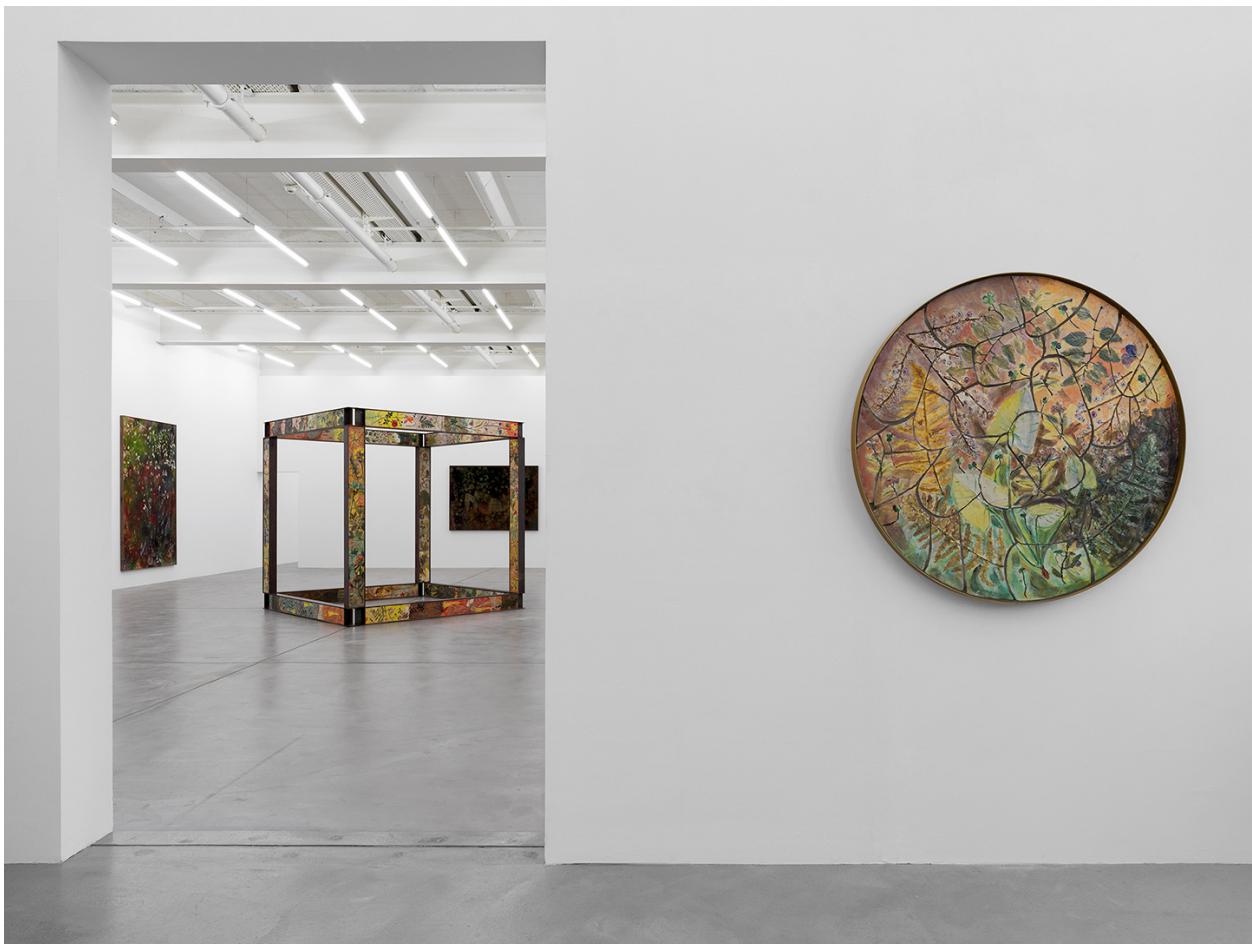


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"Sam Falls at Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich"

By Tillmann Severin

April 21, 2019



Sam Falls, installation view at Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to announce the gallery's fifth solo exhibition with the Los Angeles-/ New York-based artist Sam Falls.

Concerned with the intimacy of time, the illustration of place, and exploration of mortality, Sam Falls has created his own formal language by intertwining photography's core parameters of time and exposure with nature and her elements. Working largely outdoors with vernacular materials and nature as a site-specific subject, Falls abandons mechanical reproduction in favor of a more

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symbiotic relationship between subject and object. In doing so, he bridges the gap between photography, sculpture, and painting, as well as the divide between artist, object, and viewer. In these new works, created especially for the show, he uses this language to conceive a unique space between photographic fidelity to a subject and painting's intimate interpretation. At the same time, the paintings continue to stay true to a specific environment by utilizing local plants.



