

PRESS RELEASE

Sam Falls

September 1 – October 28, 2023

Opening on Friday, September 1, 11 am – 8 pm, and Saturday, September 2, 11 am – 6 pm

Artist talk on Friday, September 1, 6 pm

Maag Areal, Zahnradstr. 21, CH-8005 Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present its eighth solo exhibition by the US-American artist Sam Falls.

“Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting.”

— Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*

Imagine the history of art as an ocean, and for the skin of the ocean, with all its surface tension, we have, according to Aristotle, “art as imitation of nature”. The dynamic, ever-growing world of art swims unquestioningly under this simple definition. We’ve explored these waters long and deep, but we’ve never really broken through the surface. Even if “life imitates art far more than art imitates life”, as Oscar Wilde said, we’re still trapped in a classic framework of mimesis, like harmless fish taking on the bright colors and shapes of poisonous plants and predators (technically known in biology as ‘aggressive mimicry’). As we’ve hurtled through the last few centuries with relatively little regard for the environment, one can imagine a time coming when nature all but disappears, and all we’re left with are our imitations of nature – a shallow puddle of landscapes – from which we must draw from to recreate a bio-synthetic future nature that imitates art. This would be a future based on taste rather than true objective beauty – which only exists in raw nature – and so we must not only strive to preserve the environment we have left, but work to make art that breaks through the surface of imitation to become part of nature itself.

To evolve as an artist and break through this threshold, I’ve consistently pushed to explore the open atmosphere and work symbiotically with the environment, to merge the act and outcome of art with those of nature and time, rather than illustrating it. To achieve this, I’ve persistently relinquished my presence to make room for the hand of nature itself to be present in the process and the very aesthetics of the artwork. Artists have always sought a certain purity – Abstract Expressionism, for example – but this has always been through the lens of art as an individual, human endeavor. But what about the time before civilization, and perhaps after? I would like to believe that art has always been there and will outlive us, in its truest form. The true artistic impulse is not simply aesthetics, but the universal depth of mortality and the emotional extremes it contains: birth and death, joy and pain, color and darkness, sun and rain, day and night, spring and fall – all of these are most evident in nature and form the heartbeat of the works composing this exhibition. The best description of this I’ve encountered was by Cormac McCarthy towards the end of *All The Pretty Horses*,

“He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought that the world’s heartbeat at some terrible cost and that the world’s pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower.”

Everyone agrees that art will never match natural beauty, but how close can we get? Along with time (and mortality), this philosophy of art and nature has always been central to my work (and life). From Plato and Aristotle to Kant and the canon of Western philosophy, it has been agreed that objective beauty is only in the form of nature, yet art always exists as a representation of it. Since my beginnings as an artist, I’ve consistently tried to open my mind and methods to what it would mean not to imitate nature, but to be it. Conceptually, I’ve consistently pushed both the abstract and research sides of the spectrum, working with and understanding the environment, spending time looking at and feeling the forms of nature, large and small, as well as studying phytomorphology, habitats and life cycles of plants. On the process side of this pursuit, I’ve methodically abandoned traditional and contemporary artistic tools such as brush and camera to work towards a purer collaborative process with nature. Throughout this process I have often thought of a passage from Aristotle’s *Physics II*, Part 8: “[...] if things made by nature were also made by art, they would come into being in the same way as by nature. Each step in the series is for the sake of the

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

next; and generally, art completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her. If, therefore, artificial products are for the sake of an end, so clearly also are natural products." So, while I can't avoid the end of my process being art, I have worked to understand the productive processes of nature and to evolve toward a creative practice that synthesizes the acts of art and nature. The final form of this collaboration is art, but it involves nature rather than imitating it.

As Aristotle's philosophy describes, no matter how closely art imitates nature, there is a limit to that form that will always divide it from true natural beauty, and that is the limit of human nature. Over time, I've found that there is the potential to erase this boundary by not just yielding to nature, but letting it take the reins by removing myself from the work, leaving space for the active environment, for chance. Nietzsche conceived of this potential portal to nature as art through the Dionysian, allowing for the ecstatic displacement of artistic forms through the "primordial unity" of nature. While Nietzsche agrees with Aristotle that the plastic arts imitate nature and go so far as to support artificial constructs of society and morality that conflict with nature and attempt to tame it under what he calls the Apollonian, he also understands that the reciprocal exists in the Dionysian, where "artistic energies burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist." Nietzsche believes that this artistic production most readily takes the form of music, which essentially comes from the artist in natural form, since there is no natural equivalent to mimic. Although I'm not making music, I believe that this potential exists for the visual arts as well, but the way has yet to be paved through this new and exciting collaboration with nature. Like a musician, I work with given natural rules to form a work of art that cannot be defined until it exists, there is no goal of representation or allegory except that of nature becoming itself. The deeper I get into this collaboration, the more I've been able to subtract myself from the composition, or as Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Dionysian art offers "the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in the augury of a restored oneness."

