

Archaea and Rejoicing the Sun

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My recent work emanates from an enquiry that began during a Master in Film & Photography study entitled *The Archaea*, which focused broadly on ecology, 'intelligence in nature', and the psychological subfield of eco-psychology.

The research question, 'how does one create a photographic body of work about Deep Ecology; the philosophy that considers humans to be equal to and no more important than any other species, advocating a radical re-adjustment of the relationship between humans and nature' resulted in the *Archaea* project. The work was born out of a desire to bring awareness to the growing body of contemporary post-human, anthropological research, challenging the viewpoint that plants are unintelligent (and alongside many other life forms, inferior to humans).

This manifested in a series of photographic images of constructed photographic tableaux of entangled, botanical phantasmagoria, referring to the landscape, with a suggestion of figuration. Inspired by the 'Jungle paintings' of Max Ernst, alluding to Ballardian themes of nature's retribution.

Initially searching for a visual methodology to express the multi-layered strands of theoretical underpinning led to a re-reading of J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, which in turn led, via themes of nature's retribution, to Max Ernst and his psychologically disturbing 1930s Jungle paintings. With influences drawn from non-western culture, alchemy and the occult, Ernst was working with surrealist methods of psychic automatism as a method of disrupting the senses, attempting to reconnect to shamanic and primeval ways of seeing and representing

the world, to regain a spiritual harmony with nature that he felt had been lost by rationalism and technological advancement.

Max Ernst was among many artists from the late nineteenth century onwards to practice shamanic techniques of seeing; artists which include Van Gogh, Cezanne, Rimbaud and Kahlo. These artists experimented with methods of shifting perception, of altering the normal state of being to enter realms of non-ordinary reality to disrupt habitual ways of seeing.

While investigating these ideas, my digitally created photographic work began to play with surrealistic juxtapositions, which allowed for absurd, nonsensical narratives to be created from found objects of botanical flotsam and phantasmagoria alongside experiments with pareidolia, the ability of the brain to distinguish faces or patterns in random data. Leonardo da Vinci, in one of his many notebooks wrote about pareidolia as an artistic device. "If you look at any wall spotted with various stains or with a mixture of different kinds of stones, if you are about to invent some scene you will be able to see in it a resemblance to various different landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys, and various groups of hills."

Max Ernst was known to be a devotee of a similar methodology that formed the basis of his frottage and grattage painting, techniques that he originated, specifically to rupture the identity of objective reality.

A digital photographic stacking technique with a subsequent sequence of bespoke post-production effects became the ideal process, allowing for an original methodology following Max Ernst's surrealist methods.

The low-key still life studio imagery evolved into a site-specific sculptural installation, co-created with my partner, contemporary artist and sculptor Mally Mallinson.

Early in 2019, we began a collaboration on a new and ongoing body of work which attempts to fuse Mally's ideological, political and satirical sculpture with my psychological, photographic landscapes. This work, entitled *Rejoicing the Sun*, explores the human position within the cyclical nature of earth's evolution; the eternal loop of our self-destruction on planet earth.

'*Skip of Fools*' refers to book VI of Plato's *Republic* about a ship with a dysfunctional crew. The smaller skeletal figure pushes the skip/ship up a mountain of refuse, an allegory to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, punished for eternity by the gods for his self-aggrandisement and forced to roll a giant boulder uphill only for it to perpetually roll down again.

The second piece, Epstein's *Tanks (The Dove that goes Boom)*, reimagines *Doves*, the Epstein sculpture, as a weapon. The paradoxically loaded symbology of the dove, from ancient Greece to its fairly modern reincarnation as a symbol of peace and pacifism, is transformed into a cardboard war machine being reclaimed by the act of nature's retribution.

The third image *The Petrified City (Rejoicing the Sun)* is based on the form of an excavated military bunker, suggestive of a crashed spacecraft. This reimagines the remains of the valley forge from the sci-fi film *Silent Running*, whose well-lit forest greenhouse dome, drifts into deep space carrying the last remnants of the earth's ecology. These three large scale photographic images were shown at Format 2019 at the University of Derby.

See: www.stephanierushton.co.uk



above and p34-36, from *The Archaea*
p30-33 from *Rejoicing the Sun*





Tanks



The Petrified City

