# SIMIAN



***Désespoir des Singes*, Cyprien Gaillard. Jun 20 — Sep 13, 2026**

***Désespoir des Singes***

*Désespoir des singes* is a species of indigenous Chilean tree, locally known as the Pehuén, which is sacred to the Pehuenche people, who have long relied on its seeds as a staple food. The tree is believed to have acquired its common name—the monkey puzzle tree, or in French, *Désespoir des singes,* meaning "The monkeys' despair"—in the nineteenth century, when one was being planted at Pencarrow, a Cornish estate. According to the story, a guest touched one of its sharp branches and remarked: "Climbing it would be a puzzle even for a monkey".

Dating back approximately 200 million years, the monkey puzzle tree is among the oldest living species on Earth, having coexisted with the dinosaurs. Its distinctive, spine-like leaves are thought to have evolved as protection against prehistoric grazing animals that have long since disappeared. In the wild, monkey puzzle trees grow on the slopes of volcanoes and high mountain ranges. Their thick bark is remarkably fire-resistant, allowing entire stands to survive even after lava flows.

A symbol of endurance and resilience, this species has persisted across millennia, gradually adapting to changing environments while retaining its singular form. Cyprien Gaillard adopts the French name of the Pehuén tree—*Désespoir des singes*—for his exhibition at Simian. The title reappears in a homonymous work consisting of three plaques that appear to have been removed from botanical specimens, recalling the labels once attached to trees displayed in a botanical garden.

Gaillard transforms readymade objects into artworks through analogy, using it both as a method and a point of departure for reflecting on how art can bring contrasting aspects of existence into relation without seeking to explain them. Originally employed by ancient Greek philosophers and mathematicians such as Aristotle and Euclid to describe proportional relationships, analogy literally means "according to proportion." It is a tool for measurement in language, whether spoken or visual. Gaillard deploys it to reveal correspondences between seemingly disparate things, often in ways that are unexpected, uncanny, and deeply resonant.

Using analogy as a means of probing hidden layers of visual meaning, Gaillard destabilizes the distinction between what is seen and what is understood, leaving viewers suspended before images that initially appear straightforward yet conceal their own shadows.

The exhibition presents the series *Geographical Analogies*, which uncovers meaningful correspondences among disparate photographs taken in different places and at different times. The works consist of groupings of nine Polaroids mounted on rounded supports that wrap around the structural columns of Simian's exhibition space. The curved form of each support elevates the images, transforming the material texture of the analogue photographs into something almost crystalline, as though each image were a facet of a larger sculptural object. Although the photographs were taken between 2006 and 2012, the groupings have been reconfigured for this exhibition, presenting each image anew while preserving its original, unaltered state. Rather than hanging flat against the wall, the Polaroids appear to float from the gallery's pillars.

They evoke the branches of the monkey puzzle tree, resisting both the viewer's vertical gaze and the conventional notion of photography as a flat, two-dimensional surface. Recorded by Gaillard using the now-defunct Polaroid Spectra format, this visual archive offers a kaleidoscopic view of familiar and unfamiliar places, preserved objects, and natural structures marked by human intervention. By their very nature, Polaroids resist manipulation and therefore possess a forensic quality, functioning less as images of moments than as traces of their occurrence. They are archaeological objects in their own right: remnants of a time that has passed yet continues to speak to the present. Like fossils, they possess a tactile presence. One can discern the fingerprints of the photographer who held them during the brief seconds of their development, as well as the marks left by exposure to light and by their journeys from place to place. They are unique, pocket-sized fossils of a past that sought permanence at the very moment it was slipping away.

Carefully assembled and presented without glass or protective coverings, the photographs resemble specimens in a natural history museum: material records of experiences we may never fully understand yet to which we remain irrevocably connected. These images record moments of intimacy in both public and private contexts, revealing not only the ephemerality of the medium but also the fragility of memory itself. Their colours will inevitably fade over time, erasing the very moments they were meant to preserve. Gaillard's work moves through cities and their margins, observing the accumulation of people, objects, ideas, projects, and architectures that gather, erode, and nevertheless endure. They remain in place, almost imperceptibly shifting in form and disposition over time. Like the monkey puzzle tree, these urban entities appear as traces of deep time, remnants of worlds that seem somehow to predate us.

The Polaroids likewise become signs of entropy: evidence of irreversible processes of accumulation, erosion, and transformation unfolding within environments where previous lives and temporalities remain perceptible. Their traces emerge like geological strata within a fossil or like the lingering light of a star whose radiance continues to travel long after its extinction. These temporal dimensions accumulate beside and upon one another, never reverting, never regenerating, simply persisting. Another work in the exhibition, *Knife Handles*, consists of wooden blocks intended to be shaped into knife handles. Typically transformed into custom-made, high-end collectible knives, these blanks are often cut from exceptionally old or carefully cultivated wood, embodying a material history of patience, growth, and duration. Yet once this purpose is inscribed into the wood, the process becomes irreversible. The transformation is entropic: it cannot be undone, and the material can no longer become anything else.

In this sense, Gaillard seems to suggest that human beings relate to time much as monkeys relate to the monkey puzzle tree: even the bravest or most intelligent among us can fall into despair when confronted by something fundamentally resistant to comprehension. Time, like the tree, cannot truly be climbed.

Text by Irene Campolmi
Curator of Art, Technology and Society at Amos Rex and Curator at Large. Co-founder, Yonder | Art•Science | Niels Bohr Institute



The figure of the weeping Buddha, was first encountered by the artist within architect Piet Blom's Cube Houses in Rotterdam.

