

**THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT IS DEDICATING AN EXTENSIVE THEMATIC EXHIBITION TO THE FASCINATION WITH WILDERNESS FROM MODERNITY TO THE PRESENT**

## **WILDERNESS**

**NOVEMBER 1, 2018–FEBRUARY 3, 2019**

**PRESS PREVIEW: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2018, 11 A.M.**

At a time when most of the blank spaces on the map of this world have largely disappeared and an “untouched state of nature” almost only still exists in the form of designated conservation areas, wilderness has once again become a focus in art. The search for the last free places, expeditions as an artistic medium, and visions of a post-human world as well as the renegotiation of the relationships between human beings and animals shape the works of many contemporary artists. The Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is now dedicating an extensive thematic exhibition to the recurring fascination with wilderness from November 1, 2018, to February 3, 2019. Over 100 important and impressive artworks by some 35 international artists are presented, including Julian Charrière, Ian Cheng, Marcus Coates, Tacita Dean, Mark Dion, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Camille Henrot, Asger Jorn, Per Kirkeby, Joachim Koester, Ana Mendieta, Georgia O’Keeffe, Gerhard Richter, Henri Rousseau, and Carleton E. Watkins. The exhibition brings together paintings, photographs, graphics, video and sound works, sculptures, and installations that trace the connections between wilderness and art from modernity to the present. With wilderness, what is under consideration is a cultural concept that has always also served as a projection surface for the other and the alien, for antitypes and fantasies of desire beyond the boundaries of a self-appointed civilization. In the current “age of human beings,” the utopia of a natural state removed from culture and human influence seems outdated. The examination of traditional images and fictions of wilderness, however, seem more alive than ever before.

The exhibition *Wilderness* is supported by the Dr. Marschner Foundation and the Verein der Freunde der Schirn Kunsthalle e. V.

In the traditional meaning of the word, wilderness denotes locations and instances that deny human access and in which nature is left to itself. In occidental history, wilderness as a cultural concept has always been constituted above all as an alternative model—in contrast to the spheres of the cultivated, the domesticated, or of civilization. It was only in the course of the eighteenth century that the Western concept of wilderness increasingly changed from a terrifying, threatening alternative world beyond human control into a positive utopia that then, conversely, was confronted with civilization as a threat. In connection with this, wilderness as an epitome of the sublime developed into an aesthetic category that, mediated by Romanticism, is still in use today. Abstract and ambiguous as the term wilderness at first seems, it nevertheless also directly gives rise to concrete pictures and associations that are rooted in the collective consciousness and perpetuate the legacy of Romanticism. The artistic examination of pictures and motifs of a disappearing wilderness today also always makes reference to a historical tradition. Against this backdrop, the exhibition is not first and foremost dedicated to the topic of wilderness in terms of iconography, but instead interrogates the relationship between wilderness and art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries so as to shed light on it from current perspective. The exhibition develops as a thematically conceived dialogue between contemporary and historical works. The emphases are on the aesthetic of the sublime popularized by Romanticism, the exploration of wilderness as a space of artistic experience, the metaphorical dimension of wilderness as a creative principle, and the creation of new, artificial forms of wilderness using the means of art.

For the exhibition, the Schirn was able to obtain loans from numerous German and international museums, and public and private collections, including the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen/Basel, the Tate in London, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, the Museo Nacional

Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Fondation Dubuffet in Paris, the Cobra Museum of Modern Art in Amstelveen, the Pinakothek der Moderne and the Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen (Bavarian State Painting Collections) in Munich, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, and the ZERO Foundation in Düsseldorf.

“A new call for wilderness is currently ringing out in all areas of life. There is a widespread longing for nature in its original state, that, given our overregulated and hyper-controlled reality, we tend to interpret as an escapist reflex. At the same time, it seems as if the disappearance of real wilderness areas from the surface of the earth is leading to an upsurge in the volume of pictures and fictions of wilderness. In art we have also been able to observe an increasing resort to motifs associated with the cultural concept of wilderness. The Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is dedicating an extensive exhibition to this recurring fascination with wilderness,” says Dr. Philipp Demandt, Director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt.

Esther Schlicht, the curator of the exhibition, explains: “In the case of wilderness as a topic, we have always also been dealing with images and projections in which the fears and longings of a self-appointed civilization are expressed. The idea of wilderness in itself is hence directly accompanied by the production of artistic pictures. The exhibition is linked to this idea and, when it interrogates wilderness in art, does not attempt first and foremost to trace the iconographic conventions of the historical representation of wilderness. Starting from a series of contemporary positions, it instead explores a relationship between art and wilderness that goes back to Romanticism. In individual thematic sections, attention is thus focused on particular aspects such as the aesthetic of the sublime popularized by Romanticism, the exploration of wilderness as a space for artistic experience, the metaphorical dimension of wilderness as a creative principle, and the creation of new, artificial wilderness by art.”

