

EXHIBITION REVIEW
MARILYN ADLINGTON



Geoffrey Pugen, *Venice* (2020), archival pigment print, 40 x 26". Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy MKG127.

GEOFFREY PUGEN, *WEATHER ROOM*

MKG127, Toronto, January 11 – February 8, 2020

Sitting at the intersection of technology and the natural world, humanity becomes a ghostly presence in Geoffrey Pugen's *Weather Room*. Working with video, photography, and sculpture, *Weather Room* is a thematic investigation of a speculative future wherein humans cease to exist, and machines are left to flourish. MKG127 is a small, white cube commercial gallery, with walls lined by a series of eye-level framed photographs. These images operate as a background for ambitious sculptural works that integrate utilitarian steel forms with silent video screen technology. Pugen's practice engages with the art-historical tradition of the sublime, examining an expansive world beyond

humanity. He suggests apocalyptic moments that engage specifically with possible futures that go beyond individual subjectivities. Decentering the presence of the human figure, *Weather Room* becomes an investigation of the "hyper-sublime." Alluding to the ongoing and ever-present collection of data through the metaphor of weather forecasting, the sculptures draw attention to the way data traces and records human existence by outliving and evolving with—rather than against—nature. The exhibition asks, who does this hyper-sublime world belong to, if not humanity?

Through the defiance of conventional tropes of science-fiction, *Weather Room*'s striking first impression

draws focus to the serenity of its apocalyptic vision. The silent serenity is haunting. Grounded in docu-fiction aesthetics, the photographs are not real, but neither are they unreal. Selected from past projects, the images arise out of various residencies and travels completed over eight years. Through the process of digital erasure, all human presence is eliminated from each scene and the conventional beauty of these photographs appear like postcards from an immediate future that feels difficult to fully imagine. The all-too familiar, deafening desertion of these worlds strips away any semblance of fictitious speculation; instead, the photographs convey tangible presence as commonplace ephemera illustrates evidence of lives left behind.

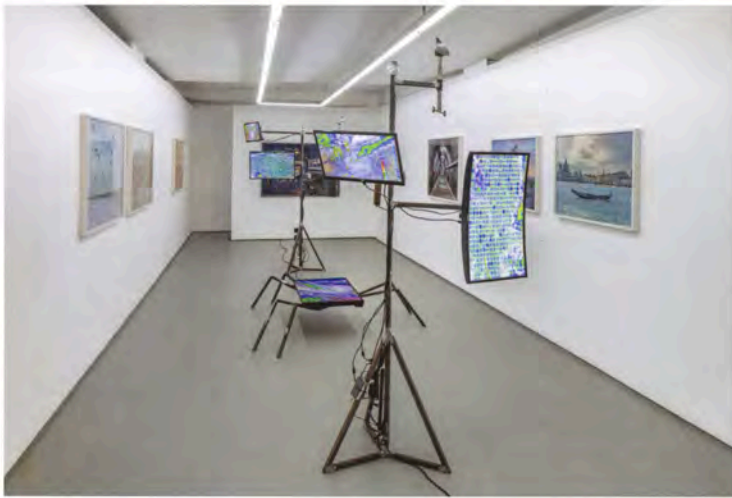
The first two photographs feature flora and fauna exclusively, depicting an overgrown forest (*Butterfly Museum*, 2020) and desolate desert (*Balboa Peninsula*, 2019). Upon first glance, nothing seems to be awry, but a closer engagement with the images reveals that there is much more than natural beauty to be gleaned. *Butterfly Museum* does not depict a museum at all; the thick, wild greenery replaces all evidence of any human presence within this modernist structure. Put into immediate conversation with the looming sculptures of *Weather Station 1* (2020)—wherein two screens confront the viewer, playing looped, but undecipherable data—the curatorial positioning introduces a meta-phorical relationship between the natural world and human presence that continues throughout the exhibition. The visual grounding of an overgrown forest in proximity with these screens alludes to the possibility that the screen has been glitching, and will continue to glitch, for time immemorial. Performing as the visual debris of encounters no longer remembered, the sculpture suggests that human subjectivity is no longer implicated in these data narratives. The world spins madly on.