Sam Falls, installation view at Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

The two paintings named Autumn Ground (aspen trees, 1) and Autumn Ground (aspen trees, 2) are akin to photographic negatives. They are covered with dye punctuated by the silhouettes of aspen leaves, thereby giving shape to the artist's formal approach. In order to create these works, Falls employed his knowledge of nature and media. Over the course of a week in October the canvases lay on a mountainside thick with Aspen trees and accumulated the falling foliage to create natural compositions on the forest floor. Throughout the week Falls hiked up to the site and scattered natural dyes over the leaf covered canvases. The dyes were then catalyzed by the varied precipitation throughout the week, and the composition organically changed as windblown leaves moved across the canvas, creating a new exposure and additive image in the dye. This process resulted in images that not only depict the climate and flora of the Alpine environment,

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but also the passage of time. The paintings are simultaneously recognizable as part of his oeuvre and unpredictable, allowing the melancholy and beauty of the season to emanate from the work.



Sam Falls, *Fertile Valley*, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

The outdoor sculpture, Room, is connected to the environment in a similar way. Raw structural I-beams were filled with hand-made ceramic tiles, each rendering plants from different locations. Room stands between architecture and landscape, as the work forms a structure that is reminiscent of a domestic space, but one which lacks an 'inside.'

In the largest painting of the exhibition, Schindler, Falls, for the first time, arranged the organic materials he uses for his paintings in a realistic manner, true to their place in a landscape: roses at the bottom, palms and shrubs in the middle, trees and foliage at the top. Furthermore, Falls made this painting at his house through changing weather over the course of a California winter, using the plants he keeps as native subjects for his paintings. Consequently, the painting is not only a portrait of a geographical landscape but also of a personal landscape.

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With the birth of two children over the past three years, Falls found himself working closer to home and not only incorporating the domestic location into his work but also the subject matter. As his work with nature over the past decade led deeper into researching the art historical tradition of symbolism with flora and fauna, his interest in the human figure and its symbolism grew. This has all coalesced into the new works, which spawn from classical figurative structures and symbols in iconography and portraiture, merged with his family members as the subject. In doing so, Falls synthesized art historical allegories with everyday life. One such painting, *Annunciation*, shows a figure with wing-like ferns on its back, alluding to the pose of Raffael's Gabriel. Though the angel's pose is recognizable, the primary intention was not the reference, but rather the wish to portray his postpartum wife. Falls made a tracing of his wife and placed it on the canvas, superimposing the iconography of art history and daily life. In order to layer the common family situation with the Biblical scene, Falls did not copy Raffael's *Annunciation*, but rather reversed and recontextualized its symbolical meaning: here the kneeling figure is the mother herself rather than the annunciation of motherhood; instead of male Gabriel holding an iris in order to symbolize purity and pregnancy as a gift, the artist's wife holds a rose symbolizing passionate love and authority.

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In accordance with this formal approach, Death (*Wish*) is not only figurative but also resembles a particular painting: Dürer's *Death and the Landsknecht*. In spite of this resemblance, Falls did not draw a single line of this figure. Whilst working on the paintings outside in the woods surrounded by the falling autumn leaves, the artist found a fallen tree that reminded him of Dürer's skeleton. He replaced Death's hourglass with dandelions, a flower that commonly grows in disturbed soil, and one that uniquely flowers in the form of a circular head of seeds days before dying. Around the world children pluck these flowers and blow the seeds to make a wish, securing the single flower's death while unwittingly propagating the species. Instead of bargaining for life with the gambling Landsknecht, Falls' death-figure shifts the focus to a parallel metaphor focused more on the self-consciousness of melancholy and nature's astute allegory of life and death.

Falls writes about this way of linking the contemporary everyday and natural situations to the tradition of painting, allowing the viewer to enter his motifs, as well as accessing the concepts behind them:

"The legacy of iconography and symbolism in painting is heavy, but so is everyday – as much as it was before. We're so far removed from the origins of western painting and its religious beginnings that they almost appear silent and melancholic. However, the total secularization of contemporary art has not eclipsed the elemental beauty of Renaissance paintings and this timelessness relies on natural form: plants and bodies."

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