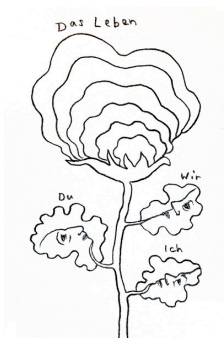


Sabian Baumann «nature (presque) morte»
March 29 - May 24, 2025



The substance we are made of is as old as the universe.

Sabian Baumann (2014)

The exhibition **nature (presque) mort** consists of a series of colorful drawings against a black background. Borrowing from hidden picture puzzles, comics, and scientific illustrations, a visual program has emerged that shows the world in plural, as an always already multiple simultaneity of worlds. This series of works offers insights into a cosmology that is based on a substantial entanglement. In loving precision, Sabian Baumann develops a visual language for how such a place might look. In many of the works, we perhaps recognize something already familiar to us. In some of the proposed visions, human beings are entirely absent. Recurring and central motifs are plants, insects, caterpillars, butterflies, and, over and over, flowers. They are arranged in various ways in relation to humanoid bodies, next to one another, on top of one another, or simply as they are, present in the same image.

Here, Sabian Baumann uses the model of the historical genre *nature morte* and expands it with a (*presque*), which can be read in several ways. The climate crisis, the end of democratic governments, and the strengthening of autocratic powers form the socio-political framework for this historical situation in which Sabian takes up the genre of the still life. "Really? In times of threatened apocalypses and a doomsday mood you draw flowers?" Yes, exactly now.

Things, beings, and entities emerge in precisely drawn relationships to one another. Axes of vision, evoked contacts and gestures, direct our gaze and show how gentle, how tender and thus self-evident the individual is linked to the greater whole. The manner of these relationships seems to come from another time. Something recalls the order of cabinets of curiosity, while elsewhere it remains unclear whether we are in the future, a recent or more distant past, or perhaps in a parallel present. But we know that this work cycle comes from a common substance and from a puzzling cosmology. Categories become irrelevant, for upon closer inspection everything lies

a bit askew, in between. With a striking plasticity, fundamental premises and structures are questioned with which individuals, identities, and more-than-human existences are placed in relation to one another, ordered and regulated.

There are composite beings combining the vegetative and the human, hybrids of inorganic material and humanoid forms, various animals and interstitial beings, butterflies and moths, clouds, weather phenomena, and cosmic bodies like the sun and the moon. Repeatedly, mouths, eyes, and hands surface as figures. Upon closer inspection, the pleasing motifs develop complex relationships, symbolisms, and narrative impacts. In many of the drawings, apparently opposite poles are combined, like day and night or life and death. In these adjacent placements, differences are not suspended. But connecting elements emerge that were previously invisible. Through the visual proximity of the staging, for example, the similarities between the leaves of a plant and the wings of a butterfly become obvious. Elsewhere, the affinity between human neurons and structures of vegetative life forms in their details, ramifications, and outbranching is revealed.

The drawing *Erinnerung an die Menschen*, for example, transports us to a post-human era. A landscape that bears human facial traits points to the traces of human beings after their annihilation. Subtly, the dichotomy between life and death is subverted and reference is made to a world where differences exist without generating division.

In this way, the reference to the European tradition of still life becomes all the more explosive. When we think of the emergence of the concepts of still life and *nature morte*, we find ourselves in the Baroque period and find inanimate or at least inactive objects, things, materials. At first glance, the German (and English) concept of the genre–*Stilleben* (still life)–opens associations that differ from those triggered by the French expression *nature morte*. But both suggest the idea of the passivity of material and an animating (human or divine) spirit, a paradigmatic example of the division of the world into “culture and nature.”

How did the description of nature as something dead, something still come about, considering that both attributes stand at the start of a violent allegation with destructive consequences? It could be argued that if a form of existence is without language and without intention, it cannot be human (enough), it exists therefore without consciousness, and is assumed not to be worthy of protection. But that paves the way for extractivism, the form of thought that underwrites colonial wars and the endless exploitation of planetary resources gains in power.

The work that gives the exhibition its title **nature (presque) mort** (almost dead nature) sketches a horizon of a coming planetary catastrophe, evokes clear references like global warming, extinction, the destruction of habitats and of the foundations for human existence and more-than-human entities. Furthermore, the “almost” can refer to attributes of death as a quality, that all realms of nature accept as given, passive, ahistorical, static, and inalterable. In a dichotomy called into question here, everything “natural” is distinguished from the realm of the “cultural” that intervenes dynamically in the world in a fabricated, historically transformable, and active

fashion. This notion of passive material animated by an active spirit reflects juridical-economic programs, forms of government, and humanistic self-conceptions. In such a world, nature neither has an impact, nor intention and rights. When Sabian here refers to nature as “almost dead,” this echoes as “almost without intention” and complicates traditional binary positions by positing a nature-culture where modes of existence that differ from one another are linked to one another in an elementary way.

Sabian escapes this binarily structured world by developing drawing after drawing, figure after figure with rigor, a narrative that attests to other forms of being. They are existences that elude an all too rapid ascription. It's not surprising that many of the drawings do not seem particularly “still.” Over and over, the element of a just ended or begun movement surfaces. **nature (presque) mort** pulsates, vibrates, delicately breathes, not least also due to the shimmering plasticity of the drawings themselves that as traces of movement attest to the vitality of the hands that created them.

Lucie Tuma translated by Brian Currid