

# BLOUIN **modernpainters**

ART / ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN / PERFORMING ARTS

APRIL 2019

## **TOP 10** CONTEMPORARY POETS TO READ IN 2019

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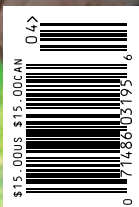
**PHILIPP FÜRHOFFER:  
EXPLAINS HIS  
INSPIRATION**

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**KIM CHONG HAK:  
THE KOREAN VAN GOGH**



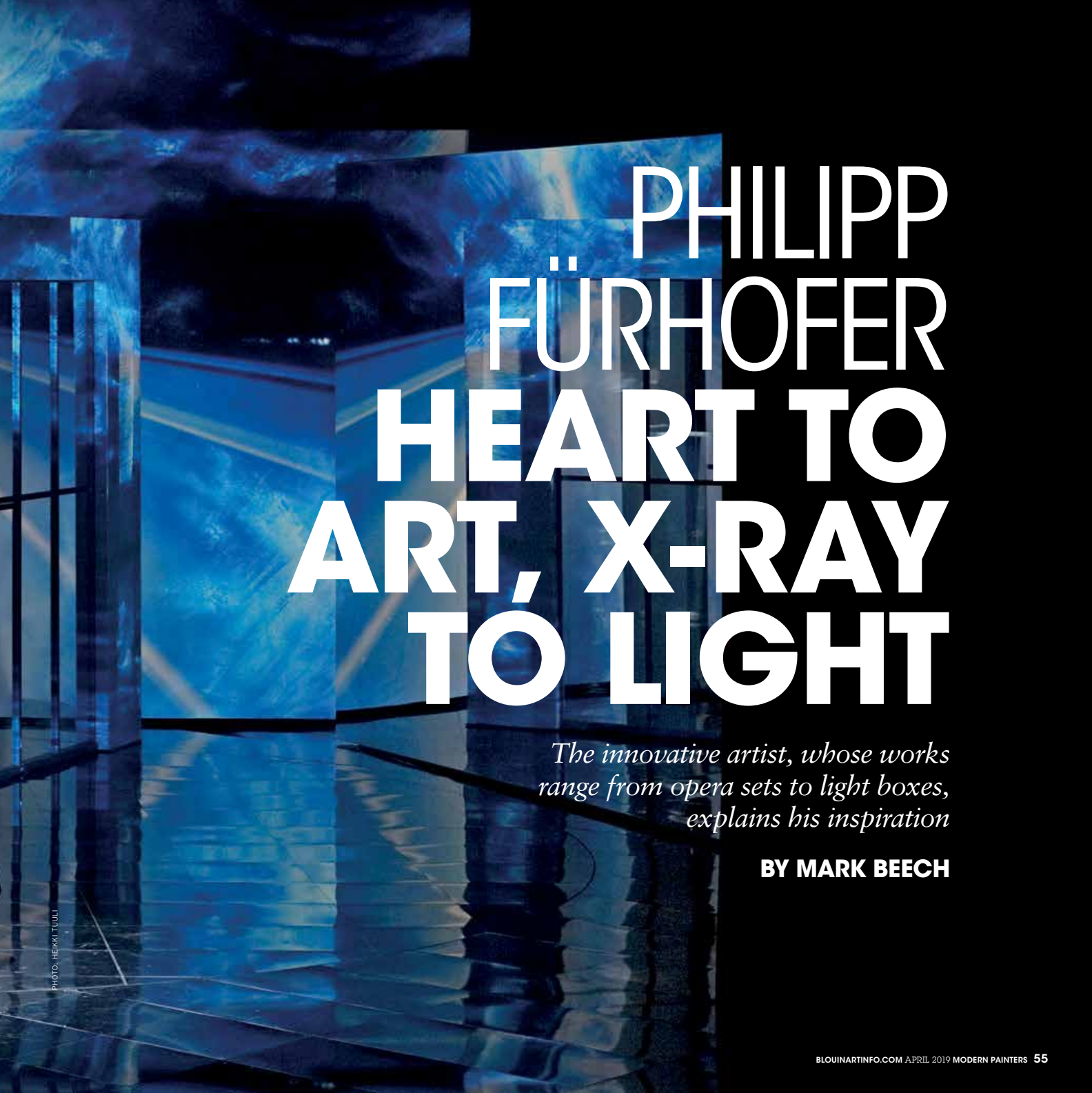
**TOP 10:  
ART BOOKS**





Set design: Der  
Fliegende Holländer,  
• 2016, Finnish  
National Opera,  
Richard Wagner,  
director: Kasper  
Holten,  
conductor: John  
Fiore,  
costumes: Anja van  
Kragh.





