

Chris Bierl Mutual Adaption

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Since the beginnings of art, humans in all eras and cultures have depicted animals. We cannot say with certainty what motivated the first painters and sculptors of the world tens of thousands of years ago to immortalize cattle, mammoths, bison, or horses on the walls of rocks and caves, as well as in small carvings. However, it seems obvious that this expressed the special significance of animals in human life and the relationship that has always been ambivalent: terror and admiration, utility and destruction, exploitation and worship, disgust and beauty, struggle and adaptation are some of the aspects that describe it.

Insects played a subordinate role in art, even though they could acquire high symbolic and metaphorical significance due to their diligence, beauty, or other abilities, such as the scarab beetle in Egyptian or bees in Western culture. However, in contemporary art, insects are a recurring motif that is thematized from various perspectives and in diverse contexts. Nevertheless, it is still rare for an artist to work with living animals, as Chris Bierl does. He brings various species of Asian mantises – praying mantises – to the museum, where they live during an exhibition and can move freely within a predetermined framework. With this decision, Bierl opts against a specific form of representation, which always implies abstraction and reduction. Instead, he respectfully integrates the animals as partners in his artistic creation and presents them as individual beings in their entirety.

His series "Anime" consists of six large monochrome canvases arranged symmetrically in space. The clarity and strictness of the distribution, as well as the tranquility of the color fields, lend a meditative, almost sacred atmosphere to the otherwise empty exhibition hall. The monochromatic surfaces initially appear as resonating surfaces for our emotions or contemplative immersion, but the impression changes fundamentally once one recognizes that each canvas is occupied by a mantis – a total of six different species that partially stand out in their coloration from the canvas, while at other times they seem to merge with it so much that they are hardly recognizable at first glance.

The unsettling experience of being confronted with living animals in an art museum raises the question of how we can actually understand the monochromatic images. The titles of the works, consisting of geographical coordinates, provide a clue. They designate places that Chris Bierl explored on his extensive tours through volcanic landscapes in Japan, from which he brought back soil, rocks, and ash representing the coloration of those places. In turn, he used these samples to create the images in the "Anime" series, sometimes employing various silicate melts and granulates to achieve the corresponding natural color tone. Depending on the materials used and the application technique, the images appear more uniform, calm, homogeneous, flat, then again more dynamic, cloudy, painterly, deep. We can immerse ourselves in these paintings, let their colors affect us, and imagine what the landscapes that give them their coloration might look like. Thus, the images are situated in a peculiar intermediate area. On the one hand, they are monochromatic, non-representational color field paintings that make the used material the subject of the image. On the other hand, they are abstracted landscape representations, mapping specific places based on earthy colors. In this case, the artistic material, i.e., the earth, and the object of representation, i.e., the Japanese landscape, are partially identical.

However, no matter how one looks at the images, the mantises remain a dominant element, capturing attention and suggesting the works be viewed as animal pictures with a neutral background. In doing so, Bierl subtly questions the relationship between subject and background, a classical aspect of painterly composition, by allowing the mantises to determine the final composition. They move slowly across the surfaces and even climb onto the edges of the paintings, constantly changing the image and expanding into the surrounding space. Since mantises are also capable of blending in with their surroundings, they potentially change their color over the course of an exhibition.

In "Anime," nature becomes art, but also the artistic artifact, and monochromatic painting becomes nature as it serves as a habitat for the mantises during the exhibition. It is an actual landscape, a barren, vegetation-free earth that hangs on the wall, where praying mantises patiently wait. Small and delicate yet commanding the impression of the image, they represent a life form that has existed long before humans, millions of years ago. Their adaptability to their environment has ensured their survival and can be understood as a model for a way of life that, unlike humans, does not forcefully shape its natural surroundings according to its own desires but exists in harmony with it.

Insects presented as individuals in a museum, a place of preservation, also evoke their vulnerability. The preservation of insect diversity will be crucial for the survival of humanity. Without them, we would live on a planet of decay and putrefaction; other living beings would lack food; many plants would go un-pollinated, and countless other essential tasks for maintaining ecological balance would go unfulfilled. Alternatively, the isolated mantises on the earthy, mineral, inhospitable images also evoke, spanning across geological eras, the last survivors on a largely destroyed, devastated planet that may stand as the apocalyptic result of human interference in nature and can only be inhabited by beings with the best adaptability.