## THEMES AND ARTWORKS IN THE EXHIBITION—A SELECTION

The kickoff and historical starting point of the exhibition are two virtually emblematic depictions of wilderness: **Briton Rivière's** *Beyond Man's Footsteps* (1894) and **Henri Rousseau's** outstanding painting *Le lion, ayant faim, se jette sur l'antilope* (*The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope*, 1898–1905). Both were created at a time interval of only a few years, and outline the spectrum of what was dealt with as wilderness at the turn of the twentieth century. Rivière's depiction of a polar bear in the arctic ice desert represents the irrevocable farewell to Romanticism's notion of nature in the age of Darwinism. Rousseau's naïve-seeming jungle fantasy, in contrast, represents a unique synthesis of the motif of the primeval forest—as an epitome of a wild nature in its original state—with the painting style of the artist. It was perceived as primitive and anti-modern by his contemporaries and hence already points to the twentieth century. The overwhelming, large-format visions also show the extent to which the idea of wilderness has been associated from the outset with images and projections in which the fears and longings of a self-appointed civilization are expressed.

A first thematic area is dedicated to the depiction of wilderness as remote, untouched nature and juxtaposes contemporary works with a selection of historical photographs by, for instance, **Carleton E. Watkins**, who began documenting the newly accessed regions of the American West in photographs in 1861. His photos of a deserted Yosemite Valley not only substantially shaped the myth of the “Wild West,” but also contributed to the fact that Yosemite Valley was declared inviolable in 1864 and that an area in a wild state (from the perspective of the white settlers) was thus given protection for the first very time. Today, artists such as **Darren Almond** or **Julian Charrière** intentionally seek out remote regions of the world in order to capture them in the medium of photography. In doing so, they make use of motifs and set pieces from a Romantic pictorial tradition, which now serve as a foil for a critical examination of a fundamentally different concept of nature. Julian Charrière's views of the Alps in his series *Panorama* (2011), for example,

seem at first glance to be contemporary variations on historical panoramas. Upon closer examination, however, they turn out to be models arranged by the artist.

In an extension of such conceptual approaches in photography, the exhibition also presents works by the painter **Gerhard Richter**, who intensively dedicated himself to tradition-charged landscape painting and hence undertook a critical revision of motifs of wilderness that are historically fraught, particularly in the German context.

The exhibition also examines wilderness as a space of artistic experience: wilderness has again and again challenged artists not only as an imaginary alternative world, but also as a place that directly inspires artistic works. The artists do not primarily depict untouched natural spaces, but instead appropriate it by means of direct confrontation and intensive examination and thus make it a significant component of their work. In addition to a selection of the little-known *Tableaux d'assemblages* by **Jean Dubuffet** from the late 1950s, etchings and field notebooks and photographs from the archive of the Danish painter and geologist **Per Kirkeby**, which he created during numerous trips to Greenland, are also presented. In the large-format painting *From the Plains II* (1954), **Georgia O'Keeffe** depicted the hostile desert of the American Southwest as a sensual space of experience reduced to light and color. The work enters into a dialogue with the ZERO artist **Heinz Mack's** futuristic-seeming light experiments in the North African desert, which became famous in the 1960s as the *Sahara Project*.

Since the 1970s, the English artist **Richard Long** has also made wilderness not only the setting, but also quasi the medium and topic of his site-specific works. With his *Lines* and *Circles*, he temporarily transforms natural spaces by means of elementary activities such as walking or collecting and organizing found natural materials, documents this state, and then once again leaves the works to themselves. The performances of the Japanese collective **GUN** (Group Ultra Niigata), which was active in the 1960s and 1970s, are likewise fleeting. Its members—starting from an isolated, largely snow-covered region of Japan—for instance attempted to temporarily alter the “picture of snow.” The *Siluetas* of **Ana Mendieta**—body impressions or body contours that the artist inscribed in the landscape in various places in Mexico and Iowa in the years 1976 to 1979—in contrast, emerged from her search for a connection with nature that is as physical as it is spiritual. In performances such as *Bird Transformation* (1972), Mendieta also staged becoming an animal in an animist-seeming way, as the artist **Marcus Coates** also does in a similar way today. Photographs by him from the years 1998–99 are also presented in the exhibition.

Another section of the exhibition deals with the question of an “inner wilderness.” The notion of an uncharted, forgotten “wilderness within us” became a topic in art at the beginning of the twentieth century. Artists of various avant-garde movements questioned European civilization's belief in progress and coupled Jean-Jaques Rousseau's ideal of a hidden or buried human wilderness with the vision of a creation of art liberated from rigid cultural conventions and rational control.

Wilderness as an adversary of so-called civilization developed into an artistic concept; depicting it, so to say, became a metaphor—for inner states, for an art based on a loss of control, instinct and chance, or the position of artists themselves.