# PHILIPP FÜRHOFFER HEART TO ART, X-RAY TO LIGHT

*The innovative artist, whose works  
range from opera sets to light boxes,  
explains his inspiration*

**BY MARK BEECH**

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hilipp Fürhofer's life changed forever after a medical examination in his mid-20s.

From birth, the German art student had a problem with his heart valves. Usually when this condition is discovered (and in his case it was diagnosed quite late because of mild symptoms), the course is to monitor health with the notice that patients might eventually encounter problems, but perhaps not for three decades. In Fürhofer's case, the outlook was much more grim.

"If we do not operate now it will be too late," the doctors told me," the artist, now 36, recalled. "They said: 'You will be dying in a few months.' For me it was a catastrophe and I was knocked out for half a year."

Fürhofer said that he was an ambitious and competitive student. Now he was being informed that it could be all over.

In 2019, some 13 years on and with a successful operation leading to a career in blossom, he can look back in gratitude. Not only did he survive, but the health incident was a major inspiration.

Fürhofer was interviewed recently while sitting in the upstairs area of London's Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, where final preparations were taking place for the director Stefan Herheim's version of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's most ambitious opera, "The Queen of Spades." Fürhofer was the opera's designer and was on call because of an emergency costume fitting for the dress rehearsal. His art is multidisciplinary, ranging over paintings, sculptures, installations and set designs.

Fürhofer is studiously articulate, speaking in English while stroking his trim beard and replying thoughtfully and enthusiastically. He was born in 1982, in Augsburg, near the Bavarian capital. He went to Munich on weekends to enjoy the opera and the museums. He warmed to the first question of the interview: did he always want to be an artist?

"It is funny you ask this because I was very recently at my parents' house and they just showed me something from my first year in school at maybe six or seven years old," he said. "I was asked to write something on what I wanted to be. I said I



Philipp Fürhofer





COURTESY TST PHOTOGRAPHY

Set and costume design: Carmen,  
Konzert Theater Bern, 2018,  
Georges Bizet,  
director: Stephan Märki,  
conductor: Mario Venzago.





