

Press Release

Jean-Luc Mylayne

Mirror

June 2–July 29, 2023

Public Reception: June 1, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, London

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Poetry and existential philosophical questions define Jean-Luc Mylayne's conceptual photographic practice of over four decades. Capturing birds in their natural habitats, the artist creates formally surprising and carefully calibrated images. Sprüth Magers is pleased to present *Mirror*, a choreographed selection of Mylayne's works forming a distinctive ensemble thematically revolving around the fragility of our shared ecosystems and the brevity of life on earth. Every work on show is unique and the product of exceptional amounts of commitment, time and technical ingenuity. Requiring lengthy periods of preparation that stand in stark contrast to his subjects' ceaseless anxious movement, Mylayne composes tableaux that possess the astounding ability to decelerate time. In a meditation on nature, life and transience, he seems to explore the commonalities and divides between us humans and these fragile, untamed animals.

Following an invariable pattern, Mylayne's titles convey his method and theoretical concerns. Numbered chronologically and stating the year and months of production – making no reference to location or bird species – they reveal time as the fundamental aspect of his work. This archival method of titling indicates the two different temporal modalities that determine the artworks. Recording both an opportune moment and the continuous passage of time, they name the factors that make a meticulously planned yet spontaneous image possible. In *N° 324, Avril Mai 2005 (2005)*, two birds are caught in mid-flight. Camouflaged by their surroundings, they appear transparent and invoke metaphors for our fleeting existence on a billions-of-years-old planet. Long envisioned and well prepared, the captured instants cannot be repeated – a circumstance emphasized by the artist's choice to have only one print made of each photograph.

Challenging parameters are set to bring these images into being. Mylayne identifies an individual bird, conceives of a visual idea, sets up his equipment in a place that the bird frequents and waits for particular light conditions. Contending with changes in weather and seasons, he repeats the process with scientific precision: setting up his gear daily and taking it all down every night, only to reinstall it in the same position the following day. The principles of repetition and difference are also employed in the presentation of Mylayne's works. Variations of the same shot are often grouped together, thus inviting comparative viewing. *N° 409, Avril Mai 2006* and *N° 411, Avril*

Mai 2006 (both 2006) – two images showing a different single bird in the same setting, sitting on a branch amid a few daisies – offer up new details upon each viewing. Within the abrupt transitions from blurred to extremely sharp, there are several points to focus on. Without a one-point perspective to understand and organize the depicted landscapes, the viewer's eyes are compelled to move searchingly through sudden changes in spatial registers. This dynamic character is achieved using lenses of varying focal lengths that are specifically built to fit the artist's purposes, lending his works a certain painterly quality. Reading these images must take place incrementally as well as synoptically.

As with Mylayne's photography, exact copies do not exist in nature. Pointing toward recognizable individuality in his subjects, the 'A' in *A 7, Novembre 2006 - Mars 2007* (2006/2007) stands for *ami*. The 'friend' is a sharp bluebird with shiny feathers that sits at the center of a uniformly blurred background. Likewise evoking familiarity, a series of five photos – produced in February and March of 2008 – each of which catches one individual bird from a different angle while inspecting the camera's lens. Displaying the sense of humor with which the artist designs his *mises-en-scène*, the repetition of motif adds to the amusing effect. Color is also used to generate rhythm within a restrained aesthetic; dashes of red – in a male vermilion flycatcher or a bush in bloom – run through a row of images on show. An orange bird engages the viewer with its direct gaze and tentative posture in *N° 540, Mars Avril Mai 2007* (2007). Framed in the absolute center of an otherwise heavily blurred picture, the bird finds itself in the crosshairs of shadows created by surrounding trees – no doubt an allusion to the lines that structure the composition in the photographer's mind and the camera's viewfinder. Although this particular bird makes it hard not to assume it had something to ask the viewer, Mylayne has no interest in anthropomorphizing his avian subjects. Instead, the continuing theme in his works is the innate wisdom that can be detected in nature's systems and cycles.

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Establishing a connection to current debates about the negative impact human activity has on the planet, Mylayne's photography – with its singularity and disfavor of a vanishing point – seems to ask the viewer to adopt a different point of view, one that refutes the anthropocentric perspective. A notion mirrored in the works' individual scaling that references the viewer as well as the bird pictured within. The impressive insistence on one subject throughout a long career has prompted distinctive poetic observations that elicit a wide range of possible readings and meanings. A reflection on our present age of the Anthropocene, the trust implicit in these photographs leaves viewers with much to consider.

Jean-Luc Mylayne (*1946, Marquise, France) lives and works in the world. Selected solo exhibitions include Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover (2020), Fondation Vincent Van Gogh, Arles, Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Long Museum, Shanghai (all 2018–2019), The Art Institute of Chicago, The Arts Club of Chicago, Lurie Garden, Millennium Park, Chicago (all 2015), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2010), Musée d'Art contemporain de Lyon (2009), Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York (2007–2009), Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe, NM (2004, 2005, 2010), Musée des Arts contemporains, Grand-Hornu (2004), Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris (1995), Musée d'Art moderne, Saint-Étienne (1991). Significant group exhibitions include Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London (2020), S.M.A.K., Ghent (2017), the 54th Venice Biennale (2011), Neues Museum Weserburg, Bremen (1998), 10th Biennale of Sydney (1996), Kunsthhaus Zürich, Zurich (1995).

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