

The Island of Dr. Schneider

Max Hooper Schneider
"Damaged by Miracles"
High Art
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At equidistance between a Bachelor Machine inspired by Warner Bros., gothic comedy, Beetlejuice, and a Santa Monica version of Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus*, Max Hooper Schneider (*1982) likes to produce hybrid organisms. The Californian artist continues the construction of his biomechanical *Merzbau* in "Damaged in Miracles", what we might call a cathedral of anthropocentric misery.

Rather than the tropicalisation of the white cube that defines his usual *modus operandi*, Schneider opted here for a desert punk symphony. *To The Victor The Spoils* (2021), the first and by far the most impressive sculpture, is a carousel whose structure ends in a bouquet of tails inspired by the anatomy of H.R. Giger's Xenomorph and painted in different childish colours. Its trunk is made of soft toys solidified by

Estuary Holobiont (detail), 2021
 Chromed aluminum machine, resin, marine plants and algae, estuarine detritus
 126 x 165 x 152 cm



Eocene Epizoon: Cnidarian Bacula, 2021
 Fossil from the Eocene Epoch, aluminum machine, mounded sand
 235 x 130 x 150 cm



red resin, while its base is a white box ornamented with pink, green, red, blue, and purple handprints. Next to it are three sculptures from the artist's "Eocene Epizoon" series (2021): related to the geological period from 56 to 33.9 million years ago, they are archaeological reconstructions of fossilised animals, perched on sand bases and topped with animated exoskeletons. Defying the distinction between organic and mechanical, these recall the drawings of the German visionary of the scientific imagination, Paul Scheerbarth. Inspired equally by Baruch Spinoza's monistic philosophy postulating the fundamental unity of the universe, Schneider drew extra-terrestrial creatures that upset the categories of the living.

Courtesy: the artist and High Art, Paris / Artes

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The series "Dis-Memorium (Morbid Eroticism)" (2021) occupies an entire room of the gallery with a set of copper sculptures aggregating various materials that appear to have been burned together. It is possible to detect studded belts, BDSM harnesses, and gas masks – remnants of a cybergoth concert – among the garbage. If it is commonly accepted that the amount of time separating the apogee of a civilisation from its ruins is considerably reduced with climate change, Schneider seems here to give us a foretaste of what will our own fossils be. The last work on view is *Estuary Holobiont* (2021). Composed of marine plants and detritus gleaned from a waterway immersed in resin to form a base that looks like a swamp, it is, icing on the cake, topped by a mechanised arachnid.

One could situate the artist's practice halfway between the machinic experiments of Mark Pauline's Survival Research Laboratories in San Francisco and the inquiries into bio-art carried out by the experimental lab SymbioticA in Perth, yet his work is in stark contrast with the cohort of futurist movements born on the shore of the Pacific Rim – from Solarpunk to Sinofuturism. Instead of giving itself as a dystopic, utopic, or uehronic vision of humanity, it produces a familiar reality taking elements from both real and fictional clues which, when looked close upon, reveal their unforfeiting uncanniness.

Behind the references to pulp culture, Schneider shatters the dialectical thinking characteristic of modernity by implicitly criticising the museum – along with the white cube – and its will to order the world between living and non-living, nature and culture, original and copy.

In 1881, Gustave Flaubert levied a similar criticism through his unfinished comic novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. He ridiculed the encyclopedic will of two copyists who, failure after failure in all the humanities, finally decide to build their own museum, in which they will start copying, classifying, and drawing conclusions about the world from all

the objects that fall into their hands: tobacco pouches, old newspapers, posters, and torn books. If Flaubert parodied the museum by rationalising ad absurdum its founding notions of tradition, influence, development, evolution, source, and origin, Schneider collapses these categories on themselves ad nauseam. He is the Californian offspring of the Z-graded museum history that transformed the institution into a delirious machine, for better or worse. From Ferdinand II's Wunderkammer in Innsbruck, to P.T. Barnum's museum in New York, the institution's genealogy is haunted by the wobbly, the debris, the amorphous, the failing, and the bizarre.

But who or what inhabits Schneider's museological imaginary? Neither science-fiction nor fantasy, the

various *pièces-montées* presented at High Art seem to go beyond the artificial categories that help us think our reality and its limits. They materialise the New Weird, a contemporary literary genre that shares some traits with the aforementioned ones but that must not be confused with them. In the latter, as in Schneider's work, language is out of breath and no longer allows us to think about the world. Contrary to regular fictions, which suppose a continuity between our reality with the narrative one (as tenuous as the latter might be), stories in the tradition of the New Weird, Schneider's work among them, unfold a world in which humans exist, but is simply not one "made" for them.

Pierre-Alexandre Mateos & Charles Teyssou