A characteristic of Chris Bierl's art is presenting the materials used in their appearance and materiality, allowing viewers to individually react to them. Thus, viewers can activate their narrative potential, inherent in their possible combinations, in different ways. Depending on the perspective, we may feel disgust, fascination, or indifference when faced with the insects. We may feel like we are observing the insects or being observed by them. We may sense the imaginary boundary that marks the animals' space, which we do not want to invade out of respect for the animal or fear of its reactions. The artworks created by human hands, potentially damaged by the mantises, may appear fragile and worthy of protection, while the insects that attract us and keep us at a distance may seem delicate and introspective. We may recognize the animals as individuals with their own character or see them merely as anonymous insects with whom we cannot establish a relationship. We may question what differentiates a mantis from a mosquito or fruit fly, which we often thoughtlessly kill. After all, individual insects, disregarding protected species, are not protected under German law and can be killed.

Bierl's works always reflect our perception of the phenomena in the world around us, which shapes our perception. In the multipart work "OrganicMatterBiosphere," Bierl brings together materials such as crude oil, sulfur, oil sand, and walnut wood, as well as burnt birds, a small amount of water from the Black Sea in a glass bottle, and a ghost mantis on a branch under a glass dome. The mantis's camouflage is so good that it is hardly distinguishable from a leaf. Initially, the materials Bierl uses, presented in a highly precise and reduced, aestheticized form, have their individual effects. The deep black glossy

surface of the crude oil is flawless, and one fears that particles of sulfur nearby could contaminate it—an peculiar notion considering that we generally view oil as polluting, sticky, and leaving stains. Thus, oil appears differently when I consider it as an aesthetic phenomenon compared to when I consider it in terms of its energetic usability or its historical significance for the Anthropocene era. However, it is hardly possible to remain fixed on individual observations when confronted with Chris Bierl's art. Instead, our associative thinking is further stimulated as we activate the various materials in our imagination, mix them together, and create imaginative connections. For example, oil and sulfur are substances that evoke associations of combustibility and the release of stored energy, fire, toxicity, industrialization, or volcanic violence. And who knows what could happen if these two substances were to mix? Is secret knowledge stored here, like in an alchemical laboratory, or is an experiment being prepared? How did the two magpies lying next to them die? Were they victims of an oil spill or perished in a dangerous experiment or burned in a sulfur fire? Is the mantis protected in its reduced terrarium from these specific substances or generally from the destruction of the environment by humans? And is the small bottle a valuable archaeological object that has been carefully placed on the black surface to be showcased, or was it washed ashore by the sea onto a beach clumped with oil sand from the Black Sea?

This free, associative thinking corresponds to Bierl's working method, where he repeatedly encounters aspects during his research for his works that particularly interest him. He follows and deepens these aspects, links them with other considerations, and seeks a visual expression for them, without aiming to illustrate axioms or make claims. For example, during the preparation for "OrganicMatterBiosphere," he learned about a theory by the Soviet scientist Vladimir Vernadsky, which assumes that the carbon compounds necessary for the formation of crude oil can be found in all layers of the Earth, so theoretically, one would only need to drill deep enough to always encounter oil. The theory widely accepted in our society, on the other hand, explains that crude oil is formed through the decomposition of organic materials, a process that can be observed in the Black Sea, where oil could potentially form over millions of years. The fossil sedimentation theory, as well as Wernadski's theory, have not been definitively proven, but they cannot be completely discarded either. So, how can we recognize a valid truth? To what extent are our scientific methods, which are always based on human-made models, capable of capturing the complexity of processes that span millions of years and involve the course of the universe, the formation of the Earth, or at least the production of oil? Bierl has incorporated oil and sulfur into a piece of furniture made of walnut wood, resembling an old-fashioned school desk with two compartments for chalk and a wet sponge for writing and erasing. The acquisition of knowledge and scientific work always function as a process of capturing, asserting, discarding, expanding, wiping away individual elements, starting anew in other places, combining and advancing without ever being completed.

At first glance, the installation "High Wichita" resembles a modern scientific laboratory. On a long, narrow table with a white polyamide casting plate, we can see glasses containing various colored powders, soils, and stones, test tubes, bones, dark driftwood from the Baltic Sea, terrariums with branches and mantises, tubes, and a text that deals with scientific classification systems and the position of pseudosciences within them. Two televisions above the table display close-up shots of mantises, as if their behavior is being directly observed in the laboratory. Again, we try to understand the significance of the different elements and how they relate to each other. However, an unconnected hose, a leafy branch without a mantis, and an apparently non-functional, sideways-tilted, metallic-glossy glass hollow form create an impression of incompleteness, improvisation, and lack of final thought. The bones and driftwood, on the other hand, evoke magical or alchemical

thinking that could underlie this arrangement. Ultimately, the initial appearance turns out to be deceptive. Unlike "OrganicMatterBiosphere," the contrast here lies between the scientifically laboratory-like appearance and the obvious non-functionality of the overall structure, raising questions about how science actually works and the spirit that underlies it, such as curiosity about phenomena, collecting and observing, designing experimental setups, and searching for the one missing puzzle piece that could confirm or falsify an assumption.

