

European Student Challenge 2020 - Artist's Statement Armin Völckers

When presented with the idea of an exhibition on climate change/environmentalism, traveling through Europe, a thought crossed my mind: political art is boring.

In my humble opinion, art is distinct from any other form of communication, because it must maintain a secret, an unsolvable question, a mystery in the middle. An artwork can be accidental, playful, heavy, deep or even vulgar, but I think it should resist any attempt to come to a final conclusion. Even art that willfully leaves itself open for interpretation must not do so obviously, because it is that very obviousness, that "will", that kills an artwork.

Therefore a political artwork serving solely as a mouthpiece for a message that can otherwise be told without the artwork makes itself redundant. I have often felt that such a piece of art not only does not help the message, but can even weaken the cause.

J. Henry Fair's photography is powerful because it speaks with a deafening silence. Its beauty is raw and rude. Henry's cause is obvious - alert us to how far we've gone down the ladder - but his art hides behind the false grin of Western aestheticism; the golden ratio, tasteful colouring, splendid presentation, etc.

His work exclaims, "Here is a good, inspired, Western, well-crafted, ideologically sound piece of photography" - and at the same time it is not that at all. It makes you question the very earth beneath your feet. The open question in its center is only superficially about the environment; it reaches down to the core human existence, and asks whether it makes sense to live, care, and strive.

So naturally I thought, "What could I possibly do to match his work?" Like Henry, I wanted to transform the medium into the message.

I decided I would use only the bare minimum of material, plus digital photography and inkjet printing, with the former being comprised mainly of found objects from around my studio.

Since Henry's work is very concrete, hands-on, and delivers amazing insights into ecological realities, I figured I would go the opposite route.

I decided to take only images that would have formed spontaneously and instinctively in my mind, and that might only be tangentially connected to the theme. Since everybody reacts to another one's instinct, I wished my work to instigate an initial, though unformed, interest in the exhibition.

Consequently, my work would depict the inner world rather than outside realities. As a result of restricting myself to limited resources, I would then have to recreate my ideas with whatever material that I could find.

My work should serve as a catalyst, pushing the truths of Henry's pictures into the unconscious of the beholder - because that's where hard truths take root and grow into action.

So I began decorating my studio with paraphernalia that I already had there, such as a mannequin, a bag of glue, hearing protectors, a spirit level and my old Van Gogh chair. In addition were some items that I bought: background paper, a green wig, yellow satin, pink leg warmers, and metal foil.

The Works

Henry and I decided that we would cover the five fundamental themes of environmentalism with one work each:

AIR

WATER

FOOD

CLIMATE

ENERGY

As this sounds a bit theoretical, I have taken the liberty of (what artists should in fact never do) losing a few words on what my pictures are all about.

My aim was to use photography the same way I use painting. In painting you begin with an initial idea, then you cover the canvas with paint and gradually destroy the idea. It's often a frustrating process of "killing your darlings", until that final picture forms, which is at the same time balanced, surprising, fresh, deep, and alive.

I had not given the tiniest bit of thought to the photos or their content before I created them. The images are derived from my unconscious: dreams, daydreams, and random ideas. I started thinking about their meaning only after they were finished.

1) Plastic Hippie (FOOD)

2) Good Robot, Bad Robot (ENERGY)

So many metaphors at play: the mannequin wears a veil; Mother Mary, The Bride Of Christ. Two faces, Daryl Hannah and Sean Young from "Blade Runner" - the good and the bad robot, our fears and hopes regarding AI. The artificiality of everything - the hedonism of the post-war era that turned into mountains of waste: plastic wrapping, small units, single households, technoid plastic toys, mind numbing entertainment (to propel sales), mass travel, over-consumption - the nightmare of a mankind doing "better every day", the dance on the volcano. Woodstock after the music: rags and dirt. The Greek and Roman Togas, the dress-code for the coming heat.

The stupidity - low forehead, empty eyes, green hair - the hedonistic punk, the industry sell-out in a culture, that has turned into permanent underground, because there is no more "high". It's either all high, or all low, and like all addicts we know: eventually it's all-low.

