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GUILLAUME DÉNERVAUD

'Orphaned Wells'

March 8 – May 18, 2024

Guillaume Dénervaud's works in "Orphaned Wells" are portals to other worlds. They take us into seemingly postapocalyptic landscapes, potential worlds emerging after our world has reached the point of collapse, driven by ever-expanding global capitalism, the ruthless advancement of progress and technology, and the consequent environmental devastation. The artist draws inspiration from science fiction subgenres such as cyberpunk or its more optimistic version, solarpunk.

The exhibition's ground floor consists primarily of large-size canvases and smaller drawings. The first are compositions of geometrical objects, mainly spheres and cylinders, glowing in pale colours against a darker background. The drawings show the entanglement of long, thin, cable-like structures connecting spheres and more organic, flower-like compositions. Ambiguously oscillating between figuration and abstraction, the depicted objects generate associations that disrupt spatial and temporal scales and the line between the natural and organic and the artificial or human-made. In terms of scale, the glowing spheres could simultaneously represent astronomical bodies, blooming dandelions, microscopic organisms, or tiny particles. Interpreted in relation to human scale, however, the shapes and figures resemble both machinic elements and organic matter: tree stems and pipes, flowers and wheels, wires and lianas. This deliberate confusion suggests an effortless coexistence or even an ontological equivalence between the natural and the artificial, having reached a unified state of wholeness or symbiosis. The thin lianas or cables intensify the sensation of interconnection and interdependency between the bio-machinic entities. Humans, however, are largely absent. They have left behind their tools and machines. Dénervaud draws these using architectural stencils, a tool that, even though it has been rendered obsolete by computer-aided design, allows him to achieve a high degree of geometric precision. The drawings and paintings are thus, to some extent, engineered.

The exhibition's title already references technological infrastructures – oil and gas wells – orphaned by their creators and caretakers, humans. They have not been appropriately plugged, leaking toxic substances and contaminating the surrounding air, water and soil. In Dénervaud's paintings, humans might have gone extinct as a consequence of eluding their responsibility. Regardless of their absence, however, the artist's response still feels optimistic, depicting a blooming and vibrant nature in a world in the process of recovery, reminiscent of Nausicaä's Garden Lab in Hayao Miyazaki's post-apocalyptic fantasy film. He imagines the highly absorbent ground in his paintings to have a similar healing effect when applying oil colours. Reciprocally, the machinic appears full of life, possibly hinting at a technological singularity scenario in which machines have become self-sufficient and overpowered humans. Where to set the temporal marker of Dénervaud's seemingly futuristic scenarios remains unclear. The title's orphaned wells refer to already existing anticipations of apocalyptic landscapes. We might already be living in the middle of the catastrophe. Further, if we think again of the spheric shapes as microbes or even as an allegory to the universe's birth, the temporal scale collapses completely and invites us to think of life and time in a cyclical cosmology. Dénervaud's works could be a visual manifestation of Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov's beliefs: we are meant to produce a cosmic catastrophe, the same way that thinking matter of a past universe could have set in motion what scientists have named the Big Bang.

In the back of the exhibition's ground floor, we find a luminous orb made out of blown glass. It heavily resembles the glowing spheres depicted in the paintings. Through a door, we go down the stairs into the gloom of the basement. The stair constitutes a spatial threshold forcing us to leave behind the apollonian space of framed portals, ready to be entered. Downstairs, we find more of Dénervaud's orbs distributed in several rooms.

Guillaume Dénervaud (b. 1987, Fribourg, Switzerland) lives and works in Paris. He studied at the École des arts appliqués, Geneva and at HEAD, Geneva. Dénervaud's solo shows include Gregor Staiger, Zurich (2024); Swiss Institute, New York (2023); Bel Ami, Los Angeles (2023); Centre D'édition Contemporary (CEC), Geneva (2021); Balice Hertling, Paris (2019); Alienze, Lausanne (2019); and Hard Hat, Geneva (2018). Group exhibitions include Pernod Ricard Foundation, Paris (forthcoming); Don't Worry, This Will All Be Over Soon, Gregor Staiger, Milan (2023); La main-pleur, Fri Art Kunsthalle, Fribourg (2022); Des corps, des écritures, Musée d'art Moderne de Paris (2022); Aquarium, Maison Populaire, Montreuil (2022); Les formes du transfert, Les Magasins Généraux, Paris (2021); Emblazoned World, Bel Ami, Los Angeles (2021); Le sain ennui, BQ Gallery, Berlin (2021); Your Friends and Neighbors, High Art, Paris (2020); and L'Oranger, LiveInYourHead, Geneva (2017). Dénervaud participated in the Swiss Institute residency program, New York (2021). His work is in the collections of the ICA Miami; MAMCO, Geneva; and the Musée d'art Moderne de Paris. He is a 2023 recipient of the Swiss Art Awards.