

SALT 6: EMRE HÜNER

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Text by Jill Dawsey

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The University of Utah, Salt Lake City
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salt (sôlt) n.

- 1. A colorless or white crystalline solid used extensively in ground or granulated form as a food seasoning and preservative*
- 2. An element that gives flavor or zest*
- 3. Sharp, lively wit*
- 4. A mineral sharing definitive characteristics with Utah's capital city*

“I wanted to imagine modernism unearthed by some future archaeologist...”

–T.J. Clark, *Farewell To An Idea*, 1999¹

“The future is but the obsolete in reverse.”

–Vladimir Nabokov, “Lance,” 1952²

Watching Emre Hüner's films feels something like time travel. In two 16mm shorts, *Aeolian Processes #1* and *#2*, the camera shows us an array of objects—framed in close-ups or arranged as still lifes—that withhold immediate clues to their temporal or geographic origins. Archaic-looking tools mix with artifacts from the more recent industrial past, as if unearthed together many centuries from now. Hüner casts us as amateur archaeologists. When and where do these objects come from? What relationship do they have to one another? A yellow motorcycle helmet, rough-hewn clay figures, colored metal sticks, an aerodynamic form: is this the secular altar of some off-planet cult? The films themselves are relics; as an outmoded, insistently analog medium, 16mm film produces a distanced effect suggestive of memories and dreams.³ Traveling through time, these films tell us what the past looks like from the perspective of a distant future.

As an artist, Hüner travels between mediums and genres and geographies. Born in Istanbul and now based in Berlin, his practice encompasses drawing, animation, video, film, sculpture, installation, and occasionally printmaking. These diverse media are vehicles for ideas connected to dense constellations of literary, filmic, artistic, and scientific reference points. In this allusive universe, Hüner returns to certain themes again and again: modernist experiments, failed utopias, myths of technological progress. Sifting through the dustbin of history, he looks for what might be salvaged. Hüner's process involves working with an archive of found photographs, books, films, and images culled from the internet. He creates hundreds of drawings based on these collected images and objects, which are catalogued to form a kind of personal encyclopedia or anthology.

Hüner draws upon this encyclopedia to create works such as the animated video *Panoptikon* (2005), whose title sequence conjures the contents of an archaeological dig. Composed of gouache drawings, the animation depicts a world at once antiquated and modern, fantastical and technocratic, with imagery that evokes scientific invention and the pageantry of war. A later work, *Juggernaut* (2009), is similarly archive-based, but takes the form of a filmic montage comprising historical reenactments, film clips sampled from the archives of NASA, General Motors, and Disney, and newsreel footage of the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, where one may glimpse the "greater and better tomorrow that we're building today," as the film's narrator proclaims.

This "greater and better tomorrow" brings us back to the subject of time travel, and back to the future, so to speak. Hüner sometimes incorporates his videos and films into sculptural environments or installations, and in *salt 6*, the films *Aeolian Processes #1* and *#2* are projected onto structures evocative of early 20th century Russian Constructivist-style kiosks. The structures serve as screens but also as freestanding sculptures composed of geometric planes—solid and perforated wood panels juxtaposed with red and purple panes of Plexiglas. These sculptural screens are reminiscent of the work of constructivist Naum Gabo, whose Plexiglas 'monument' celebrates air travel and technological progress. If Hüner invokes the project of Constructivism, he also invokes its utopian aspirations, which sought to meld art and life, technical innovation and societal organization. In this way, his work offers glimpses of an alternate future through the lens of the receding past.

Aeolian Processes #1 proceeds as a series of still shots of objects on a table, composed as in

a still life painting. Here the saturated colors of 16mm film suggest the work of the sixteenth-century Spanish still life painter Juan Sánchez Cotán translated into another dimension. In *Aeolian Processes #2*, the objects are held in a series of close-ups, where they appear more alien, situated in extraterrestrial landscapes. Many of the objects that appear in the films were first seen as part of another recent body of work, an installation entitled *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe* (2012) which was shown last summer at *Manifesta 9*, the European biennial. (In Hüner's practice, one body of work tends to lead to the next, uncovering areas of investigation that become the subject of a new body of work, and then the next, and so on.) The artist created many of the objects in that installation—objects that would subsequently become the subjects of the films—while at the Rijksakademie residency in Amsterdam, where he made use of a ceramics laboratory and spray paint booth. Filled with accumulated dust, unused material, and the residue of so many past projects, the ceramics laboratory appeared to Hüner as the setting for a scale model of the universe. With its encrusted layers of brightly colored paint, metal plates used to carry clay to the kiln, and murky, plaster-filled water, the laboratory conjured up the surfaces of planets and other-worldly civilizations.