FOOD: like Don Henley once sang: "We satisfy our endless needs and justify our bloody deeds..." An endless stream of plastic, an endless row of hungry mouths, and endless tunnel swallowing an over-speeding train that cannot slow down. A spirit level, held in bloodied hands, but the blood is pink. We never really intended to make a sacrifice, it's just make up for a play. The cape, taken from an old photographic series of mine is the cape of "Rocketman", Thomas Pynchon's

metaphorical hero, the failed secret agent, the defender of the Western world who has lost his cause: the American who fought the Nazis after the Nazis are gone.

ENERGY: the cape is made from Imipolex G, a synthetic material symbolizing the crosscurrent of war and eroticism in a decadent post-war-culture. The mannequin also wears Rocketman's fiery red suit, but in a sweater-'round-neck fashion, like an 80s movie producer. The old, grey tennis shoes: we're aging, our tastes, our methods, our bones. The yellow background: make-believe sunshine. The feathers - John B. Sebastian sang at Woodstock: "And all of the heavies, were light as a feather... happy in a land of Oz". On the record I misheard "hippies" for heavies. We're all happy in a land of Oz, in our movies, our commercials, our political utopias, our corner cafés and backyards, but something is bubbling up, deep, black and ugly like the LaBrea tar pits. As with the tar pits, we built a park and a museum around it.

3) Europe, A Restauration (CLIMATE)

The political climate is as heated up as our atmosphere. Said political atmosphere is changing like the weather. In ever-changing coalitions, Europe drags along like a sick mother that can't afford to rest because her dirty kids need a bath.

In the middle, a Leporello of three movies:

Obsession

In Brian de Palma's thriller "Obsession" (1976), Genevieve Bujold plays a young mother, who - together with her little daughter - gets abducted and killed, leaving Cliff Robertson a desperate widower. 15 years later Robertson travels to Italy, and one portentous morning meets Bujold in the church where he first met his deceased wife.

Bujold is now a young Italian restorer, who apparently hasn't aged since that first scene, and Robertson is of course struck by the similarity between her and his deceased wife. Not a hint of Bujold noticing his inner drama. No hint that there is any link between the two of them. Spoiler alert: of course she is his daughter who has survived, and now works on a sinister plot to defraud him - revenge on a daddy who did not come in time for her rescue.

(The next paragraph is partly based on "Ghost Images in Brian de Palma's "Obsession"" by Valentin Nussbaum)

The fresco Bujold is assisting in the restoration of is by Bernardo Daddi (which is not originally in the chapel where they filmed); it is a Virgin and Child, whose damaging has revealed an earlier work underneath — which one of these works is to be sacrificed for the other? This is the dilemma that Bujold has to face: should she remove the Madonna (the Mother) or restore the Daddi (the Father)? This aspect was already mentioned in the first critics of the movie in 1976: "Schrader (the screenwriter) and De Palma have loaded their penny dreadful with allusions high and low. (...) Why such fuss over a lesser master like Daddi, for whom Bujold and the restorers finally opt? Because Bujold's heart, however ironically and ferally, belongs to Daddy. And why the Virgin and Child? Because love between child and mother is what really motivates her. And why is the earlier work that is sacrificed? An anterior life must be abandoned both by Robertson and Bujold for the sake of a vita nuova."

Despite all of the plot's shortcomings, the movie is an early work of genius: dense, atmospheric, and of an emotional drive that never veers off into melodrama or kitsch. It feels very real, and the

slow pans, camera travels, zooms and dissolves, driven by a congenial musical score, lure the viewer into a delirium worthy of the film's role model "Vertigo".

Like Bujold in the film, Europe is at a parting of the ways: Should we restore the old idea of Europe, a prosperous but unhappy family of nations, an aging demographic, an old, toothless patriarch who is mocked behind his back at family reunions - or should we embrace the globalized world, competing in a virtual economy with strong enemies, or false friends, or maybe real friends, but of the sort who jovially break your back by slapping it too hard - and who all seem armed to their teeth? Is Europe a mother or a dad? An old masterpiece or a lesser version of itself? Do others - the viewers, the non-Europeans, those "not in the picture" - care about our concerns: climate change, migration, equality? Or are we like the old fresco: collecting dust in an old church that hardly anyone visits?

Don't Look Now

In Nicolas Roeg's "Don't Look Now" (1973), a similar issue is staged. It's the story of John Baxter (Donald Sutherland), an art restorer who mistakes a fleeting red hooded figure in Venice with his deceased daughter he unconsciously wishes would resurrect (Schülting, 1999: 207- 211).

