

Michel Comte

Erosion I

Exhibition in Lucerne: 21.11.2020–29.1.2021
Opening: Saturday, 21 November, 11 am – 5 pm

Erosion II

Exhibition in Uetikon am See:
19.11.2020–29.1.2021
Opening: Saturday, 5 December, 11 am – 5 pm

Erosion I & II

If you halt the erosion of humankind, humankind will halt the erosion of the soil.
– Chandi Prasad Bhatt, environmental activist

One of the most drastic consequences of climate change is massive erosion following extreme weather events. It is the title and leitmotif of Michel Comte's two exhibitions, *Erosion I* and *Erosion II*, which will open this fall/winter at the Galerie Urs Meile in Lucerne and at the artist's studio in Uetikon am See, Switzerland.

Comte once described his works as “gentle reminders of reality”, as he uses them to draw attention to climate change. His nearly sacred-looking works of art strive to capture the sublimity of what threatens to disappear soon, or has already vanished. In the process Comte primarily tries to instigate an awareness of the impacts of our actions on our environment, while inspiring us to lead simpler, more sustainable lives. Only if we change ourselves, our lifestyles and our consumer behavior will we gain the opportunity to slow the progress of environmental destruction.

Erosion I

Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne
21 November 2020 – 29 January 2021
Opening: Saturday, 21 November, 11:00 am – 5:00 p.m.

Erosion. The eponymous series of works *Erosion* encompasses 20 ceramic works (2018, porcelain, rock salt, rock dust and mineral pigments, 33 x 33 x 10 cm each). The darker works are fired with ground rock and coal. Their surfaces are reminiscent of the layer of rust on glaciers, which can be traced back to industrial coal burning that has also been causing the glaciers to melt since the nineteenth century. A mix of salt, rock dust, and pigments lend the lighter works their coloring. The salt refers to the increasing salinization of the oceans, which is occurring due to the change in the hydrologic cycle (evaporation, precipitation, and circulation) caused by global warming. Rock dust is the result of the immense pressure glacial ice exerts upon the boulders below it.

Ombre. (2018, distilled water on handmade, raw rice paper, 66 x 66 cm). Comte had a pigment relief made of each of the 33 x 33 x 10-cm ceramic pieces on handmade rice paper from one of Beijing's oldest paper manufacturers. Dampened with distilled water, the white rice paper is pressed upon the ceramics for several hours. Pressing the pigment against the surface texture of the blocks for more than seventeen hours results in a permanent image on the paper. The sensuous, delicate paper topographies thus produced resemble endless, snow-covered mountain landscapes.

Drifts. With this installation of sixteen cast glass sculptures measuring 20 to 75 centimeters, *Drifts* (2020, coldworking glass, variable dimensions), Comte presents his newest series of works. From a distance, the individual pieces look like raw rocks. Seen from close up, however, the fascinating interiors of the sculptures open up to the viewer, revealing a similarity to ice formations or crystals, so that they resemble living creatures created by nature. The title, *Drifts*, refers to the rocks and sediment that emerge through the erosion, shifting and debris of glaciers.

Comte's *Drifts* are connected to his group of sculptures, *Untitled (Murano Glass Mountains)*, 2017, handcrafted Murano glass, granite dust, 40 x 29 x 20 cm, edition of 2 + I AP), which are also featured in the show. The two pieces, made of handcrafted Murano glass resemble massifs and were first presented in 2017 as part of the exhibition *Black Light, White Light* at the Triennale di Milano.

Wood Prints. "What would human life be without forests, those natural cities?" asked the American author Henry David Thoreau. With *Wood Prints* (2020, black ink print on paper, 42 x 29.7 cm each), a series of black Japanese ink woodcuts on paper, Comte's theme is the die-off of trees in the present time. As a result of environmental changes, commercial exploitation, and systemic neglect of forests, the 'lungs of the earth' are in serious danger. Their greatest threats are fires, storms, parasites, unsustainable forestry methods and extensive logging.

Erosion II

Atelier Michel Comte, Uetikon am See

5 December 2020 – 29 January 2021

Opening: Saturday, 5 December, 11 am – 5 pm

Glacier Terminus. Glacier Terminus (2019, ink, pigment, acrylic on iron metal panel, 246 x 2500 x 7.5 cm) stretches along a 25-meter-long, 2.5-meter high wall in the artist's studio. The work is made up of 21 iron plates treated with forty to sixty layers of ink, acrylic paint, salt dust, and oxidized carbon in a months-long process. The source of inspiration is the vanishing face of the 14th of July glacier in northwestern Spitsbergen, which Comte has visited several times in the past.

White Light I. The floor installation features an impressive photograph of the Swiss glacier Val Roseg (2017, pigment print on cotton paper, wood container, resin, tempered glass, mineral material, diptych, each panel 180 x 250 x 15 cm, edition of two). Printed on very thin, delicate cotton, the large photograph is stretched on a specially made frame with a mirrored back wall and black glazing. The photograph shows the breathtaking beauty of nature's drama and - at the same time - humankind's harsh treatment of high mountain landscapes.

Erosion [wood] (2019, Japanese ink on wood, variable dimensions). Another floor installation made of eleven wooden beams between one and four meters long and treated with black Japanese ink, *Erosion* is the counterpart of the ink prints in the gallery show. They refer to the large amount of driftwood in alpine rivers, which results from the processes of erosion in mountainous regions.

Single Stone (Requiem). Comte presented the installation (2017, black granite, 40 x 40 x 40 cm, edition of two) for the first time at the MAXXI Museum in Rome. The gradually vanishing texture of a glacier is projected onto a large piece of granite placed in the center of a large, dark room, until finally all that is left is the denuded, gray stone. Sound recordings of breaking, cracking glacial ice fill the space with a claustrophobic, disturbing atmosphere.

Salt and Dust and Stoneworks. Besides the large, three-dimensional installations, Comte also presents two smaller series of works. The different-sized paintings from the series *Salt and Dust* (2018, mineral pigments, rock salt, coal on rice paper [fermented type] mounted on wooden board, 33 x 33 x 4 cm and 280 x 170 x 8 cm) are mounted on wood, covered in Chinese paper, and produced in an elaborate process using salt, carbon, and more than sixty layers of pigment. The light-colored works are also treated with crushed shells and stones. A second group of works, *Stoneworks* (2020, black ink on paper, variable dimensions) encompasses a number of ink collages and cut-outs. These are meditative studies of rocks and cliffs that the artist has encountered in nature, and which have awakened his interest and inspired him.

Michel Comte (*1954 in Zurich, where he now resides) began his career restoring contemporary art and soon became an in-demand fashion photographer. He has worked with artists such as Andy Warhol and Yves Klein, as well as with Karl Lagerfeld for the fashion labels Chloé and Chanel. He photographed regularly for Vogue Italia and Vanity Fair, as well as for companies such as Dolce & Gabbana, Gianfranco Ferré, BMW, and Ferrari. Since 2009 Comte has mainly devoted himself to multimedia artwork. Especially in the past three years he has confronted climate change in a series of solo shows: *Light* at the MAXXI | Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome; *Black Light, White Light* at the Triennale di Milano (2017); *Light III* at the Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing (2018); and *Light IV* at Dirimart, Istanbul (2019). Michel Comte's extensive illustrated volume *Light*, published in 2016 by Gerhard Steidl, assembles photographs of glaciers and massifs in the process of being transformed by global warming.