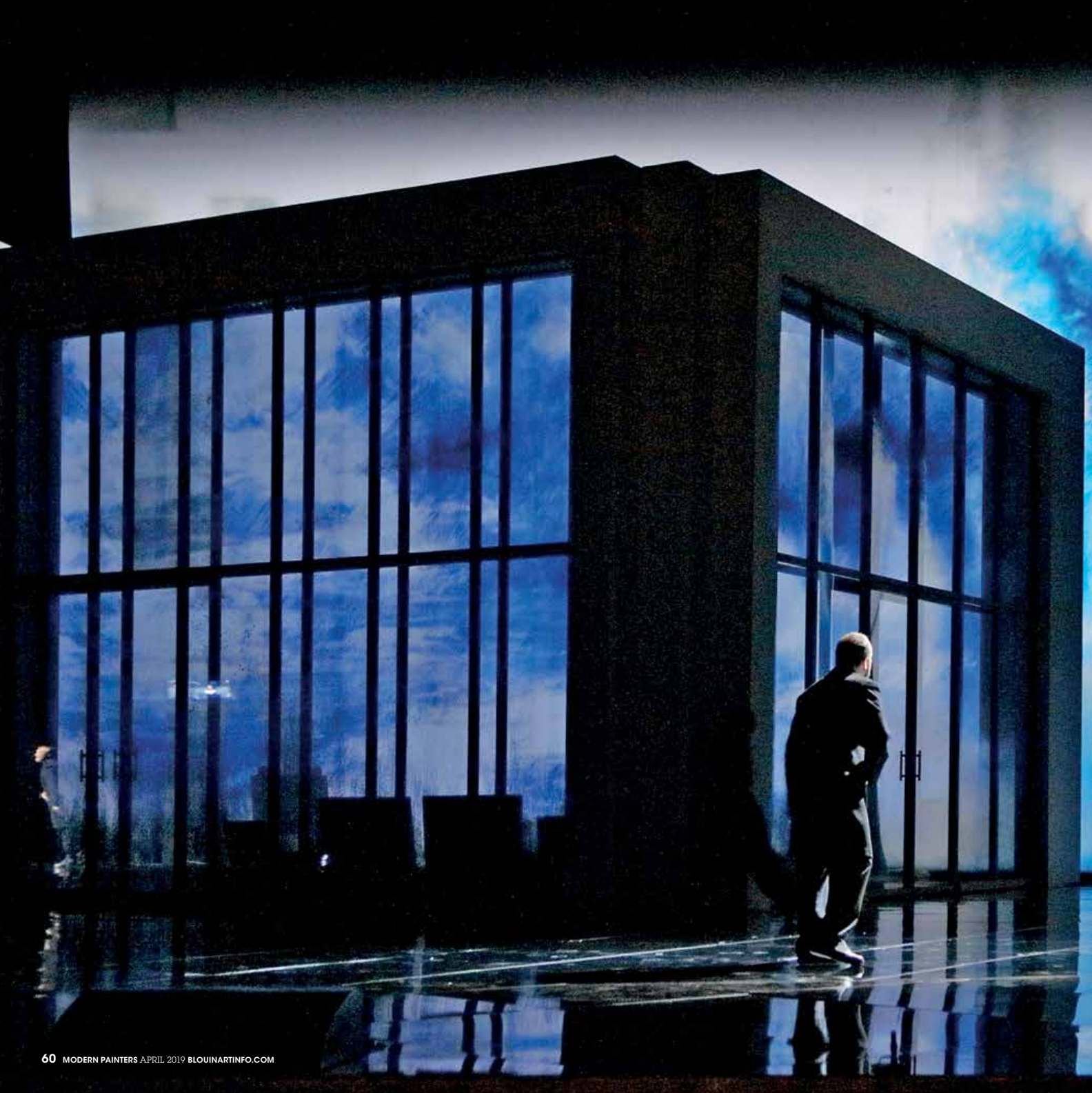


Set and costume design:  
Pique Dame, Dutch National  
Opera, Amsterdam, 2016,  
Royal Opera House, 2019,  
Piotr I. Tschalkowsky,  
director: Stefan Herheim,  
conductor: Mariss Jansons/  
Tony Pappano.



PHOTO: KARL FORSTER









**"The Flying Dutchman,"**  
set design, 2016,  
Finnish National  
Opera, directed  
by Kasper Holten.

wanted to be an artist." While he was always painting as a kid, after high school Fürhofer briefly hesitated between choosing music (piano) or visual art. "I was fine but not phenomenally talented as a musician, but I was a very good painter and I realized that was more my instinct. I want to prepare things in my studio and prepare a stage rather than be onstage myself."

Fürhofer moved to Berlin, and modestly said "miraculously things happened very smoothly for me." He was accepted for the School of Fine Arts at the University of Berlin starting in 2002.

"This should have been a clear way at this point but then I had a very essential crisis," he said. This was the heart transplant in 2006 and many months in the hospital. "Surviving that made things crystal clear. It focused my mind on what was important in life and what not, on being healthy and doing what I want to do."

A particular turning point came in his hospital room studying the X-ray light boxes of his thorax. "It inspired me massively, getting away from the more traditional painting to a light box or three-dimensional object that is blinking or pulsing like a machine or an organism." Describing the acrylic black boxes that he later created as art, he said: "Each work has its own rhythm, ticking like clocks, constantly switching every few seconds."

Fürhofer earned his master's degree in 2008. Where his contemporaries were inspired by events such as the reunification of Berlin, Fürhofer noted that his long hospital sojourn "made me realize the fragility of my own life: the feeling that nothing is stable or set, everything is in a flow and can be changed or switched off immediately."

A specific aspect of his acrylic glass boxes is that they are filled both with his own objects as well as ready-made detritus. Fürhofer said that they are hard to show in static photographs because of the constant changes: some may show sunsets and then switch into mirrors. It is unclear if some of the wires inside are real or painted. He has an assistant for all the electrical material and also gets help for modeling stage sets, to make them as realistic as possible, though he does all the painting himself. The works are truly mixed media and contain mirrors, acetate, bulbs, tubes, transparent paintings of body parts or landscapes, plus old plastic bags transformed by paint: "They make people think about what they throw away and how we save our planet."

Both with stage and art, Fürhofer is interested in how light can add "a lot of fluidity and ambivalence." This has led directly to some of his monumental shows, such as the 2017-2018 "[Dis]connect" event in the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt.