Unlike "Obsession", the connotation of restoration in "Don't Look Now" is negative. After his daughter drowns in the film's intro, Donald Sutherland travels to Venice on a work assignment (in American movies, all restorers work always and only on Italian frescos it seems), haunted by memories and nightmares of his dying daughter and later, of his own death. Early into the plot he has a near-fatal accident: climbing the hanging scaffold to peer at the fresco he's supposed to save for the first time, a rope breaks and right before falling 30 feet to his death, he clings to the rope in a mesmerizing scene of chaos, hysteria, destruction and desperation. When I first watched it I sat there in utter disbelief it was so good. Sutherland, here an impotent American Tarzan, hanging from his "last straw" in a cold, un-welcoming Europe in the midst of the 1973 oil crisis, is all failure, end-times and determinism. He's dangling over the mouth of hell. This scene literally can't help but be allegorical. There is so much to this movie, on all levels, that its psychological merits are but one feat among many.

Somewhere in the 1970s the Western idea of democratizing the world took a blow so hard we're still bleeding. Only briefly interrupted by a beam of hope through the fall of communism we - the majority, the Boomers and now the Millennials - have realized in slo-mo that the Western concept doesn't hold, unless perhaps it goes through so many transmutations it'd be unrecognizable. All this leaves that uncanny feeling in our stomachs: we're too few, too old, too soft to do the job, and those who have the money and the power today, couldn't care less.

Days And Clouds

The last image is from "Days And Clouds" (Giorni e nuvole, 2007), a film by Silvio Soldini. It is one of those rare masterpieces that picks out one exemplary story from within the historical fabric of a certain time and place (Europe in the beginning of the 21st century) to encompass the cultural horizon of a whole era. It contains so many aspects of the feeling of "living now" in Europe, and what we face that it's Balzacian in its precision, if not in scope.

Once again we're in Italy, in Genoa, and Margherita Buy is a restorer. After her husband (Antonio Albanese) confesses to her that he hadn't told her about losing his well-paying job six months ago, she must give up her job. It's a voluntary job, so she's not giving up on any income, but now

she must earn money to avoid a financial disaster - because their affluent lifestyle is quickly ripping holes into all their safety nets. This is so European - we can volunteer for a full time job, because the municipality has no money; but we have plenty.

Eventually Margherita runs out of money, like we all do, and all the volunteer work, that a substantial chunk of the Western European economy is by now built upon slowly and invisibly fades away to make room for all these jobs we never dreamed we'd end up with. Margherita has to work in a callcenter, and her husband joins a messenger service until his daughter spots him at a crossing, on his moped, shocked and sad. It's a stark reminder that losing a job can happen to anybody, and that our social fabric has become permeable. As Alan Sillitoe once wrote: "He felt a lack of security. No place existed in all the world that could be called safe, and he knew for the first time in his life that there had never been any such thing as safety, and never would be, the difference being that now he knew it as a fact, whereas before it was a natural unconscious state" (Saturday Night And Sunday Morning).

Margherita can't continue to do what she loves. At the end of the film she and husband Antonio visit the building where Margherita's young colleagues have finished the fresco - those lucky ones whose parents are still rich enough, or who got the one paid job out of five. In the empty hall, Margherita and Antonio lie down on the floor, reconciling after a stressful period in their lives, and look up to a piece of European culture that others have restored for them (like in "Obsession", it's a dug-out early Renaissance painter under a lesser master, however this time the older painting wins).

Can we Europeans continue to do what we love? Can we continue to "save the world" - equal opportunity, clean environment, the end of hunger and war? Or will we have to watch others finish our project, dependent on their mercies, their insights, and their respect?

4) Silent Spring (AIR)

The lonesome cowboy stops his horse - a fountain bursts from the ground. What is it? Perhaps it's fresh water; perhaps something else. Better not get too close. We Europeans had better not look too closely at our utopias. They might be poison, or just a one shot deal. Or the ground beneath us may open up in judgement.

The microphone listens in, directed at us. What have we to say? The Hebrew word "manna" means "What is it?" Bread from Heaven or water from the earth. Does the cacophony of all the political, scientific, and societal voices produce more than a sum-total of silence?

