



FONDATION BEYELER

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# THE MIND'S EYE

Images of Nature from Claude Monet to Otobong Nkanga

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**BASQUIAT** THE MODENA  
PAINTINGS

Cover:

Otobong Nkanga

*Unearthed – Abyss*, 2021 (detail)

Tapestry, 350 × 600 cm

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel

Fondation Beyeler Collection

**THE MIND'S EYE. Images of Nature from Claude Monet  
to Otobong Nkanga  
10 June – 27 August 2023**

**Basquiat. The Modena Paintings  
11 June – 27 August 2023**

## **THE MIND'S EYE. Images of Nature from Claude Monet to Otobong Nkanga**

### INTRODUCTION

*Mind's Eye* is the title of a sculpture by Pierre Huyghe, which is on display in the exhibition. The expression is used here to describe artists' ability to conjure up images such as those featured in the exhibition.

Our views and notions of nature have changed in the past 100 years. A picture by Monet is filled with happiness: it shows nature as unspoiled and reflects the gaze of the artist who conceived his garden as a haven whose fragility he may have already sensed. Such a largely untroubled view has become nigh on impossible today—our knowledge of nature's woundedness and endangerment looms far too large.

The artists featured in "THE MIND'S EYE. Images of Nature from Claude Monet to Otobong Nkanga" have produced images of nature that visualise both these perspectives. The contemporary view is more complex and less carefree, yet it is no less wonderful. Rather than a swan song, it provides powerful visions, which merge memory and longing, imagination and curiosity as to the possible shape of nature and our relation to it.

The exhibition features a number of works that have joined the collection in the past ten years. Their presentation alongside earlier paintings by artists such as Henri Rousseau,

Henri Matisse or Marc Chagall is in keeping with the museum's guiding principle that new acquisitions display or establish connections to the existing collection—sometimes more and sometimes less obviously so. The last room is dedicated to the display of a significant group of works by American artist Robert Ryman from the Daros Collection, with which the Fondation Beyeler has for many years maintained friendly ties.

The exhibition has been curated by Theodora Vischer, Chief Curator of the Fondation Beyeler.

Currently also on view: “Basquiat. The Modena Paintings” (→ more information available under ROOM 9 and FOYER).

## ROOM 1

### **1 Wolfgang Tillmans (\*1968)**

#### **tree filling window, 2002**

Inkjet print on paper, foldback clips

Fondation Beyeler Collection

*tree filling window* plunges us into an ocean of shades of green. The sunlight sifting through the leaves of a magnificent treetop generates a diffuse glow and settles like a filter over the entire image. Cropped by the window frame, the expansive foliage is reflected in the open window panes. The image contrasts the tree's organic morphology and the paned window's strict geometry, natural growth and rigid delimitation, outside and inside. Window views have been a popular subject in painting since Romanticism, used to express a yearning for the outside world. This photograph by German artist Wolfgang Tillmans is also such an "image of longing" and invites us to think about our present relationship with nature.

## ROOM 2

### **2 Lucas Arruda (\*1983)**

#### **Untitled (from the series Deserto-Modelo), 2015**

Oil and beeswax on canvas

Fondation Beyeler Collection

Lined up on the wall, the small-scale paintings of Brazilian artist Lucas Arruda merge into a panorama of hazy landscapes, creating almost a separate cosmos within the exhibition space. The densely packed paint draws attention to its own materiality and physicality. The landscapes are often only identifiable as such by the horizon line suggested along the lower edge of the painting—the pictures focus on conveying light, mood and atmosphere. This as yet unfinished series does not seem concerned with depicting real places, but rather with providing different formulations of the artist's idea of landscape.

The same can be said about the work of Argentina-born Italian artist Lucio Fontana. Even though *Concetto spaziale* is reminiscent of organic formations such as seed capsules or buds, it has been conceived to materialise an idea of space. Fontana's sculpture addresses relations of tension between volume and void, outside and inside.

## ROOM 3

### **3 Claude Monet (1840–1926)**

#### **Le bassin aux nymphéas, c. 1917–1920**

*The Water Lily Pond*

Oil on canvas, triptych

Beyeler Collection

Even before the turn of the century, French painter Claude Monet began exploring the idea of combining several large-scale water lily paintings into an expansive decorative scheme. The painting in the collection of the Fondation Beyeler is related to the panorama-like *Grandes décorations* painted by Monet for the Orangerie in the Tuileries Garden in Paris. It condenses the artist's impressions of his idyllic garden in Giverny: over a width of nine metres, this masterpiece intricately and inextricably merges water lilies, water, reflections, sky and clouds. In this calm yet vibrant waterscape, there is no horizon, no demarcation between sky and earth. In a novel way, the artist succeeds in fusing the elements of water, air and earth into a boundless membrane.



