

Life is out there

by Anna Mecugni

On the eve of the U.N.-backed climate-change conference in Copenhagen - ahead of which world leaders have declared that, as many nations are unwilling to commit to an agreement, a legally binding treaty is unlikely to be formulated - Berlin-based Philipp Fürhofer's Untitled (2009), a site-specific project conceived for his Italian debut at NotFair Gallery in Milan, seems all the more compelling. Fürhofer transformed a large cubical structure—the gallery's hallmark, adjacent to its main space and delimited by two blind walls and two floor-to-ceiling glass curtains—into an enormous light box. A jumble of black cables interspersed with energy-saving light bulbs is arranged inside it. By overlapping with a beautifully rendered under-brush painted in black on the glass, the cables evoke the image of an intricate forest. However, as the light is switched off, the transparent glass, lined with a material known as “spy mirror foil,” becomes a reflective surface that shows the surrounding environment and is covered in vertical streaks of light silver paint: The image of an intricate forest disappears and is replaced by the image of a melting ice cube. Untitled might be seen as commenting on electric light (and energy in general) as both a destructive force, causing ice to melt, and as a constructive force, by rendering things visible, according to a process that might be interpreted as a visual metaphor of a world’s creation. Fürhofer discovered spy mirror foil when he was working as a stagedesign assistant for opera productions in Zurich and Berlin in the early 2000s. He began incorporating it in his works in 2008, two years after he had started painting on acrylic glass. Motivated by the need to push painting’s flexibility so as to reflect the changing nature of life, Fürhofer paints on acrylic glass objects, which feature elementary geometric shapes such as parallelepipeds and pyramids, and inside which he places ordinary objects and materials that contrast with the painted motifs conceptually but not visually, just like the electric cables that look like branches in Untitled. The use of light bulbs and spy mirror foil further expands the possibilities of painting by creating a double motif, such as the forest and the melting ice cube in the current installation.

The combination of painting and ready-mades recalls the Dada and New Dada tradition of the assemblage, particularly the work of artists such as the German Kurt Schwitters or the American Robert Rauschenberg. The accumulations of mundane objects embedded in resin and encased in Plexiglas parallelepipeds of the French Arman also come to mind. The creation of nature through what the artist describes as “the absurd teamwork of artificial materials,” such as colored

pencils, plastic sheets and newspapers, is a theme that also runs through the other works in this exhibition, all of which were executed in 2009: Osram Dulux Superstar, 6 x 36 W, Drunt im Tal (Down the Valley), Bergblau (Blue Mountain). Typical of Fürhofer’s work is also an ironic take on the great German tradition of Romanticism and its concept of the sublime in nature. At a time when global warming is threatening the health of the planet and the existence of many species, nature can no longer appear as grand and pure, as the inconsiderate treatment of generations after generations has made it as Fürhofer shows it to us: vulnerable and hybrid.

Catalogue - text for the exhibition »*life is out there*«
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