Bierl has created a striking image of incompleteness, the missing part, with the broken material image made of oil sand. He placed its lower part in front of the gallery on the street during an exhibition, from where it was eventually taken by unknown individuals. This obvious fragment on the wall raises questions about how parts relate to the whole, who decides what is intact or broken, whether something lost can be reconstructed, how value is created through an artistic act from raw materials, and what knowledge value an artwork can have that may not even be recognized as such by its owner - and for that reason may no longer even exist.

The three photographs "Save and Redeem," presented together with "OrganicMatterBiosphere," were taken in the vicinity of the Russian city of Karabash, where copper has been produced since the 19th century. The outdated factories have made it one of the most polluted cities in the world, leaving heavy traces of destruction in the landscape. A huge black mountain of waste mud towers over the houses in the area. Like the oil in "OrganicMatterBiosphere," it appears threatening or valuable, beautiful or ugly, alluring or repulsive depending on the perspective. Innocently, the white trunks of birch trees stand out in front of it, graphically and delicately. Bierl manages to imbue these photographs with a peculiar poetic beauty that stands in disconcerting contrast to what they actually depict. They appear as an embodiment of the repression that humans constantly engage in by ruthlessly exploiting and destroying nature, even though they have long recognized that this path leads to a deadly future.

The video "Conference of Birds" also revolves around the theme of knowledge and is based on a famous Persian poem from the 12th century of the same name. It tells the story of birds embarking on a journey to find their ruler, only to discover at the end of their arduous voyage that they themselves are the king, but they had not realized it (for a more detailed summary, see the interview, p. 69-70). Bierl recorded the video, which is accompanied by quotes from the poem, in the bird collection of the Natural History Museum in Nice. At times, small notes and labels are visible, revealing the scientific classifications by which the birds are grouped and identified. Then the birds stare at us so penetratingly that one might think they are still alive. It seems as if they have come together in another world, inaccessible to us, independently searching for a realization that will remain incomprehensible to us.

Chris Bierl also regularly sets out on journeys to remote and secluded regions where he doesn't encounter another person for days. It is in places like Norway and Iceland that the photographs of the series "Devaru III" (Fig. p. 44-51) were created, conveying a sense of vastness and exposure. In them, we recognize not only landscapes in specific colors, but also individual rocks or arrangements of stones that have clearly captured the attention of the wanderer and presented themselves as almost animated in complete solitude, giving him a profound sense of connection with natural phenomena that are conventionally considered lifeless. In the same space, the sound composition "Breheimen" by Francesco

Previtali aka derderder and Chris Bierl captures the sensation that arises when traversing such barren landscapes, where all sounds of civilization disappear, individual sounds are intensified, and supposed silence is no longer silence but begins to tell a story.

For Bierl, these hikes are also a way to test what form of adaptation one requires for their own survival. At the same time, even in the most remote regions, such as glaciers that are constantly retreating, he experiences the impact of human intervention in nature. Thus, these hikes are also marked by the very ambivalences that have always shaped our relationship with animals and landscapes, and that constantly necessitate a balance through mutual adjustments, the only way to ensure survival for all.

In the multipart installation "OrganicMatterBiosphere," Bierl brings together materials such as crude oil, sulfur, walnut wood, burnt birds, and water from the Black Sea in a manner reminiscent of a cabinet of wonders. A ghost mantis hangs from a withered branch, barely distinguishable from a leaf, while a mysterious "Denglish" poem cryptically speaks of workers, profits, and the value of art as a commodity. All these elements have an impact on their own, but we find ourselves questioning how they are interconnected, connecting them in thought and exploring possible mixtures, as if attempting to uncover the secret knowledge of an alchemical laboratory.

The three photographs "Redeem and Save" depict the area around the Russian city of Karabash, which has become one of the most polluted cities in the world due to copper production. A gigantic black mountain of lifeless material towers over the landscape, simultaneously fascinating and repulsive.

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