PHOTO HEIKKI RIHJÄRVI / T+T PHOTOGRAPHY



"Alcina,"  
set design, 2014,  
Luzerner Theater, Switzerland,  
directed by Nadja Loschky.



# "A LOT OF ARTISTS ARE NOT REALLY INTERESTED IN THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF AN OPERA. THEY ARE INTERESTED IN DELIVERING THEIR IMAGE OR THEIR BRAND SO IT CAN GET VERY BORING"

The artist transformed the circular Schirn Rotunda into an illusionary space, playing with visitors' perceptions and reality. He was citing the optical mechanical playhouse that Louis Daguerre opened in Paris in 1822. Fürhofer placed two mirror ceilings in line with the height of the Rotunda's two upper floors and used light to create two different spatial situations. When the floor of the Rotunda was lit up, the lower, semi-transparent mirror looked like a false ceiling installed above the heads of the visitors who were passing from the city hall into the dome. This served to visually reduce the space. When the light was switched to the upper area of the Rotunda, the lower mirror became transparent and afforded a view of the entire circular structure with the two mirrors making the circular structure look infinitely tall, like a skyscraper. The two spatial situations alternated every 10 seconds in a regular, pulse-like rhythm.

"The completely different perspectives pushed passers-by into a different rhythm," Fürhofer said. "It was confusing and irritating: the onlooker appeared and disappeared. You saw yourself then lost yourself. The space grew from small to eternity. It is a simple trick but it becomes existential in a way. That is like an opera set in that there is development: it is not only one static picture, it has to react to different scenes, the drama and stories."

Philipp Demandt, the director of Städel Museum and Schirn Kunsthalle, wrote that the "[Dis]connect" display laid "bare the illusions" and demonstrated "what it means to want to grasp reality."

In 2018, Munich's Kunsthalle asked Fürhofer to design the exhibition "Du bist Faust." He mixed Goethe's puppet theater with Gothic rooms and semi-transparent screens for maximum effect and greatly enlivened a show of more than 100 artworks from a variety of artists inspired by Goethe's classic drama.

"I am a visual artist first," he said. "At a certain point I was asked to do set design and a few years later I dared to do costume design, which is a totally different job and so much work, but I was more annoyed about having costumes within my set that I had no control over. The whole visual impact from stage should come from one point unless you have a very good collaboration."



**"Mein Schicksal  
reißt mich fort,"**  
2016,  
242×60×60 cm.,  
acrylic and oil on  
acrylic glass, spy  
mirror, LED-lights  
and cables.

meeting his set and costume designer, Reinhard von der Thannen, who became a good friend.

Herheim made his Royal Opera debut in 2013, directing Verdi's "Les Vêpres Siciliennes" with designs by Fürhofer. It won the Laurence Olivier Award for best opera production.

Fürhofer's other designs include "Der fliegende Holländer" at the Finnish National Opera in Helsinki, directed by Kasper Holten, and "Eugene Onegin" for the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam. His work usually has subtle associations with the culture and style of the original opera, while Onegin was trademark Fürhofer. Rather than a static set, he devised an opening glass box with effects variously described as kaleidoscopic and dreamlike: are the audience watching the singers or seeing themselves in the mirrors?

Fürhofer said his art comes about because he is "fascinated about how images can change, things could develop. A lot of artists are not really interested in the dramatic structure of an opera. They are interested in delivering their image or their brand so it can get very boring." (The war against boredom is something that is a constant theme in his ever-changing works.) By contrast, Fürhofer enthuses about the "War Requiem" setting by Wolfgang Tillmans and some of the "phenomenal" stagings by the South African artist William Kentridge.

Fürhofer's own opera break came a decade ago when he met the Norwegian director Herheim. "I was a student and the director came to me. I was just doing flat oil paintings and he asked me, 'do you have anything to do with set design?' and I said, 'No but I would love to.'" Herheim introduced him to the German director Hans Neuenfels, who did Wagner's "Lohengrin" at the Bayreuth Festival (in 2010). Neuenfels is a leading exponent of German experimental theater and the young artist assisted him for two years,





Philipp Fürhofer,  
installation view of  
"Robot Room Moody,"  
exhibition.





Set and costume design:  
Macbeth Badisches  
Staatstheater, Karlsruhe, 2016,  
Giuseppe Verdi,  
director: Holger Müller-Brandes,  
conductor: Johannes Willig.