The theme of erasure plays an important role in Pugen's artistic and conceptual practice. In particular, Robert Rauschenberg's collaboration with Willem de Kooning is noted as a key catalyst for *Weather Room's* experimentation with digital erasure. Famously, with *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), Rauschenberg was interested in exploring the potentiality of artwork produced entirely through erasure, focusing on a deliberate removal of markings rather than on accumulation.¹ Pugen's photograph *Venice* (2020) invites a similar allure of the unseen, wherein the removal of human

forms highlights the remains of a city left behind. The immediacy of the photograph's obliteration gestures towards the figures that were there, now gone, vanishing within a moment's notice. The disappearance feels unplanned, unexpected, and perhaps even unintentional, but it does not feel disruptive.

The series of photographs function as individual slices of data that ideologically expand within the sculptures. Through them, the hyper-sublime is put into clear focus, as the weather stands in for a larger metaphor of things humanity cannot control, no matter the magnitude of information collected and manipulated. Video collages play on screens, synchronized to capture the chaotic elegance of weather-based data. The videos—fast-paced, glitchy, and hypnotic—embody a specific methodology of collage that appropriates and assembles reworked, dissected, and subverted images of radar and data. While the sculptures themselves are new (dated 2020), the discordant videos contain data collected over fifteen years. Contrary to their uncanny echo of pragmatic weather structures, these sculptures do not adhere to a single narrative. Purely visual, they monitor a new ecological world that continues to predict a future beyond humanity. Rauschenberg's "combines" become a worthwhile consideration here (*Satellite* from 1955 particularly comes to mind), setting a precedent for the weather stations as utilitarian and multi-dimensional sculpture-collages. By translating and subtly re-contextualizing these visual representations through video-based experiments, the screens breathe new life into the post-apocalyptic, post-human sculptures.

The Frankensteinian sculptures reinsert a physical type of body that is erased from Pugen's photographs. They are programmed to play ongoing sets of looped data that serve as abstract evidence of a haunted human existence. The viewer in the exhibition space does not move through, so much as move around, the sculptures that take up the central portion of the main gallery. Composed of pragmatic steel tubing welded together, the sculptures silently stand among and above the viewer, integrating the architecture of video technology into multiple, synced installations.² They are topped with crystal balls (a detail easy to miss), a cheeky addition that brings together two competing paradigms: the rational collection of concrete data and the primal strategy of mystical fascination. The gesture of



Geoffrey Pugen, *Weather Room* (2020), installation view. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy MKG127.

folding two competing systems of thought onto one structure articulates the paradoxical wisdom of absence and transformation interrogated by the exhibition.

Pugen's overall project considers post-2000s surveillance capitalism and the intimate relationship that has developed between data and the human body. While the physical presence of humanity has disappeared, the remnants of their existence persist indefinitely through the collection of data. Human presence is remembered only by the technology that outlives the species it was designed to oversee.

Thinking more broadly, the metaphor of the web as a mediative structure becomes important. The metaphor finds specific curatorial articulation in two exhibited works: in *Old Montreal* (2020), as a photograph of a single spider on an expansive web and in *Station 4* (2020), as a sculpture installed in the middle of the main gallery space. Immediately drawn together through the repeated imagery of a single spider, the notion of the "web" connects two distinct, but not oppositional perspectives. The lone spider is one of the few examples of life in the exhibition and functions as a figure for all who outlive humanity. Formally echoed by the anthropomorphized spider sculpture, this confluence serves as a reminder of the many ways that machinery appropriates the natural forms and bodies who created them. As an organic merging of physical presence and glitching screens of data, *Station 4* becomes the most identifiably monstrous figure, having evolved beyond more conventional bipedal weather

station sculptures. Despite the unnerving content, the message feels geared more towards a dissociative hope than existential dread, as a recognition of the certainty of a future that marches on and beyond, through its appropriation of living beings.

In many ways, the exhibition feels scarce, lonely, and apolitical, but this is to Pugen's advantage. As the gallery space transforms into a privileged glimpse of a possible future, his metaphysical inquiries surrounding mechanical mediation and indifference allude to a world that feels eerie. While his photography suggests a reversal of any collage-like impulse—discretely taking away from what is already there—the artist's sculptures absorb a particular visual anxiety that comes out of erasure and translates them into concrete imaginary figures. The juxtaposition between photography and sculpture extends toward a larger curatorial interrogation of visual erasure and appropriation, as human-made structures and machinery develop an unexpected alliance with the autonomous technology left behind in a silently eternal apocalyptic utopia.

Marilyn Adlington is an emerging art critic and curator based in Toronto, currently researching collage as a practice and a politic oriented toward radical futures.

NOTES

- 1 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased De Kooning Drawing*, 1953: Overview," n.d., www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.298.
- 2 Geoffrey Pugen, "Info," n.d., geoffreypugen.com/info.