

Julian Charrière
Skies Heavy

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by Vanessa Boni

Overlay, feminist art historian Lucy R. Lippard's 1983 publication, excavates prehistoric stones, symbols, and their ritual significance. Lippard documents the reoccurrence of these objects in Land Art and Process Art, whose protagonists had sought to reconnect contemporary artistic practice—preoccupied as it was with conceptual approaches—to natural materials and their function in ancient belief systems. To highlight spiritual tendencies in contemporary art was to diverge from a prevailing Modernist insistence that art had, in fact, superseded religiosity. Lippard proposed 'overlay' as the operative verb in a novel conception of the present's relation to the past. Contemporary art's agnostic materialities do not *overcome*, but rather *overlay* their historic spiritual entanglements.

Julian Charrière is acutely aware of these temporal, material, and spiritual *overlays* of the human onto the geological. Fascinated by natural and environmental science, he often embarks on expeditions to carry out fieldwork in remote or ecologically fragile zones, which become integral to his artistic production. A number of sculptural works, have, for example, incorporated masses of coal, healing obsidian, and erratic rock: materials formed by epic geological processes, such as the fossilisation of carboniferous forests, the eruption of volcanos, or the movement of glaciers, in terrains that have been ravaged by man-made ecological catastrophe. For the artist, the physical encounter between stone—indiscriminately manufactured by the earth itself—and the viewer, *matters*, because it grounds the work in a heavy realm, where geological, spiritual, political, and economic forces meet without resolution. The earth does not care for millions of years, or for the immeasurable forces it wields. Only when overlaid with human quantifications of time and energy do its material deposits become *awesome*. Charrière's artworks, then, are metonyms, weighty objects brought before us to be scrutinised, yet remaining ever constitutive of the earth from which they have been prised.

Buried Sunshines Burn is a new series of large-scale images on stainless steel plates, made in the spirit of the nineteenth century technique of heliography (derived from the Greek, meaning 'sun writing'). Heliography was, historically, one of the earliest attempts to capture the sun's rays to create an image. Bitumen, a naturally occurring asphalt collected by the artist from the La Brea, Carpinteria and McKittrick tar pits in California, is applied, as a viscous liquid, to metal plates, rendering them photosensitive. Exposed to UV light, as if by an artificial sun, the bitumen petrifies, baking the image onto the alloy's surface. An original aerial photographic capture of Californian oil fields, anachronistically, remediated into heliography in the artist's studio. Akin to previous works by Charrière, the materials constituent of image-making processes typically become the

subject of their depictions. As is the case with *Buried Sunshines Burn*, which manifest hydrocarbons both as their subject matter and material underpinning, mirroring the history of Los Angeles as a megalopolis built on and with fossil fuels. It reveals the leviathan sinews of, among others, the Kern River Oil Field in the San Joaquin Valley, the Placerita and Aliso Canyon Oil Fields in Santa Clarita, as well as the enormous Inglewood Oil Field underneath LA, the presence of which transformed this once desert into an epicenter of image-making.

Golden swirls glimmer and entice, patterns and textures illegible from the ground unfurl to reveal an expansive labyrinthine network of dirt roads, snaking around pits of petroleum. These images are unstable: scenic details come in and out of focus, and the viewer's attention slips from close-up material confrontation to sudden, pictorial, elevations. The title of this work *Buried Sunshines Burn*, hints at an inherent repetition, a looping back onto itself. It is a *recursive* phrase. By using bitumen as both the topic and the means, these images embody photography's extractivist origins and lay bare the complexities and paradoxes of visual culture and the technological infrastructures that have come to underpin it.

Erratic rocks are collateral objects, dragged over vast distances by glacial surges, to become anomalies and anachronisms in the locations where they ultimately reside. These rocks have fascinated geologists and artists precisely because of their unlikely mobility. A grid of holes has been drilled into the erratic relic presented in *Not All Who Wander Are Lost*, employing a similar diamond drilling technique to that used in mining. The extracted columns of material, reminiscent of geological core samples, are then arranged as a primitive conveyor belt, onto which the perforated rock is mounted, awaiting transport. These columns contain glimmers of precious metals: aluminium, brass, copper, silver, and steel, tokens whose allure only invites more, and deeper, extractive projects. The technological precision of this work's manufacture is offset by its elemental sculptural composition, recalling mythical efforts to shape the earth at Stonehenge, or Giza, or the holed megaliths positioned to align with the rising sun to create sacred moments: all of them human attempts to *be* geological that still maintain their confounding mystery.

Considered together, this exhibition of works express Charrière's characteristic position: on the cusp of poetry and waste, of urgency and futility. They cannot be read as anything *other* than indictments of anthropocene conditions, and yet they categorically refuse any pretence to journalistic remove: they are themselves always materially implicated, never dispassionate reports. Charrière brings forth the deep mystery of the natural world, and overlays it with the telling, cruel conundrum that there is nothing new under the sun.