To achieve this ideal oneness with nature, I've been working directly with the sun and the rain for over a decade, using them as both my tools and my subjects, to produce artworks that exist not only as primary sources of nature transposed, but as images of time. The work has evolved to include flora and fauna as part of the subject and substance of the work, and I've taken this collaboration to new heights. Whereas before I used rain and atmosphere to make 'paintings' of the landscape and seasonal plants, in the past year I've developed a temporal element to these works. In the past, if the rain washed away the image of the plants, I would start again, but I realized that if I left the freshly cut plants on the canvas, they would continue to live like flowers in a vase, absorbing not only the water from the canvas by osmosis, but also the pigment. This has resulted in these new works, which depict in great ghostly detail the last stage of the flora's life, as well as the accumulating season of spring and summer storms in the Hudson Valley. From the first blooms of irises, daffodils, bleeding hearts and peonies in early spring, to the wild goldenrods, coneflowers and Queen Anne's lace of summer, the paintings evolve as the seasons change and rain feeds both the nature of the environment and the composition of the painting.

While I've always used the sun to create long-term outdoor photograms, I've previously stuck to non-living subjects that would survive a year in the elements. These new works are made from the cuttings of living plants at the height of their spring bloom and left to wither on dyed canvas until early autumn. To develop this practice, I've dyed the organic canvas with traditional natural dyes made from plants such as sequoia seeds, lac, madder root and marigold flowers, as well as insects such as cochineal. The resulting images not only illustrate the natural effect of the sun's rays and the subtle resilience and vulnerability of the environment, but they also hold time within the work itself, not just a mirror of the changing seasons, but a work formed from the accumulation of time.

Lastly, thinking about rapidly disappearing landscapes and the need to preserve their form, I've created what might be called fossils for the future. The larger ceramic works take the earth and literally sculpt it with the plants and human form together. While it is a world, I hope we will avoid the thought of a time to come when these forms will no longer be on the earth in their living form imbues the work with a memorial tone and precautionary symbolism. Another poetic translation of this comes from Cormac McCarthy in his apocalyptic novel *The Road*: "He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it." The ceramic-framed works are made from the actual flowers in the Polaroid photographs. This film was once the pinnacle of technological reproduction but is now obsolete and no longer manufactured. I've used it to photograph flowers in spring as they bloom, their splendor instantly transferred by light onto the Polaroid film. Weeks later I would return to those very flowers and cut them off as they wilted, rolling them in wet clay to preserve them forever as fossils, framing the image of their younger, vibrant form.

The soul of all this work is to connect with the heart of nature and become one with it. In turn, I hope that their exhibition will provide a space, both new and familiar, for the viewer to merge with nature. Western art has been built on this Apollonian ideal of individuation, reflecting or challenging the same social and political values throughout its culture. I would argue that it's because the true beauty of nature and its forms requires true pain and suffering, but human individuation edits these fundamentals in favor of an imitation of pain alongside the imitation of beauty. Now, more than ever, we must turn to the Dionysian. We've seen what centuries of individuation have done to our present position, and it's time to evolve, to embrace the truth of nature and embody it in the visual arts along with music, as Nietzsche wrote, "[...] because music addresses itself symbolically to the primordial contradiction and pain in the heart of the original oneness, and thus presents in symbolic form a sphere which is above all appearances and prior to them [...]" Like the first organisms to emerge from the sea and live on land, the process of evolution was natural. As art races along a path of technological development, from film photography to digital imaging to robotics and AI, it all seems to lie beneath the surface of natural beauty. I believe in a progressive art, but I think it's most important to keep in perspective what's most important and where it started. I believe it's possible to integrate art and nature, not just their processes, but their ends - to achieve pure beauty in all its dichotomy. Art is a mirror of the present moment, but good art can be a little ahead of its time. Right now, we are looking for ways to stop destroying the environment, but I hope we will soon realize that we are the environment, that the art we make now can guide our relationship with the natural world of the future.

Sam Falls, Summer 2023

Concerned with the intimacy of time, the illustration of place, and exploration of mortality, Sam Falls (born 1984 in San Diego, CA, US) has created his own formal language by intertwining photography's core parameters of time and exposure with nature and her elements. Working largely outdoors with vernacular materials and nature as a site-specific subject, Falls abandons mechanical reproduction in favor of a more symbiotic relationship between subject and object. In doing so, he bridges the gap between photography, sculpture, and painting, as well as the divide between artist, object, and viewer.

Recent solo exhibitions by Sam Falls include MOCA Cleveland, OH, US (2023); Mori Museum in Tokyo, JP (2022); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US (2018); Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Trento and Rovereto, IT (2018); The Kitchen, New York, NY, US (2015); Ballroom Marfa, Texas, TX, US (2015); Pomona College Museum of Art, CA, US (2014); Public Art Fund, New York, NY, US (2014); and LAXART, Los Angeles, CA, US (2013), among others. His work has been included in group exhibitions at Biennale Weierthal, Winterthur, CH (2023); Fondation Opale, Lens, CH (2020); Art Basel Unlimited, Basel, CH (2019); Aspen Art Museum, Colorado, CO, US (2018); Le Consortium, Dijon, FR (2017); Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, OH, US (2017); Mead Gallery, University of Warwick, UK (2016); Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, SC (2015); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, US (2015); Menil Collection, Houston, TX, US (2015); Museo MADRE, Naples, FL, US (2014); and the International Center of Photography, New York, NY, US (2013); among others.

For more information, please contact the sales (onlinesales@presenhuber.com).

For press images and information, please contact David Ulrichs PR (press@presenhuber.com, +49 176 5033 0135).