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Interview



Mathias Kessler at ME Contemporary just before the opening, 2010.

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Interview: Mathias Kessler

In his exhibition *I'll Survive* showing at ME Contemporary in Copenhagen, Austrian artist **Mathias Kessler** examines in depth the complicated and intertwined historical relationship between man and nature. Manifested in sweeping landscape prints and photographic imagery in conjunction with three-dimensional sculptural elements, Kessler explores the disillusioned human interpretations of the natural world, the endless quest to explore, conquer, and even understand it, and the consequences this has on the planet and mankind. Copenhagen had the opportunity to meet with Mathias Kessler to discuss his exhibition and the role his artistic ambitions ironically play in the very theme of his work as a result.

Mathias Kessler (b. 1968) was born and raised in Austria. He is self-educated and presently lives and works in New York. He has exhibited throughout Europe, the US, and Mexico. Among his most recent exhibitions are *The Taste of Discovery*, at Gallerie Heike Strelow, in Frankfurt, Germany, and *Nowhere to Be Found*, shown at Volta 5 in New York and at Eikon Schaufenster, Museums Quarter, Vienna, Austria.

Interview: **Heather Anderson**
 Foto: **Heather Anderson & ME Contemporary**

Mathias Kessler (AT)

I'll Survive

01. oktober - 30. oktober 2010

ME contemporary

Ny Adelgade 7, DK-1104 København K

web site: www.mecontemporary.com

Onsdag - fredag 12-17 Lørdag 12-15



Mathias Kessler: *I'll Survive*, 2010. Installation view.

How would you present your exhibition in your own words?

It represents our Western perception of nature; how we deal with it, perceive it, how we handle it in a sense. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, brought a new stance with regards to nature. That stance of ourselves, of our society, kind of brought about new changes. There was romanticism leaning towards a certain arrogance in the human attitude regarding nature, and that arrogance slowly translated into industrialism, which helped create the mess in which we find ourselves now. It is these environmental and scientific themes I try to address, kind of like traveling back and forth through time.

That leads me up to the second question, which is a two-part question. The first part is, have you always been so passionate about the environment, the natural world and our place in it? Or is this a more recent development brought on by the undeniable natural catastrophes and changes of that nature?

That's a good question, actually. I grew up in the mountains in Austria, so I had a very, very close connection to nature. I always spent every free minute in nature, hiking, playing sports, being a really outdoors person. So I always had that relationship with nature. Relating to the issues in this exhibition, it only came about five or six years back, when there was a certain media hype about global warming. I mean, my interest in nature was always there, but I was wondering why is it now that the media is picking up this subject and not twenty, thirty years ago? Why is there such a focus on global warming now, why is it that Al Gore is pitching in with his movie and documentary? You have to take a second look at what is going on and examine how our society is reacting to it. What is the elite and political agenda? The societal elite obviously has an interest in the environment.

Granted, there is always an industry that is exploiting our concept of the environment, which goes back to a certain romantic picture we have about nature. It's always this beautiful, romantic landscape painting which is still a figment of the egocentric. But we still live with it. It kind of overrides our own reality, and the advertising industry obviously plays with it very well. They create this green image which has nothing to do with nature. It is really twisted, but it works because we have this picture engrained in us, that it is our source of life, so it's easy to play the game and press the button to alert our consciousness to it. I realize that part of it is media hype and an interest in brainwashing and making money, and part of it is very honest, but the honest part sometimes doesn't go very far or succeed. Who wants to hear about the natural apocalypse? Except for the few crazy radicals who want the apocalypse...



Mathias Kessler: *Nowhere to Be Found #2*, 2010. 50 x 47 x 196 cm. skull with corals and shrimp in water tank on wooden base.

The second part of this question is more relative to the materials and the actual physical approach to this exhibition. How did the sculptural concept in juxtaposition with the prints come to pass? Is this something that evolved naturally, or was it something you consciously decided had to happen?

It kind of developed naturally. When I first started the work, I had to look into our tradition of landscape. I was inspired by Ansel Adams, a famous landscape photographer. He has published a couple of written works addressing the positive and the negative aspects of landscape photography. He promotes a certain method of approaching landscape photography in a technical way. I pushed this theory further. The perfect atmospheric condition to shoot a landscape would be eleven o'clock at night because there's no pollution in the atmosphere. The atmosphere is cooling down, the dirt either rises up or falls down, meaning the dew in the morning forms because of the cooling of the atmosphere, and the water drops collapse onto the grass. There is no light at eleven o'clock at night, so one has to start to stage it with movie lights. I looked into the Hollywood setting, and Hollywood shoots a lot of movie scenes at night because they don't have permission to shoot during the day, or they can't because there are too many people. They light up stretches of nature and towns, completely artificially, and I used that technology and applied it to my approach. Doing this work, I realized what it means to present a new dimension of nature and how you have to bring a lot of equipment to the location. It's always a distracting element.

That then brings me back to the question, what is science today? How does science today handle our problems? How do we perceive nature? I attached myself to the scientific expeditions, and when I explore the microscopic laboratory level of natural life, it is akin to the skulls and corals growing within an artificial tank in an artificial environment.



Mathias Kessler: *Acopan Tepui, Venezuela*, 2009. 100 x 145 cm. Digital C print. Diasec, face in mount on 3 mm nonreflective gallery Plexi, Dibond backing and back brace.

Do you feel that this subject matter will continue to be a theme in future exhibitions? Will the approach remain the same, or are you looking for it to evolve into something different?

Yeah, I actually want it to evolve into a study of how our society reacts to this subject. Are people reacting in a scientific way? And what do they bring as solutions and research to it? I am also interested in how other sectors of society break away, that there are groups of people that live in the utopian way. In the future, I want to look at investigating those

groups of people who deny the power of our post-consumer society, move away from it and try to live within the means of their own livelihood.

Do you have specific future geographical targets that interest you as an artist?

There are a couple of targets. One is the Yogi innuits in Colombia. Interestingly, the Colombian government allows them to do this, and I would like for them to ask me to produce an artwork in which I reverse the colonial aspect and instead address the indigenous people who completely removed themselves from the way they used to live. The other target is to examine utopian society. Most of them exist in the U.S. because it is founded on the idea of utopia. Many religious groups, the Shakers for example, came to the States long ago with this idea. I think that it is still happening in the U.S. and I think that the fact that this mentality is still prevalent here, albeit unconscious, is very interesting. People still find themselves together, creating a community with new ideas. Some of these ideas find their way back to Europe, whereas they get completely forgotten in the U.S. Like the green policies, implemented by Nixon in the 70's which are now embraced in Europe and stays on course with a forward-thinking mentality, whereas in the U.S. there was almost a mental regression back to the 19th century.

Thank you.



Mathias Kessler: *Acupan Tepuis_02, Venezuela, 2009.* 100 x 150 cm.
Digital C print. Diasec, face in mount on 3 mm nonreflective gallery Plexi,
Dibond backing and back brace.

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