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ARTFORUM

Julian Charrière, Towards No Earthly Pole, 2019, 4K video, color, sound, 104 minutes.

Julian Charrière

SEAN KELLY GALLERY

The earliest signs of nature gone awry in the classic 1954 black-and-white *Godzilla* are essentially moments of monochromatic abstraction: A glimmer of light roils the ocean’s surface from below, then a slick, rutted mound—ostensibly a reptilian back—emerges from the waterline. *Towards No Earthly Pole* (all works 2019)—the 104-minute video in Julian Charrière’s solo show at Sean Kelly Gallery—samples some of the cinematic language of this and other early creature features, using discomfitingly unrecognizable forms to evoke the

sublime horror of untamed wilderness. But here, ambiguity never lets up. Instead, Charrière forges a trance-inducing montage of his subjects: nighttime vistas of glaciers and polar terrain. An opening scene of heavy snowfall gives way to a succession of geomorphic surfaces, emerging and then fading back into the gloom, so foreign that they send the mind scrambling to find more familiar visual analogies: a sheet thrown over attic furniture, maybe, or cut quartz or calloused skin. The soundtrack—a nearly imperceptible hum of machinery—reveals little. Meanwhile, a blinding floodlight infuses each tableau with high drama while keeping it half-hidden in shadow. We often don't know if we're gawking at a monster's habitat—or its carapace.

If all sorts of didactic messaging is warranted in our age of accelerating climate change, it can often make for environmental art that elicits a somewhat limited read, typecasting humanity as the transgressor and the land itself as the wronged party. Luckily, Charrière doesn't insist on hitting us over the head with reminders of our villainous role in the Anthropocene, nor does he ignore the presence of people altogether. The contrivances of mankind are gently hinted at, whether in drone-powered spotlights or in the Neoclassical architecture featured in another video, *And Beneath It All Flows Liquid Fire*, which features a three-tiered water fountain brimming with dancing flames.

Along with tenebrous photographs of these gelid climes, the show included four sculptures made from "glacial erratics" (boulders transported from their sites of origin, sometimes hundreds of miles, by glaciers). Punctured with many deep holes where core samples have been removed, the rock formations rested upon these very cylindrical specimens, which were arranged lengthwise on the floor, as if to evoke the wooden rollers used by early civilizations to transport megaliths. A fifth sculpture, *Empire*, seemed more symbolically explicit: A used sled, its seat weighted with lead ingots the size of snowballs, its runners shaved down, gave the illusion that it had partially sunk into the gallery floor.

Many artists have taken on this terrain as their subject, but Charrière's recent output seems to find a kindred spirit in one particular historical work: *The Icebergs*, a monumental oil painting completed by Frederic Edwin Church in 1861. Church's canvas features its own "glacial erratic"—a dirt-colored lump, looking rather out of place on an icy promontory. Sidestepping narrative and allegory in favor of evoking nature's resistance to being described, the work confounded audiences

of his day: “The picture is above and beyond criticism,” wrote one reviewer. “We think it will require some time to get even on speaking terms with *The Icebergs*.”

Charrière, too, seems to want to force viewers into a world free from comfortable distractions and familiar vocabularies. *Towards No Earthly Pole* insists on screening indescribable alien landscapes for more than an hour and a half. It can feel a bit punishing to those of us raised with endless media feeds and in-flight entertainment systems. The work calls on us to assume the mental state of explorers from centuries past, whose long voyages must have left them no choice but to give in to the hypnotic powers of the land.