

Mirko Baselgia

Habitat

Exhibition in Lucerne: 23.11.2018–2.2.2019

Opening: Friday, November 23, 5.30–7.30 pm

Galerie Urs Meile is pleased to announce the opening of the first solo exhibition in the gallery of Swiss artist Mirko Baselgia (*1982). The exhibition's title *Habitat* can be understood in the biological sense of the term, namely as an ecosystem in which an organism or a group of organisms lives and evolves within the specificities of the surrounding environment. The term originates from the Latin verb *habitare* – “to live in” or “inhabit” – and in full refers to the natural and artificial features that characterize a human habitat. Mirko Baselgia is interested in the multiple facets of this notion, analyzing the connections that human, animal and vegetal species share with each other and with their surrounding environment. According to the artist, the concept of “habitat” deals not only with the notion of territory, but also with the (under)ground and the invisible life hiding beneath it.

The pomegranates (*Purscheida*, 2018, volcano stone from the Vesuvius eruption of 1944, each (H) 11cm, Ø 11 cm) exhibited in the first room refer precisely to the underworld and its Greek goddess Persephone, a figure that embodies vegetal renewal and is commonly associated with spring. The myth relates that Persephone was gathering flowers when Hades abducted her and brought her to the underworld. As Demeter was profoundly shaken by the disappearance of her daughter, her husband Zeus ordered Hades to return Persephone. Faking to comply with Zeus' request, Hades tricked Persephone by offering her some pomegranates seeds. For Persephone had tasted the food of the dead, Hades condemned her to spend a third of the year – the winter months – underground. The myth actually explains the origins of the cycle of seasons: when Persephone and her mother Demeter are reunited, the Earth flourishes, whereas winter comes back when she goes back to Hades. The black fruits shown in the exhibition are reproductions in original size of pomegranates sculpted into volcanic stone, debris collected by the artist in the vicinity of the Vesuvius and left by the last eruption of 1944. The choice of materials was dictated by the underground origin of the stone, which underwent a profound chemical transformation as liquid magma erupted from the bowels of the earth. If the pomegranates symbolize temptation in the Greek myth, the ones exhibited in the gallery are still intact, leaving Persephone with the possibility of a choice and the hope that she could change her destiny.

Four drawings are also on display in the first room (*Autolyse - Coprinus Comatus*, 2018, pencil, ink out of the *Coprinus Comatus*, handmade paper from Papiermühle Basel, each 77 x 55 cm). Each of them represents one or more *Coprinus comatus*, a common fungus also known as the “shaggy mane” or the “inky cap” because of the unusual method it uses to distribute its spores. Indeed, this type of fungi digests its own cap, which contribute to the dissemination of the spores. As auto-digestion “Autolyse” takes place, the cap and gills change into a black, gooey liquid, or ink. Self-destruction acquires here an unexpected positive meaning, allowing the growth of the next generation. Intrigued by this peculiar phenomenon, the artist went looking for these fungi in meadows. He first made drawings on site, and then collected the fungi to extract their ink following an old recipe. Realized with the fungi's ink, the exhibited works are analogical enlargements of the original sketches. The mushrooms are depicted in their natural environment to highlight the strong connection that these organisms share with their surroundings.

The last piece of the room consists of a “natural print” of a bird nest found during one of the artist's strolls through the woods (*Nia d'utschels - sylvia borin*, 2018, lead (20% tin, 80% lead), 77 x 55 x 1.1 cm). Baselgia obtained this print by placing the nest between a plate of steel and a plate of lead pressed against each other through a pair of rollers under considerable pressure, a perfect impression of the nest appearing on the much softer lead plate. Here too the destruction of the nest leads to the creation of something new, a unique print evoking the notions of presence, absence, mortality as well as the marks that every single organism leaves in the environment. Furthermore, bird nests are a common symbol for homes, the habitat that one shapes to live comfortably and safely. But if birds can freely choose their home, the artist draws attention to the fact that mankind has created a system in which inhabiting a

space comes with a cost and many social, political and economical restrictions.

The main gallery room displays a series of wooden works inspired by a previous installation realized at the Bellelay Abbey, Switzerland for the solo exhibition *Pardis (Curzoin)* in spring 2018. The installation spanned the length of the church's nave and transept (650 m²) and reproduced a part of the American railroad system in the 1870s based on the *Rand, McNally & Co.'s New Railway Guide Map of 1873*. The 9 works presented in the gallery are selected fragments of this floor installation. Instead of having them lie on the floor, the artist chose to frame them and hang them on the walls (*American Railroads*, 2018, Swiss stone pine wood (pinus cembra), American nut wood (frame), between 180 x 90 and 180 x 360 cm). The resulting reliefs remind us of the original railway tracks, but create simultaneously new, more abstract entities. Each module's and arrangement's title is actually composed by the letters and numbers evoking the place they occupied in the bigger map conceived by the artist to build the installation at the Bellelay Abbey. These fragments isolate one particular coordinate of the grid, reflecting on the notion of boundaries and demarcation, a direct consequence of the manmade exploitation of natural territories. The frames transform each fragment into a new territory, and give birth to isolated microcosms, highlighting the ideas of connection, division, human possession, and of restricted liberty.

Material and structural transformation processes are at the base of many works of the artist, who is interested in using a variety of materials, working in direct contact with them, and observing their physical and chemical transformation. Like an alchemist, through the visible alterations of the external world, its materials and structures, the artist achieves an inner, personal transformation allowing him to get closer to his true self and to shape the way he interacts with his environment.

The ideas of territory, natural resources, impermanence of things, and the cycle of life, death and rebirth are central to the present exhibition and recurrent in the artist's practice. Baselgia observes and redefines the dynamics and structures that shape our world, revealing the essential interdependence that connect human beings and their activities to the rest of the natural world. Through the exhibition, viewers are invited to reflect and progress in the exploration of their own inner world.

Mirko Baselgia was born 1982 in Lantsch/Lenz, Switzerland. He graduated 2010 at the Zurich University of the Arts in Fine Arts. His solo shows include: *Pardis (Curzoin)*, *Abbatiale de Bellelay, Bellelay, Switzerland* (2018); *Transmutaziun, Kunst in der Krypta No5, Grossmünster Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland* (2017); *The pattern which connects*, Kunstmuseum Olten, Olten, Switzerland (2014). Recent group exhibitions include: *Beehive*, Kunsthaus Baselland, Basel, Switzerland (2018); *Formen der Natur: Pure Nature Art, Museum Villa Rot, Burgrieden-Rot, Germany* (2018); *Extended Ground*, Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, Switzerland (2017); *Nach der Natur - Material, Form, Struktur, Museum Sinclair-Haus - Altana Kulturstiftung, Bad Homburg, Germany* (2017); *Triennale 2017 - Art Contemporain Valais*, Martigny, Switzerland (2017).