## "IT IS LIKE IN OPERA, YOU MAKE SOMETHING VISIBLE IN THE MUSIC THAT WAS NOT SEEN BEFORE. IT IS REALLY ALWAYS JUST THE CREATIVITY TO SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY"

"In opera design it is all about the music. If you do Shakespeare's 'Macbeth,' you can bring in a band or whatever, but if you do Verdi's 'Macbeth' the music gives the tone," he said.

Fürhofer has won many admirers. His friend Thierry-Maxime Loriot, who chose the artist to do the scenography of the current "Thierry Mugler Couturissime" traveling exhibition that he curated, said: "I found in his work a universal language that I deeply connected and related to, not only because of its powerful visual poetry quality, but also because of the close link to heart (disease) his works have and brought us close to each other as we both are 'survivors.' Most people connect with his art because he masters storytelling and illusionism with absolute beauty, with the mystery he creates by mixing singular materials from lights, mirrors, spy foils, wires and contemporary detritus. I think it is important that people understand his visual references when he creates sets actually come from his work and not the other way around. Opera influences him but he makes it his own practice."

Nathalie Bondil, the director and chief curator of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (which organized the Thierry Mugler show) agreed, saying that the art "touches cutting-edge questions about trans-humanism: How to combine our emotional body with artificial components? How to keep our humanism with this augmented mankind?"

Fürhofer is happy with his career growth so far. Some artists of his generation started with big shows and were later dropped by large galleries. His work has been presented in art fairs and solo and group exhibitions in Paris, Milan, Sydney, Hong Kong, Hamburg, Cologne, Munich and Berlin. He is working with German galleries, Galerie Sabine Knust in Munich and Galerie Judin in Berlin. He is looking for more international representation and happy to bide his time before big auctions because "the art world is a bit tricky."

He sums up his work: "It is like in opera, you make something visible in the music that was not seen before. It is really always just the creativity to see things differently."

Fürhofer has more operas and shows coming up. His ever-changing works will surely allow more people to see things differently. <sup>MP</sup>

*Fürhofer's next opera projects include the Royal Danish Opera, Copenhagen with "King and Marshal" directed by Peter Heise premiered on March 23 and the Bayerische Staatsoper Munich with "Castor et Pollux" directed by Hans Neuenfels premiering in June 2020. The Mugler exhibition, which runs through September 8 in Montreal, will tour to Kunsthall Rotterdam in October 2019 and to Kunsthalle München in spring 2020.*



"Gold im Fluss," 2016,  
200 × 200 × 80 cm.,  
oil on acrylic glass, wood,  
aluminium, cables and LED-pipes.



# "IS IT IN MY HEAD?"

*In a visit to Philip Fürhofer's studio,  
our critic confronts works that  
play with illusion as a reflection  
of the human condition*

**BY LOUISA ELDERTON**



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Tucked just behind Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, Philip Fürhofer's studio is in the midst of a changing landscape. When one stares out the window on a typically grey Berlin day, the view beyond is one of construction works, cranes filling in the gaps to erect the next chapter in the city's history. This is fitting because Fürhofer's work is about the dissolution of boundaries, and about space as fluid and unfixed, transforming into different states.

While he has developed a successful career as an opera set designer, Fürhofer considers himself a painter at heart, having trained in visual art at Universität der Künste Berlin. His art practice comprises light boxes that incorporate painting and sculpture. These have a theatrical quality: when the lights are on, one world is apparent; when they are off, another takes over. These works often move between the states of abstraction, figuration and landscape painting. Take, for example, "Walpurgisnacht I" (Walpuris Night, 2017), just one of the works mounted on his studio wall. It is both a forested landscape and a mirror that reflects the viewer's own image, as well as the surrounding environment.

The work references Saint Wulpurga, who was celebrated by German Christians for battling pests, rabies, whooping cough and



Philipp Fürhofer

COURTESY MAX ABADIAN



**"Green Falls,"**  
2017,  
230 × 178 × 37 cm.,  
acrylic and oil on  
acrylic glass, spy  
mirror, plastic foil,  
LED-lights, wood,  
cables and  
electrical  
control system.