## ROOM 4

### **4 Olafur Eliasson (\*1967)**

#### **Moss room, 1994**

Cladonia rangiferina (reindeer lichen), plywood, wire  
Fondation Beyeler Collection

Within the exhibition, *Moss room* forms its own microcosm, all at once exuding great calm and sharpening the senses. The ceiling and the walls of the small space are fully clad in lichen native to Iceland's sparse vegetation. As an important source of food for reindeer, it is called *Cladonia rangiferina*, or reindeer lichen.

The artist Olafur Eliasson grew up in Denmark and Iceland. The reindeer lichen is of particular interest to him mainly because it is a double organism, in which algae and fungus enter a unique symbiotic relationship. Nature plays a key role in Eliasson's overall oeuvre. By transposing it to a museum, the artist calls our attention to the fact that the understanding we have developed of nature is a construct. With this particular organic material, he further makes us aware that, in the natural world, apparent simplicity can conceal tremendous complexity.

## ROOM 4

### **5 Roni Horn (\*1955)**

#### **Opposites of White, 2006–2007**

Solid cast black and clear glass, lateral surfaces as cast, fire-polished to

Fondation Beyeler Collection

The two cylindrical elements of American artist Roni Horn's sculpture *Opposites of White* are cast in glass, each weighing about two tonnes. Their lateral surfaces are opaque, roughened to varying degrees with traces of their production process. Their circular tops are smooth and shiny, transparent as the surface of a body of water on a clear and windless day. The colour of the glass constantly changes with the shifts in incoming daylight, giving the sculptures the appearance of natural phenomena. Ever since the first of her many journeys to Iceland, Horn has been finding inspiration in its unique nature. Her experience of its landscape and weather has influenced her art in numerous ways. The juxtaposition with Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's *Moss room* becomes all the more interesting in light of the island's significance for Horn

ROOM 5

**6 Otobong Nkanga (\*1974)**

**Unearthed – Abyss, 2021**

Tapestry

Fondation Beyeler Collection

Aquatic plants, corals and shells glow against the intense dark blue of a dreamlike deep-sea landscape. Yet this idyllic view is disturbed by strange objects, reminiscent of machine parts, which are collecting on the seabed. The eponymous abyss appears as both a real site and a symbol of Earth's vulnerability.

*Unearthed – Abyss* is one of four monumental tapestries that make up Nigerian artist Otobong Nkanga's multipart work *Unearthed*. Digitally designed and intricately woven, they address our planet's reliance on water and the threat posed to Earth by mankind.

Henri Matisse's *Oceania* pictures, produced 75 years earlier, reveal a contrasting view. Not only do his screenprint stencils differ from Nkanga's work in terms of perspective, colour and technique; more fundamentally, in his day he was still able to gaze undisturbed upon the beauty of nature, of which he retained idealised memories following a journey to Tahiti.

ROOM 6

## **7 Rachel Whiteread (\*1963)**

### **Poltergeist, 2020**

Corrugated iron, beech, pine, oak, household paint  
and mixed media

Fondation Beyeler Collection

*Poltergeist* was constructed from found materials such as tree branches, twigs, metal and wood pieces, which were subsequently painted a radiant white to lend them a unified appearance. The sculpture thus represents a departure from Rachel Whiteread's established artistic practice. Previously, the British artist mostly produced sculptures by casting the hollow of an object or a space in plaster, concrete or synthetic resin. This more recent work exudes a tension of opposites: the impression of disquiet, chaos and natural decay that could arise from its many, formally disparate elements is kept at bay by the gleaming whiteness. Yet the title *Poltergeist* reinforces the sense of deceptive calm.

The apparent standstill of time, the suspension of familiar laws of nature, the extrasensory and the surreal are aspects through which Whiteread's sculpture enters into a multitude of relations with neighbouring works.

## ROOM 6

### **8 Joan Miró (1893–1983)**

#### **Paysage (Paysage au coq), 1927**

*Landscape (Landscape with Rooster)*

Oil on canvas

Beyeler Collection

Joan Miró's painting offers a glimpse of a dreamlike landscape. The empty expanses of vibrant ochre and blue are brought to life only by isolated elements seemingly unfettered by the laws of nature. Five almond-shaped stones hover shadowless in the lower half of the picture. The titular rooster is assembled from different parts, as though collaged directly onto the composition. Its fanned tail feathers resemble a dried leaf—as does the cloud, which seems pinned to the blue of the sky by tack-like black dots. Similar dots also seem to be holding in place the finely drawn wheel and the ladde , which effortlessly crosses the horizon line, as though leaning against the picture surface.

