
ART

Three Artists Visualize the Uneasy Cohabitation of Humans and Nature

A show at Detroit's Wasserman Projects brings together Willy Verginer, Christer Karlstad, and Jason DeMarte, all of whom consider our relationship to the environment.

Sarah Rose Sharp March 14, 2017

Installation view, *After Industry* at Wasserman Projects, with wood carving by Willy Verginer in foreground and paintings by Christer Karlstad in background (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DETROIT — It is fitting that *After Industry*, a three-person show at [Wasserman Projects](#) concerned with the relationship between man and nature, came together, in the words of gallery director Alison Wong,

“organically.” Yet the synthesis of three masters of divergent media — Italian sculptor [Willy Verginer](#), Norwegian painter [Christer Karlstad](#), and Michigan-based photographer [Jason DeMarte](#) — is a credit to both Wong's gift for grouping artists in uncanny combinations and gallery owner and steel company executive Gary Wasserman's passion for discovering art during his travels.

Artwork by Willy Verginer in *After Industry*, including “Where has the stockbroker gone?” (2015) at far left

Verginer's astonishing wood carvings were the jumping-off point for this exhibition. The Italian artist comes from [Ortisei](#) in South Tyrol, Italy — a small village that's known

internationally for its centuries-old trade of religious wood carvings. This art has been passed down through families and generations, and Verginer represents a

new school, diverging from the traditional religious motifs to apply the trade to fine art sculpture. Yet the roots of the work are clear: there's something both narrative and didactic about his carved tableaux, to say nothing of their painstaking detail and execution.

Wasserman's main gallery is dominated by a massive installation by Verginer which features a group of painted oil drums (the only element of his works not carved from lindenwood or applewood). The drums, which represent an industrial mechanism, are being addressed at one end by a businessman type, who perches pantless atop a tower of drums, his hands raised in the type of gang signs particular to the stock market trading floor. His opponent, gumming up the roll of barrels, is a mule that's being simultaneously ridden and consumed by two children. The businessman and the mule are recurring figures in Verginer's work, representing the clash between industry and tradition. Though Verginer has moved away from the traditional subject matter of his cultural heritage, his compositions nonetheless have a Biblical feel, in the sense of teaching a lesson by telling a story; there's no escaping the mythological, Romulus-and-Remus vibe of the two children and the mule.

Willy Verginer, "Predators" (2016)

All the objects and characters in Verginer's work feature a chromatic dividing line, which reads as a watermark. To Verginer, these lines

indicate something about periodic thresholds, but given the theme and content of the show, here they suggest rising water in the most literal sense, as well as the metaphoric understanding that a watermark represents change over time.

Looking at Verginer's watermarked objects, humans, and animals, as well as a set of wall-mounted "skins" — odd, wood-carved replicas of laborers' garments and a fox pelt, as well as crushed oil drums — invokes the visceral panic of feeling one's face slip underwater. Even if we manage to remain afloat, the rising tide is coming for us.

Willy Verginer, "For those with eyes, but still can't see" (detail, 2015)

This sense of unease and specific yet open-ended narrative segue perfectly into the large-scale oil paintings of Christer Karlstad, the second addition to the show. Karlstad's

achingly detailed nature scenes feature humans and animals in intimate and undefined relations with each other. Two paintings featuring bears are hung side

by side in the main gallery; in each case, it's unclear whether the painter has captured a tender moment or a brutal one. In much of Karlstad's work, humans are lying prone, with animals in configurations that might be threatening or familiar. His virtuosity with paint enables him to seamlessly render his foreground subjects in sharp detail, while the backgrounds are looser and dreamier. His paintings are oddly cropped, cutting off objects in ways that contribute to a feeling of apprehension and making them seem as if they'd been captured spontaneously, rather than composed.

If

Christer Karlstad, "Unidirectional" (2016)

Christer Karlstad, "Unidirectional"
(detail, 2016)

Verginer and Karlstad create a banquet of disquieting magical realism, then Jason DeMarte's intense and playful photo collages are a gratifying dessert. Detail in execution is the watchword of this show, and DeMarte carries it through, with compositions featuring dozens of individually photographed elements, stitched/pieced together into seamless and lively images. Birds and flowers are interspersed with manmade candy, paint drips, and power lines to create a kind of alternative Audubon world that questions the realness or artificiality of everything under the sun. True, a hail of blue and pink gumballs can hardly be considered natural, but their palette appears borrowed from the flowers upon which they're raining down. And sprouting among them are hairy cannabis buds — so that sugar storm might come in handy.

After

Jason DeMarte, "Cowbirds and Cake
Sprinkles" (detail, 2016)

Jason DeMarte, "Pokeberry Persuasion" (2015)
and "Lickerish (Wallpaper)" (2016)

Industry is likely riffing on the concept of "after nature" — a term once applied to the genre of still life painting and often repurposed today — and the show's presence in an industrial complex-turned-art gallery satisfyingly nods to nature and man's never-ending competition for space. Altogether, it represents a triumph of balance — between three artists who are masters of their respective disciplines and between the anxiety and wonder that attend to any contemporary consideration of the environment, as well as our human place within it.

After Industry continues at Wasserman Projects (3434 Russell Street #502, Detroit) through April 8.

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