## THE AUDIENCE IS THE VITAL INGREDIENT FOR FÜRHOFFER'S ILLUSIONISM: WE MUST MOVE OUR BODIES IN SPACE TO FEEL THE SHIFTING DIMENSIONS WITHIN HIS ARTWORKS, TO SEE THE PAINTED IMAGE INCORPORATED WITH OUR OWN ENVIRONMENT, TO WITNESS OUR OWN IMAGE BEING SUCKED INTO THE WORLD BEFORE US

also witchcraft. In German folklore, on the eve when witches convened in the Harz Mountains, people prayed to God through Saint Walpurga to protect themselves from such sorcery. Fürhofer's piece uses acrylic and oil paint on an acrylic glass box to create such a realm, one where moonlight slices through silhouetted trees to illuminate a dark, eerie forest. His method incorporates long wires that emerge from the edge of his containers, draping down and intertwining with one another. These are connected to LED lights that irradiate a two-way mirror. When on, the dark woodland emerges, a layered painting defined by a sense of three-dimensionality; when off, a colder two-dimensional plane takes over as the mirror gleams and the paintings become flat.

Illusion is an inherent quality in Fürhofer's art, utilized to create such theatricality. He describes wanting to spark questions in the viewer: "Do I believe? Is it in my head? Is it an illusion? Is it my eyes creating it? Is it just cables?" He is interested in how this reflects the human condition: we are not one thing or another, but a complex set of states that often interweave and replace one another depending on mood, input, time and our surroundings. We can be illusory, performing for one another. Fürhofer considers such existentialism: who we

are, how we choose to exist and the roles that we play accordingly.

From a side view, the materials within these acrylic boxes are densely packed into place: the mirrors are curved, appearing like waves, and wires are overflowing in front or behind this rippling plane. Light bulbs, too, are often scattered on the floor of these containers, piled atop one another. Equally, other forms of debris also rest at the base, such as cans of paint and rags. The artist gathers such matter from his immediate environment, and describes how he "more or less reacts to the things that surround" him, continuing: "I'm disturbing things that are all around us."

"Tequila Sunrise" (2017) has a bright register, a picturesque sunrise bursting with orangey light that emanates through a cloudy sky. Light bulbs fill the sea, their smooth round surfaces doubling as enormous water bubbles. From the edge, the light is a stark, bright white — the amber hues perceptible upon the surface plane alone. Another quixotic landscape is suggested in "Gold im Fluss" (Gold in the River, 2016): A hazy rainbow radiates within a turquoise sky, while white wires protrude from the front of the work and spray paint dribbles from what appear to be thunderous clouds. This creates a sense of a liminal space, a surreal

atmosphere shifting from peaceful calm into turbulent furor. The viewer traverses this vision. Indeed, the audience is the vital ingredient for Fürhofer's illusionism: we must move our bodies in space to feel the shifting dimensions within his artworks, to see the painted image incorporated with our own environment, to witness our own image being sucked into the world before us.

Such drama is reminiscent of historical

artists such as Josef Hoffmann, a Vienna-based painter and set designer born in the mid-19th century. The works also recall the 19th-century German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, whose allegorical landscapes incorporated twilight skies and morning mists.

Fürhofer references Hoffmann's painting "Der Freischütz" (1870) in his work "Nichts fühlt mein Herz als Beben" (Nothing Feels As

My Heart Quakes, 2018). In Hoffman's work, a fallen tree hangs above a churning river at night time, while small figures are caught up in some unexplained conflict. Fürhofer's work reinterprets this landscape, his painting delineated within a mirrored blue box, the

**"From heaven through the world," 2017,  
180 x 346 x 40 cm., acrylic and oil on acrylic  
glass, spy mirror, plastic foil, LED-lights, wood,  
cables and electrical control system.**







**BOTH PICS:**  
**"Sundowner," 2018,**  
**92 × 92 × 20,5 cm.,**  
**acrylic and oil on acrylic glass,**  
**spy mirror, bulbs, cables and wood.**

same trees, cliffs and rocks defining the composition. As with all of his creations, it is brought to life with light and the viewer's reflection evaporates into nature.

Like Hoffmann and Friedrich, Fürhofer sets a human presence from a faded perspective, extensive and all-powerful landscapes overshadowing everything. As such, his paintings take on a metaphysical dimension, considering the nature of reality and the relationship between mind and matter. Looking into his strange mirrors, we might imagine ourselves within a much wider context, our beings and identities dependent upon time and space, and ultimately something that will depart, die, while the landscape remains. That is the nature of life, and here, it is art. MP



**BOTHPICS:**  
 "Walpurgisnacht I," 2017,  
 200 x 190 x 23 cm.,  
 acrylic and oil on acrylic glass,  
 spy mirror foil, bulbs, print, cables,  
 wood, electrical control system  
 and LED-lights.