The painting, which Miró produced during one of his summer stays in Spain, displays the influence of his Dadaist and Surrealist milieu in Paris.

## ROOM 7

### **9 Pierre Huyghe (\*1962)**

#### **Mind's Eye (FL), 2021**

Materialised deep image reconstruction, synthetic and biological material aggregate (sugar, resin, stainless steel), microorganisms

In line with a Surrealist tradition, French artist Pierre Huyghe explores the question of what it means to exist in this world as a living being. His sculpture is a wondrous entity consisting of a variety of materials displaying iridescent colours. A transparent pale blue bubble is partly pulled over a body whose surface alternates porous with smooth areas and seemingly soft with apparently fossilised parts. The creature's appearance is shifting and elusive. Immediately, various associations come to mind—a snail-like animal, a giant insect—yet ultimately the entity cannot be compared to anything, it remains fascinating and stubbornly other.

The sculpture was conceived using deep image reconstruction, a scientific process in which images are generated by the electronic readout of brain activity. Huyghe transposed these images into sculptural shapes. The title *Mind's Eye* is a metaphor for the human power of imagination—the sculpture gives this metaphor concrete form.

## ROOM 8

### **10 Robert Ryman (1930–2019)**

#### **Works from the Daros Collection**

American artist Robert Ryman is among the leading exponents of Minimalism. As an art movement, Minimalism is mostly associated with a conceptual approach, yet Ryman's work is also deeply painterly.

All his life, Ryman painted white pictures, of which a representative group of early works is on view in this room. A cursory look around the space is enough to ascertain that a white picture is not simply a white picture. Numerous variations can be made out with regard to aspects that are usually a mere means to an end yet became defining features of Ryman's paintings: format (large, small), support (canvas, wood, paper), primer (none, white, coloured, covering the full surface or leaving out edges), type of paint (oil or acrylic), means of application (roller, brush, wooden stick) and hanging system (concealed or visible). Suddenly, the white paintings deploy an inexhaustible diversity, which it is a delight to experience in full.

## **Basquiat. The Modena Paintings**

### INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1982, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) travelled to Modena in Italy. Gallery owner Emilio Mazzoli had invited the 21-year-old New York artist to produce new works on site for a solo exhibition. Within a few days, Basquiat painted eight large-format canvases, some of them now among his most celebrated and valuable works. Despite this impressive output, however, the planned exhibition did not take place and the works were never shown together. More than 40 years later, all the “Modena Paintings” have been reunited and are now being displayed together for the very first time

The Modena series stands at the beginning of Basquiat’s career. The canvases, each between four and five metres in width, are dominated by a monumental, often black figure set against an abstract background. The paintings share several motifs and stylistic features that mark them out as a cohesive group within Basquiat’s oeuvre.

The exhibition has been curated by Sam Keller, Director of the Fondation Beyeler, and Iris Hasler, Associate Curator.



## THE ARTIST

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) ranks among the most significant artists of the late 20th century. The son of a Haitian father and a mother born to Puerto Rican parents, he lived and worked in New York City. In the early 1980s, as figurative painting experienced a renaissance, he succeeded in breaking through as a Black artist in an art world dominated by white protagonists.

Basquiat's vibrantly colourful and richly potent paintings felt unprecedented. They merged comic-like figures, skeleton silhouettes and everyday objects with symbols and textual elements. Basquiat processed motifs derived from pop culture and cultural history as well as political and economic topics into a critical commentary of consumer society and social injustice, in particular racism. Until his untimely death at the age of only 27, over less than a decade Basquiat produced an extensive body of work comprising more than 1,000 paintings and objects as well as 3,000 works on paper.

## ROOM 9

### **11 Jean-Michel Basquiat**

#### **The Guilt of Gold Teeth, 1982**

Acrylic, spray paint and oil stick on canvas

Nahmad Collection

Surrounded by numerous signs and fragments of writing, a skeleton-like figure with a shining white face under a black top hat dominates the image. The background, divided into an orange and a blue area, is reminiscent of a map, whose indeterminacy is not resolved by any of the many markings. The richly varied letter sequences and numbers partly turn into patterns and graphic elements. In doing so, they call attention to both the mutable nature of language and the shifting relation between image and meaning.