## List of works

1. ***Désespoir des Singes,* 2026**
Various tree name plates removed from botanical gardens, metal hardware

2. ***pen or knife,* 2026**
Knife and pen blanks in different woods: Ziricote, Makassar, Zebrano, Lagerstromia
Various sizes

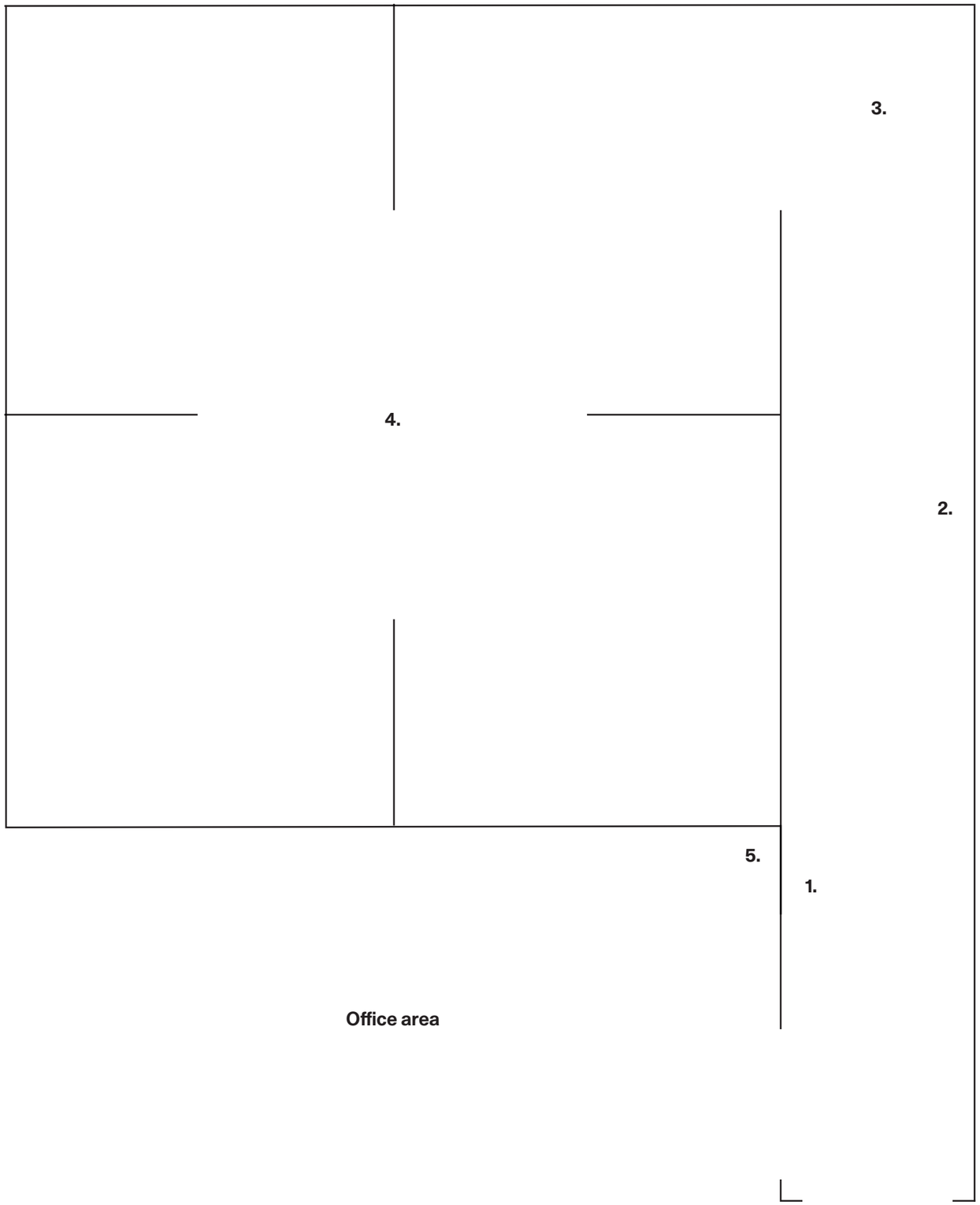
3. ***Absorbent Figure,* 2026**
Patinated bronze
53 × 51 × 46 cm

4. ***Geographical Analogies,* 2006–2026**
20 × 9 Polaroid Spectra mounted on museum board, cembalo tuning pins, piano wire
68 × 44 × 8 cm

**Office**

5. ***Untitled (rat race outtake), 2026***
35mm film, digitalized
1:26 min.

## Exhibition overview



**Simian is supported by:**
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***Geographical Analogies* were created during a residency at Callie's, Berlin**

**Courtesy:**
All works courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers

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The team at Sprüth Magers

**Cyprien Gaillard** (b. 1980) lives in Paris and Berlin. His work has been shown in exhibitions at institutions worldwide, including Haus der Kunst, Munich in 2025 – 2026, OGR Torino in 2024 – 2025, the Fondation Beyeler, Basel, in 2024, the Palais de Tokyo & Lafayette Anticipations, Paris, and LUMA Arles, both in 2022, the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, the Julia Stoschek Collection, Düsseldorf, in 2015, Sprüth Magers, Berlin, in 2015, MoMA PS1, New York, in 2013, the Kunsthalle Basel in 2010, MMK Frankfurt in 2010, the New Museum, New York, and Tate Modern, London, both in 2009. In 2010 Gaillard was the recipient of the Marcel Duchamp Prize, and in 2011 he was awarded the Nationalgalerie Prize for Young Art, Berlin.

**Simian, Kay Fiskers Plads 17**
**2300 Copenhagen**
**Denmark (DK)**

**Opening hours during exhibitions:**
**Friday, Saturday, Sunday 12-17**
**or by appointment**

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