The films' title, *Aeolian Processes*, references the phenomenon of landforms shaped by wind—Aeolus was the Greek god of the wind—inviting a morphological comparison between Hüner's clay figures and desert rock formations (like those found in Utah, perhaps). Yet these 'Aeolian processes' may also have been suggested by the spray paint booth at the residency, which—with its white tile walls, neon lights, and air filters—reminded him of a wind tunnel or scientific test site. Here, as we often encounter in Hüner's practice, the prehistoric world coexists with the modern, the natural world with the artificial.

The Aeolian processes of the films' title find further echoes in a series of drawings titled *Shrine of the Post Hypnotic*, several of which are featured in *salt 6*. Hüner describes these drawings as a translation of his sculptural process into paper and ink—three dimensions distilled into two. Drawing "in a repetitive way with no clear form in mind," he acts like a "machine recording seismic waves of a meteorite or the tension of minerals."⁴ The resulting forms are abstract but have distinct points of worldly reference in their resemblance to rock formations, knotted and twisted old trees and driftwood fragments, and rippling fabric. Using this method, the artist is less a source of expressivity or formal decision-making, more a conduit for external or chance-based directives.

If elsewhere in *salt 6* Hüner references a Constructivist visual vocabulary, here his imagery and technique register a different modernist tradition, namely that of Surrealism, which sought to explore the workings of the irrational, unconscious mind. Not incidentally, a number of Surrealists depicted landscapes shaped by Aeolian processes, locating instances of the uncanny in nature. Salvador Dali is known for his melting desert settings, while Max Ernst traveled to Utah to paint Bryce Canyon. Photographers such as Eileen Agar and Lee Miller photographed rock formations that seemed to invite psychological projection. Yet Hüner's indebtedness to Surrealism goes beyond iconography, for his process evokes the practice of automatism, or automatic writing, a key means through which the Surrealists sought to suspend self-censorship and rationality, gaining direct access to the unconscious.

If Hüner acts like a "machine" registering waves of energy and movement generated outside himself, his 'post-hypnotic' drawings are perhaps most closely related to the work of Henri Michaux. An artist peripherally associated with Surrealism, Michaux often worked under the influence of the hallucinogenic drug mescaline, inducing a trance-like state in which he recorded its physical and psychological effects in drawings and writings. While Michaux's drawings sought to escape the limits of the verbal, they were generally indecipherable, and he became increasingly aware of the impersonal, robotic aspect of his drawing practice. Perhaps Hüner's machinic drawings of biomorphic and organic forms register his own ambivalence about the contradictory relations between humans and technology.

The installation *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe* developed out of another work entitled *Quixotic*, which took as its subject Fordlandia, the factory town and plantation that Henry Ford established in the Amazon jungle, where the industrialist hoped to extract raw materials used to make tires and other car parts. The very idea of Fordlandia—with its utopian belief in rational organization and industry as a gateway to the ideal society—might serve as an apt distillation of Hüner's core interests. When the artist visited the long abandoned site in Brazil he became fascinated by wasp and termite nests that had invaded the decaying architectural structures once built by Americans. The organic architecture of the insect world proved heartier and more enduring than modern architecture, with its civilizing aspirations. Emulating the insect nests, Hüner made a sculpture out of African clay, which became part of *Quixotic*. He has continued using this material, working in small, improvised gestures that led to the clay artifacts that populate *Aeolian Processes #1* and *#2*.

In these films, architectural elements derived from Fordlandia—a water tower, for instance—

were transformed into more modular structures suggestive of space stations or settlements on other planets. Hünér also created slick, aerodynamic forms that call to mind Brancusi's *Bird in Space* sculptures or NASA's space shuttle prototypes. He then began creating landscapes or 'islands' that mix the primitive-looking clay figures with space age objects from an imagined future.

In some sense, the groupings operate as a purely abstract visual vocabulary, semiotic units that are combined and recombined to produce formal complexity and filmic texture. Hünér filmed some of the objects as they were in the process of being spray painted, spinning on a plate, under neon light. The frequency of neon is different than the rate of film and so produces flares of red and purple that momentarily fill the film's frames, obscuring the objects. (These flares are echoed in the red and purple Plexiglas of the projection structures.) Somehow these flares seem like signals. The critic Walter Benjamin understood that the greatest potential of a medium like film lies in the moments of its birth and obsolescence. Perhaps, then, we can only recognize our culture and its myths on the verge of their disappearance. The objects in Hünér's films, like the films themselves, are haunted by the vanished civilizations of the future.

Notes

1. T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.
2. As quoted by Robert Smithson in "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966) in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 11.
3. For *salt 6*, the films have been transferred to DVD.
4. From Hünér's notes on *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe*, unpublished.