Along with *Profit*, this painting stands apart among the group of works on display: unlike the other, distinctly more painterly images, here the focus shifts to the graphic and symbolic elements traced with spray paint and oil stick. Featuring the figure of Baron Samedi, in terms of content the work refers to the culture of origin of Basquiat's father. In Haitian Vodou, Baron Samedi—dressed in black funerary attire—is the spirit of death and resurrection.

## ROOM 9

### **12 Jean-Michel Basquiat**

#### **Untitled (Angel), 1982**

Acrylic and spray paint on canvas

Private collection

#### **Untitled (Devil), 1982**

Acrylic and spray paint on canvas

Private collection

The two paintings *Untitled (Angel)* and *Untitled (Devil)* pair into a contrasting illustration of good and evil.

The angel is depicted as an over life-size figure in rough brushstrokes of black, red and white. He gazes heavenward with large round eyes and his arms are wide open. Against the background of thickly applied warm hues of yellow and red, the delicate halo traced with spray paint appears so light as to truly defy gravity. By contrast, the devil is shown emerging from a thicket of layered and partly dripping paint. His face resembles a mask composed of geometric forms with pointed horns. His teeth bared, he is looking at us from oval-shaped eyes. Despite their many differences, the two figures mirror each other in the pared-down depiction of their skull-like heads—like two sides of the same coin.

## ROOM 9

### **13 Jean-Michel Basquiat**

#### **Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump, 1982**

Acrylic, oil stick and spray paint on canvas

Private collection

A black figure stands amidst strongly expressive colours, arms open wide and a dog at its side. According to the title, the “boy” and his companion are standing in the spray mist of an open fire hydrant—nicknamed “Johnny pump” in New York slang. The painting’s warm palette raises associations of summer heat and likely draws on Basquiat’s memories of playing on the New York streets of his childhood.

The work probably depicts the artist himself—recognisable by the dreadlocks—yet it also refers more fundamentally to fleeting experiences of freedom and happiness in the daily lives of Black people in the United States. Basquiat’s wrestling with the realities of Black lives shaped by slavery and racism reverberates throughout his work.

Comparable imagery in the Modena series, such as in *The Field Next to the Other Road* and *Untitled (Cowparts)*, attests to his careful observation of everyday situations, from which he developed compositions of timeless reach and resonance.

## FOYER

### 14 Jean-Michel Basquiat

#### **Untitled (Woman with Roman Torso [Venus]), 1982**

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

Private collection

Basquiat presents us with a complex, enigmatic puzzle of figures, objects and numbers set against a map-like background. To the right of the image, the figure drawn onto radiant yellow is equally evocative of shop window mannequins and antique sculptures. The work's title identifies her as Venus. The Roman goddess of love and beauty is a frequent art historical motif—famous examples include the *Venus de Milo* or Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. To the left of the image, a second, contrasting figure is set against a blue background. Her snake hair designates her as the mythological figure of Medusa, whose sight turned onlookers to stone.

By quoting art historical forebears, Basquiat the autodidact counters the image painted of him by critics as an “uneducated street boy”. At the same time, the juxtaposition of dark, wild Medusa and light, soft Venus points to racist stereotypes still prevalent today. The work also harbours a hidden, highly personal reference: in Modena, Basquiat was joined by his partner Suzanne Mallouk, whom he nicknamed “Venus”.

## INFORMATION

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We look forward to receiving your feedback on the exhibition  
guide at: [kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch](mailto:kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch)

## CATALOGUE



### **Basquiat. The Modena Paintings**

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Further publications on Jean-Michel Basquiat and  
on the Beyeler Collection are available from our Art Shop:  
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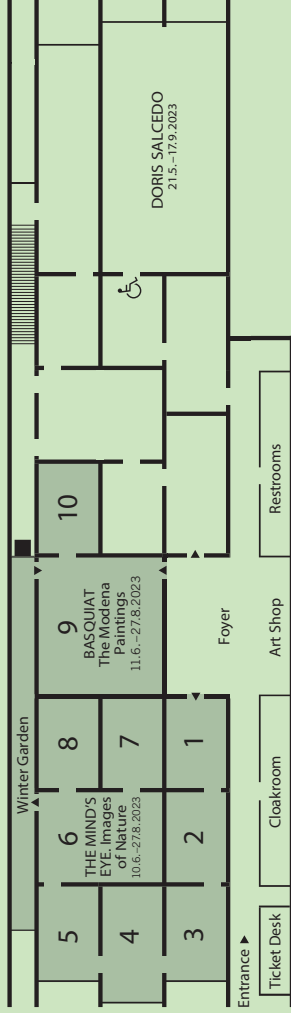
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Please do not touch the artworks !