In this sense, for instance, the nature and primeval forest scenes created by the Surrealist **Max Ernst** in the 1930s such as *La joie de vivre* (The Joy of Living, 1937) seem on the one hand to be an allegory for the dark side of nature—or alternatively of culture, since the alleged idyll can simultaneously be read as a bleak foreboding of a European civilization prior to its collapse. On the other, they stand for the artistic process itself. The artists of the **CoBrA** group also wanted to free themselves from cultural and social constraints and propagated a new form or artistic authenticity that was based primarily on intuition and wildness. Their search for the elemental and the unconsumed was reflected not least in their preference for motifs from the animal realm and an original concept of the “human animal,” as the painting *Eine Cobra-Gruppe* (A Cobra Group, 1964) by **Asger Jorn** exemplifies. Contemporary artists such as **Joachim Koester** or **Luke Fowler** also search in their works for similarly unexplored areas of the human so as to sound out the boundaries between wilderness and civilization. Fowler's film *Bogman Palmjaguar* (2008)

portrays a man who turns away from society due to a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia and retreats to the wilderness in northern Scotland.

As was already the case for the artists of CoBrA, the animal, specifically the undomesticated animal, has proven until today to be a central motif in interrogating the relationship between wilderness and civilization. In this context, the exhibition shows works, for instance, by **Helmut Middendorf**—a protagonist of “Die Neue Wilde” (New Savages)—who in his expressive tableaux, for example in *Nashorn – grün* (Rhinoceros—Green, 1979), addresses the urban wilderness, or **Frank Stella’s** abstract pictorial relief, *The Grand Armada* (1989). Stella occupied himself artistically for more than fifteen years with the literary epic “Moby Dick” by Herman Melville, a dramatic story of whaling. With her film *King Kong Addition* (2007), **Camille Henrot** dedicates herself to a revision of an—in this case medially constructed—myth. In this work, she superimposes various film versions of the prototypical story about the intrusion of a gorilla in Western civilization.

The final section of the exhibition turns to the idea of wilderness under the conditions of the Anthropocene, the “age of human beings.” Now that no remnants of a nature untouched by human beings can be imagined on the surface of the earth, the idea of nature and, concomitantly, of wilderness are also being reconceived as an artistic category. The focus here is on the search for possibilities to create a new, artificial wilderness, whether in the sense of post-apocalyptic visions of the future or secondary natural spaces beyond human beings that are left on their own. In the monumental, six-meter-wide print *Quaternary* (2014) by **Tacita Dean**, the world lies buried under volcanic ash. Starting from chemical processes and reactions, the artist **Hicham Berrada** creates fantastical landscape-like scenes such as that shown in the work *Ghost #1* (2014). For *Something thinking of you* (2015), **Ian Cheng** created a virtual form between plant, animal, and artificial life, which develops further autonomously based on its basic, programmed characteristics. The final point in the presentation at the Schirn is the sound installation *MELT* (2016) by the artist **Jacob Kirkegaard**. In the middle of an immersive environment surrounded in fog, he confronts viewers with a minimalist as well as dramatic composition consisting of the sounds of melting ice, which he recorded in Greenland and below the surface of the ice.

## ALL THE ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Darren Almond, Karel Appel, Hicham Berrada, Frères Bisson, Julian Charrière, Ian Cheng, Marcus Coates, Constant, Tacita Dean, Mark Dion, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Joan Fontcuberta, Luke Fowler, GUN (Group Ultra Niigata), Camille Henrot, Pieter Hugo, Asger Jorn, Per Kirkeby, Jacob Kirkegaard, Joachim Koester, Richard Long, Heinz Mack, Ana Mendieta, Helmut Middendorf, Georgia O’Keeffe, Richard Oelze, Gerhard Richter, Briton Rivière, Henri Rousseau, Lin May Saeed, Frank Stella, Thomas Struth, Carleton E. Watkins

**CATALOG** *Wildnis / Wilderness*, edited by Esther Schlicht. With a foreword by Philipp Demandt and texts by Philippe Descola, Karen Kurczynski, Johanna Laub, Cord Riechermann, Esther Schlicht, and Reiko Tomii as well as artists’ statements and excerpts from historical and literary texts; Kerber Verlag, bilingual edition (German/English), 200 pages, 27 x 22 cm (vertical format), ca. 170 figs., hardcover, €35.00 (Schirn), €49.95 (bookshops), ISBN 978-3-7356-0521-4

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**VENUE** SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** November 1, 2018–February 3, 2019 **INFORMATION** [www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de) **EMAIL** [welcome@schirn.de](mailto:welcome@schirn.de) **TELEPHONE** +49 69 29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49 69 29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION** €9.00, reduced €7.00 **ADMISSION FREE** for children under age 8 **COMBO TICKET WITH THE EXHIBITION KING OF THE ANIMALS** €14.00, reduced €10.00 **ADVANCED BOOKING** Tickets are available online at

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**CURATOR** Esther Schlicht **CURATORIAL ASSISTANCE** Johanna Laub

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