

NICOLAI HOWALT

Specimens

photo

12. 05 – 02. 07. 2022

PRIVATE VIEW

Thursday, May 12th – 5pm > 8.30pm

SUNDAY OPENINGS

Sunday, May 29th – 2pm > 6pm – www.marais.guide

Sunday, June 26th – 2pm > 6pm – www.marais.guide

CONCERT

Thursday, June 16th at 8pm – **Louis Siracusa & Antonin Le Faure** (double bass & viola)

I love using photography to observe something I don't understand.

It's my way of looking at the world.

Nicolai Howalt - Politiken, Jan 23rd, 2022

The observation of living things is at the heart of the *Specimens* exhibition. The term obviously has a scientific connotation; it designates *a plant or animal which is an example of a particular species or type*. *Specimens* brings together four series of works that the photographer Nicolai Howalt has been creating since 2019 - *Old Tjikko*, *Algae*, *Fasciations* and *Microscope/Preparation*. They all share a common desire to question, reflect, marvel and perhaps understand.

Developing an initial concept, Nicolai Howalt then proceeds with a systematic and creative exploration of his subjects. Most often, this is not limited to looking or documenting. As a good alchemist, he also mobilises the very materiality of the subjects in order to extract knowledge about their profound natures, the essence of which is invisible to the naked eye. Throughout the working process, the photographer is receptive to what presents itself to him. These sometimes unexpected discoveries confer a very special poetry to the images; their perfection keeps viewers at a distance, whereas their sensuality attracts them.

Old Tjikko (2019) is a portrait of the oldest known living organism – a spruce from Sweden – whose genetic material dates back 9,600 years. These prints, developed from the same negative on vintage photo paper (from 1930 to 2007) have been drawn in many versions, 97 of which are gathered in the eponymous book. If *Old Tjikko* has been contemplating us for millennia, the artist's visual choice of old paper also tells the story of passing time. Chemistry manifest itself on these papers, which alter and transform over the decades, with the tones of the prints expanding into a wide range. Some are so dark that the image is barely noticeable; in others, the state of the paper gives rise to the illusion of a veiled or starry sky. The different views of the ancestral tree are reminiscent of a souvenir album presenting a series of portraits, of moments as rituals, of variations of time(s). Beyond the materiality and the image, *Old Tjikko* is foremost the story of vitality, of life that resists.

The *Algae* series (2020-2022) is on display for the first time. The photographed specimens are part of a group of algae collected over a period of 100 years in the Øresund Sea by the Botanisk Museum (Copenhagen). The splendid variations of purple, the transparencies of these banal and essential growths reveal a part of the seabed history of this strait between Denmark and Sweden. Captured and enlarged, the algae emerge from the anonymity of the depths and unfold their graceful beauty that recalls terrestrial flora.

Fasciation (2020-2022) is an opportunity for Nicolai Howalt to focus on anomalies, another reality of life. Fasciations are rare growths that can be found in nature and in cultures. The etymology comes from the Latin *fascia* (bands, stripes). Depending on certain genetic, bacterial, hormonal or environmental conditions, the fasciations result from the abnormal development of the apical meristem (the tissue of rapidly multiplying embryonic plant cells). They can affect several plant organs (stems, flowers). The collection of these plants began in the nineteenth century in order to establish whether these malformations originated from the possession of plants by supernatural forces or whether they had a scientific explanation. Nicolai Howalt is captivated by these malformations that he discovered for the first time in a museum. Nature's capacity to give rise to uncontrollable, fantastic and marvellous figures, to

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abstract narratives, is a source of fascination for him. Observing and recording the complex mathematics of these fractal structures, their geometry at a microscopic level, stimulates and motivates the photographer to capture them in their every detail. He photographs fragments of a tree affected by fasciation and this corpus of work resonates with a silver sculpture that is the precise replica of the shrub he was examining. The ensemble therefore bears witness to the fundamental principles of growth and forms the basis of an imaginary which, when it invests reality, becomes almost unimaginable.

