repetitive events or actions that proliferated online at the time, which were oddly satisfying to watch ("oddly satisfying videos"). According to the artist this odyssey into the so-called Capitalocene era is her attempt to connect to the world.

12. Gyárfás Oláh (*1975, Romania)

Gyárfás Oláh is interested in folk traditions and uses ancient textiles to (re)create ghosts from the past or mythology. His experience in fashion design is also reflected in his work, as can be seen in *Untitled* (2015), which evokes both a threadbare garment and a human skeleton.

In the double sculpture *Szénaizmok Szalaghegyen* (Hay muscles in a mountain of ribbons, 2020), the mythological, benevolent beasts are mutable and almost unrecognisable. Natural materials, including hay, straw, hemp and wood, make them appear tame and domestic. His archaic, hybrid sculptures open up a transitional space between different worlds, societies and eras.

13. Otobong Nkanga (*1974, Nigeria)

Interested in land, architecture and the environment, Otobong Nkanga questions our use of natural resources, as well as our collective history, how it has been written and told.

The Weight of Scars (2015) brings together a constellation of photographs, of deserts, rocks and cliffs, against the backdrop of an imaginary map. Two incomplete puppets hold the strings that link the photographs. Before making this work, Nkanga visited a disused mine in Namibia, a place where society's most disadvantaged classes still carry out nowadays particularly difficult and dangerous work. *Arched Gorge* (2021), made up of a hand-tufted rug, ropes, wood and a flask made of Murano glass, can be perceived as a refuge for damaged souls, an invitation to rest.

14. Daniel Steegmann Mangrané (*1977, Spain)

In his works, Daniel Steegmann Mangrané seeks a certain fragility, in an attempt to get closer to belief systems that consider the original shared condition of humans and animals to be humanity and not animality. Cut lengthwise, this beech tree branch appears to have been dissected, split in such a way as to create a disturbing symmetry, an embodiment of vulnerability. From a distance it resembles an insect found in much of Daniel Steegmann Mangrané's work, the phasmid.

Curators: Bice Curiger, Julia Marchand and Margaux Bonopera

