

Charles Stankieveh

The Desert Turned To Glass

Opening: October 11th, 6 – 9 pm
October 11th – November 9th, 2024
Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

Eye of Silence presents images of a newly formed, smoking volcanic landscape, captured through slow-motion footage, and displayed using a vertical mirroring technique. This method, originally developed by the Swiss psychoanalyst Hermann Rorschach, was intended to reveal the unconscious aspects of the human psyche.

A freshly sculpted surface is portrayed, born from the Earth itself through an autopoietic process. When the volcanic crater emerges, one is compelled to surrender to Rorschach's principle of associative imagination: we find ourselves standing at the gateway to the world's inner depths. Shortly thereafter, it feels as though this gate is closing.

We end in caves, witnessing some of the earliest Paleolithic art in the world, located in today's Namibia —traces that suggest sonic rituals. The film's thesis, supported by archaeologists in the region, is that the rituals of these communities, including shamanistic practices, existed primarily because of sound, with imagery emerging afterward.

The footage is framed by 3D renderings: at the beginning of the film, a meteorite formed from a spiderweb of stars, while at the end, the scene shifts to the inside of the grotto that gradually dissolves back into star constellations.

The film explores the concept of spatial existence in a constant loop, taking us from the universe to a planet, and then to a landscape. The final sequence, from the cave or grotto inside the Earth, leads us back to black—back to a state of nothingness. It presents a Freudian juxtaposition of imagery that represents the most existential concepts: that of Birth and Death.

Before images emerge from the absolute darkness in the film, and before anything seems to exist, sound is introduced as the first instance that precedes the material world—a sound born from silence:

"Silence is the moment before speaking in tongues. Silence is neither a void nor a negativity. Absolute silence is impossible, and therefore I think silence represents the moment where we truly listen. It is an idea of listening as a gate towards deep empathy, where the world reveals itself to us, echoing the Buddhist belief that when the mind is still, it can perceive the true nature of things. It is in one's own silence, in these moments of stillness, that one can observe what is around and be receptive. It is the opposite of speaking, of producing." (Charles Stankieveh)

Following this concept of silence, the soundscape is a remix imperceptible to the human ear. It is composed of electromagnetic signals from the ionosphere—a layer of Earth's atmosphere extending roughly 80 to 1,000 kilometers above the surface. Using a specially custom-built antenna, the energy of the "Aurora Borealis," the dynamic flickering of the Northern Lights during an electromagnetic storm from the sun, is captured. These are combined with underwater recordings from the ocean near Cape Canaveral, made with hydrophones, as well as vibrational noise from tectonic movements and volcanic activity.

The film's title, *Eye of Silence*, is taken from a surrealist painting by Max Ernst, created during his exile in the United States during World War II. In this work, typical of Ernst's style, an alien, hallucinatory, underworld appears like a psychedelic, deep-dream Fata Morgana — constructed from biomorphic, rock-like architectural forms, reminiscent of today's AI-generated imaginary worlds.

The central motif in Ernst's painting can be interpreted as an eye, representing a portal. Like craters, it symbolizes the ancient belief in the existence of gates to other dimensions.

It is this painting that science fiction writer J.G. Ballard chose for the cover of his 1966 novel, *The Crystal World*, representing a story where animals, plants, and humans are transformed by touch into crystalline forms in a timeless existence. This transformation evokes the equally surreal setting seen in Ernst's paintings.

The painting of Max Ernst, J.G. Ballard's novel, and Stankievecch's film and soundscape all diverge and meander between a sense of dystopia and utopia. In each representation of alternative, timeless worlds that dwarf or decenter human beings, human paradigms collapse in distinct ways. Unlike the Romantics, whose subjective expressions of nature's grandeur still imply a relationship between humanity and nature, these works move away from such relational constructs.

Stankievecch's depiction is neither a pure apocalyptic narrative nor a typical science fiction dystopia. Instead, he portrays creation as it existed before human presence, employing a method of negation. He creates a retrospective vision of Earth imbued with a futuristic sensibility, where humanity is negated in favor of a broader perspective—one that encompasses time, space, unconscious potential, and unknown sensory realms.

In this sense, Stankievecch departs from the concepts of his earlier works, such as "LOVELAND," a film shot in the Arctic in 2011 at a military base, where he captured a wandering purple gas cloud moving over icy terrain. In that earlier work, military colonization defined landscapes as troubled and politically fraught, echoing nationalistic geopolitical interests amid the sublime beauty of the Arctic Sea.

Now, in times of collapsing human concepts, he portrays landscapes and the nonhuman world as living, transformative, and resonant entities. As a world on retreat from human touch.

Text | Juliet Kothe