

Visual art

German installation artist Julius von Bismarck's first Australian exhibition, *This is not the storm*, investigates the mysterious mechanisms that shape our constructed worlds.

The Hegel has landed

Melissa Bianca Amore is an art critic, curator and contemporary philosopher.

Do we construct reality or perceive it? For German installation artist Julius von Bismarck, our perceived world is constructed by an intermediary apparatus or a hidden force. Motivated by the Hegelian question of *how does human freedom become real in the world?* he creates thought experiments, art interventions and installations that challenge our perceptual limitations by revealing the imperceptible.

Interested in the phenomenology of objects, technology, neuroscience, mythology and quantum mechanics, as well as the political, cultural and historical construction of landscape, von Bismarck examines monumentality as a symbol of power and control. "I'm intrigued by what makes something a monument," he explains. "A giraffe or a landscape can be seen as a monument."

In his first Australian solo exhibition, *This is not the storm*, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), von Bismarck exposes the ruinous force of nature and the mysterious mechanisms that shape our constructed world. Impressively curated by Dr Shelley McSpedden, the show presents a compelling exchange between the celestial, with harmonic soundscapes alongside a large-scale kinetic orbiting sculpture and a foreboding eruption. Some works function as psychic registers of control, with gestures of authority, theatricality and the absurd, while others probe the demarcation between humanity and the natural world; revealing a self-governing system inside an automated artifice.

A video of the artist whipping ocean waves, *Punishment #7* (2011), anchors the exhibition with its ominous complexity. Based

on the story of the Persian king Xerxes, who in 480BC ordered the sea be punished after a storm destroyed a bridge, the obsessive and even pathological act of whipping is disorientating. Quasi-performative in nature, this work sees the artist suspend the romantic view of the ocean as a sublime creation, by revealing its inherent instability and power. The transfer of authorship and agency to the natural world emancipates human responsibility. Von Bismarck is well known for staging acts of retribution against nature and cultural landmarks, such as the iconic Statue of Liberty, which resulted in his arrest. These interventions are protests against the deceptive illusion of freedom as well as the authorship of knowledge distribution.

Negotiations of redeployment are explored in the newly commissioned spatial installation *Two heads with one stone* (2026). Evocative of the artist's earlier pendulum works, a hypnotic orbit of two heads – a 19th century style death mask and a Hellenistic marble portrait of a Greek goddess – and a locally sourced stone are suspended in an oscillating rhythm. The interchange of collision, encounter or resistance between the forms becomes the focus. It asks who can predict and control motion and interaction.

"I'm trying to calculate part of your brain that predicts movement," says von Bismarck. In this work the artist reinforces the idea that objects, "whether real, fictional, natural, artificial, human or non-human, are mutually autonomous and enter into relation". While each element deceptively appears to be rotating in an arbitrary synchronisation governed by gravity, artificial intelligence and a software program control each encounter.

In contrast with the spinning cyclical motion, *Irma to come in earnest* (2017), a cinematic portrayal of a hurricane in Florida, is filmed in monochromatic slow motion, as if the elasticity of time is pulled into a temporal pause. Von Bismarck's manipulation of the



A still of Julius von Bismarck's video installation *Irma to come in earnest*. Andrew Curtis

maelstrom destabilises the tempo from gale-force winds and flooding debris to an evocative and intimate encounter between human vulnerability and a hurricane's mystical force.

Distanced from the polarising media footage of the hurricane, this hypnotic work reinforces the transformative power of visual information to shape our reality. "Even though it's someone else's moment and camera angle, you basically use that to construct your reality," says von Bismarck. The manipulated voices of news reports are also reconfigured into vibrational harmonic strings, to create a powerful intervention into ecological violence and catastrophe.

The interplay of verisimilitude is further obscured in the work, *In the real world it doesn't happen that perfectly* (2019). Located in the adjacent gallery space, six video screens depict outraged news reports of a staged explosion on the sacred rock formations in Utah's famous Arches National Park.

In collaboration with artist Julian Charrière, von Bismarck reproduced replicas of the Utah site in Mexico. They filmed the explosion and uploaded it to the internet. Some news coverage in America presented the explosion as a terrorist act of violence against a national park; other media outlets investigated the authenticity of the footage. While exploiting and discrediting modes of representation, von Bismarck raises important questions about the distribution of fake news, where representation becomes belief, as well as the classification and ownership of cultural heritage sites. Asking who can claim ownership over natural monuments, this work reinforces how the role of ownership – as opposed to custodianship – is often exploited to control cultural agency and political agendas.

The installation *Joe is dead* (2016), co-authored with Charrière and Felix Kiessling, features a tumbleweed endlessly rotating on a

treadmill. Presented as a twofold complexity, this work addresses the illusion of borders as well as the migration of foreign ecologies in search of new fertile environments. Classified as an "illegal alien", the famous tumbleweed species *Salsola tragus* was introduced to North America in the 1870s from Russia. Often employed as a cinematic symbol of isolation and freedom, the tumbleweed deceptively signals autonomy. While the tumbleweed appears to be eternally spinning in motion, it is actually motionless, confined to the treadmill's rhythm. The work suggests that although the human condition seems to be perpetually spinning, endlessly progressing forward, it is immobile.

This is not the storm confronts pertinent questions about our future, the power of artificial intelligence, cultural mimesis and the dissemination of knowledge. Inside von Bismarck's artifice, we experience a network of interrelated temporalities as though travelling through echoing time. The mesmeric imagery in *Geh aus mein Herz! (Go forth, my heart!) Swiss Alps* (2023) exposes the intelligence and supremacy of nature while illustrating how human intervention disturbs its natural state.

Reminding us that even stones transmit ancestral memory, von Bismarck asks: Who controls how we view and interact with nature? For this artist, history can be deconstructed, and perhaps the process of decentring and relearning begins with a kind of blindness. "When you're blind, it's not a blackened space: you enter a new space made up by your third eye," he says. "Your brain creates a representation of the world like a model and you walk through the model instead of the real world." So, the question remains: What hidden forces are creating the model of our world? ●

This is not the storm is showing at ACCA, Melbourne, until June 14.

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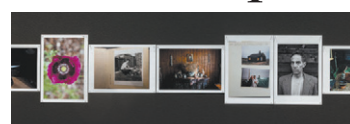
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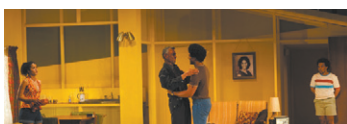
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