

HYPERALLERGIC

Sean Raspet: "What Does It Mean to Exhibit Nature?"

By Caroline Ellen Liou

September 8, 2021



Sean Raspet at Various Small Fires (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Like a creeping scent, Sean Raspet's exhibition works its way through the viewer's psyche almost imperceptibly.

LOS ANGELES — Scent is an insidious thing. It creeps into the body, an involuntary invasion, summoning memories unbidden. It is an intangible medium, as phenomenological as it is conceptual, encompassing ideas as disparate as the Anthropocene and identity politics with a distinct porosity. "As each inhalation brings in a small portion of the outside world, scents disrupt the traditional distinctions between the environment and bodies, self and other, nature and culture," points out critic and curator Jim Drobnick, who writes extensively about the senses in art.

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Like scent, [Sean Raspet's current solo exhibition](#) at Various Small Fires works its way through the viewer's psyche almost imperceptibly. At first, it seems like a sterile presentation of nature: outside in the courtyard, morning glory vines climb three rectangular trellises as if in a minimalist triptych; inside the white gallery walls, each planter is hung neatly in a row, spaced out just so; in the next room is a canister full of carbon dioxide; and at the very back, an unobtrusive panel of moss, slowly puffing out a faint whiff of patchouli. But slowly, the aesthetic pleasure at seeing the curlicues of plant tendrils gives way to questions such as, What does it mean to exhibit nature? Why are civilization and nature framed as diametrically opposed to one another? And who is taking care of these plants, and how did they get here?

Rereading the press release reveals carbon (increased, circulated, and captured) to be the material focus of the exhibition, and that the plants are the result of experiments, conducted by the artist, to create genetic mutations that could help them better adapt to changing climate conditions. Though it would be difficult to parse out this information upon first glance, by embracing a subtler approach, Raspet underlines how these critical political issues are also embedded in the very air we breathe.



Sean Raspet at Various Small Fires

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