Microscope/ Preparation (2020) immortalises the journey into minuteness, and focuses on the tool that enables such explorations. The recent pandemic inspired Nicolai Howalt to recreate a history of epidemics. He turned to the collections of the *Medicinsk Museion* – the Medical History Museum in Copenhagen. In the fight against a disease, identifying the bacterium responsible is essential, but this is not always an easy task. It is often not sufficient to use a microscope to determine the true nature of a sample or preparation. This series revisits the invention of the Gram staining method (1884) developed by the Danish bacteriologist Hans Christian Gram. Through a colouring/dicolouration process, gentian violet and fuchsine (pink) distinguish *Gram +* bacteria, whose thick walls preserve the violet colouration; and *Gram -* bacteria, whose thinner walls turn pink. The *Specimens* exhibition presents a photograph of Gram's microscope which, on this monumental scale, takes on the appearance of a space rocket. The series of *Preparations* discloses the abstract and pictorial world of coloured bacteria. This is a dialogue between research, history, nature and art: the microscope reveals other dimensions of our world in which a lethal bacterium turns out to be unsuspectingly beautiful.

With *Specimens*, Nicolai Howalt shares the visions and discoveries that his own curiosity allows him to access. The passage of time is materialised, the systems and structures of nature are made manifest, including in terms of their exceptions. The similarities and potentials carried by the micro and macro-worlds are the basis for ever-renewed wonder at the fragility of being.

background

Nicolai Howalt was born in Denmark in 1970. He trained at the **Fatamorgana** school of photography and initially intended to pursue a career as a photo-reporter, but abandoned this project after a few years to devote himself exclusively to his work as a visual artist. Presented for the first time at the Maria Lund Gallery in 2015 (*Here comes the sun*), **Nicolai Howalt's** work has been widely exhibited in Scandinavia, Europe and the United States. It has been awarded by many prestigious institutions (**Hasselblad Foundation, Danish Arts Foundation** etc.). The exhibition *Variations of Old Tjikko* at **Nikolaj Kunsthall** (Copenhagen, 2020) received the award for the best exhibition of the year in Denmark, and the following year, the series was distinguished by the honorary fellowship of the **Aage & Yelva Nimbs Fond** (Denmark). In France, the Maison du Danemark hosted the exhibition *How to hunt* (a collaboration with Trine Søndergaard, 2012) and the photographs by Nicolai Howalt and Trine Søndergaard were acquired by the collections of the Hermès Foundation and the Maison Européenne de la Photographie. In 2020, the **Musée de l'Elysée** (Lausanne) acquired the entire *Silver Migration* series, which was presented in the same year in the *Migrations* exhibition at the Maria Lund Gallery, as well as a selection of works from the *Elements* series which were exhibited at the gallery in *de travers* (2017). Nicolai Howalt's works feature in a large number of collections: **The J. Paul Getty Museum**, United States - **Hiscox Art Project**, United States - **The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts**, Canada - **Israel Museum**, Israel - **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León**, Spain - **Museum of Fine Art Houston**, United States - **Artphilein Foundation**, Italy – and in Denmark, those of: **ARoS**, Aarhus Art Museum - **Kunsten, Museum of Modern Art**, Aalborg - **Medical Museion**, University of Copenhagen, - **Bornholms Art Museum - Esbjerg Art Museum - Ny Carlsbergfondet**, - **Skagens Museum - Danish Arts Foundation - The Brandts Collection**, Odense - the **Royal Library** - the **National Museum of Photography**, Copenhagen - **Ny Kredit**.

Nicolai Howalt has published many books: *3 x 1* (2001), *Boxer* (2003), *How to hunt* (2010 – with Trine Søndergaard), *Sammen stød* (2011), *78 boxers* (2011), *Car Crash Studies* (2012), *LightBreak* (2015), *By looking down I see up. By looking up I see down* (2017), *Old Tjikko* (2019), *A New Light Break* (2020). *Old Tjikko* received the **Maribord photobook award** in 2020.

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