5) When The Levee Breaks (WATER)

It was a dream; my parents' old cupboard was in it, and a turntable, Sade, and a dark room. Since we sleep in the dark, I figure that is why in most of my dreams I'm in dark interiors rather than in bright daylight.

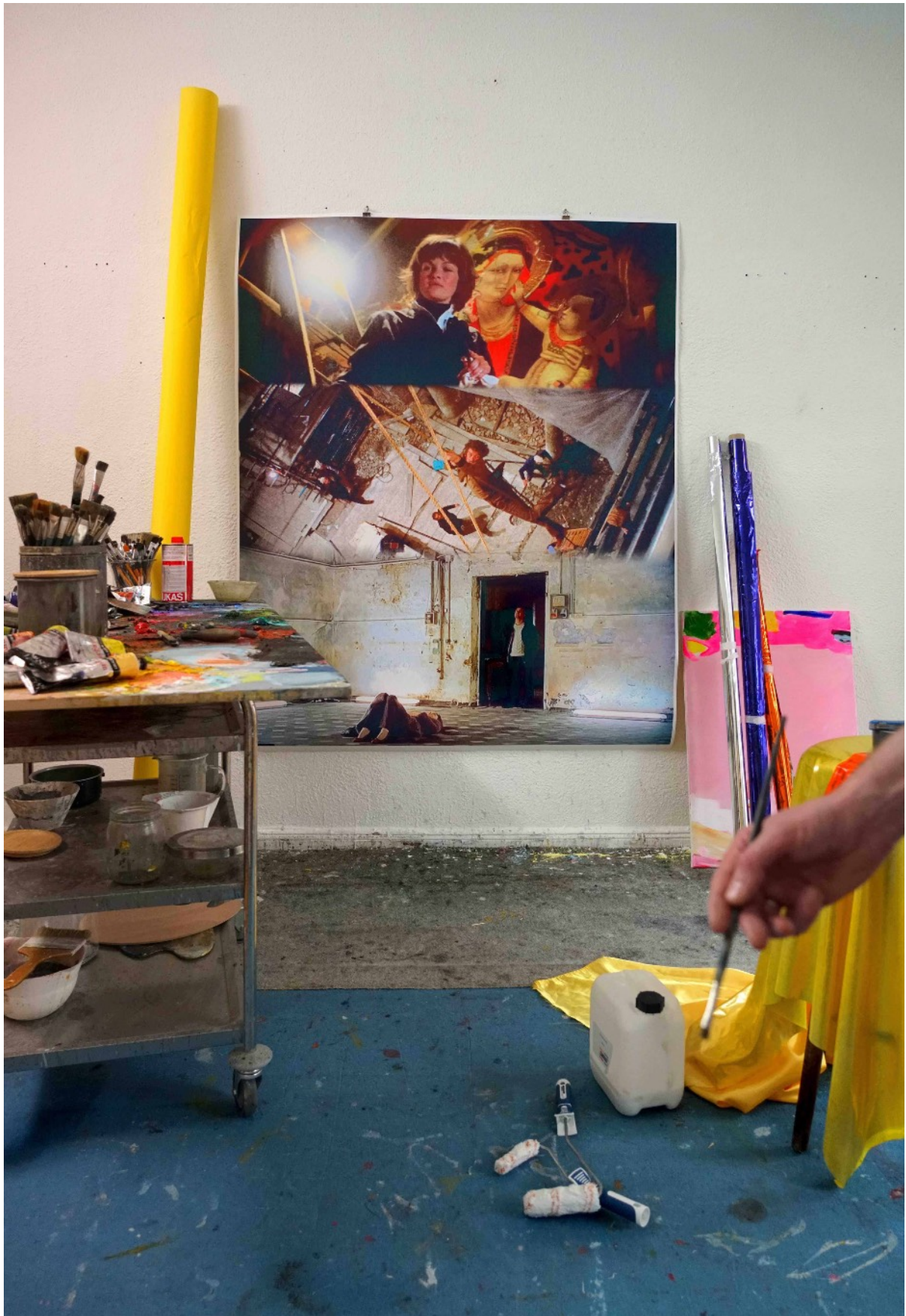
If I paint a record it's almost always Led Zeppelin 4, not because I particularly like it, but because it has one of the best record sleeves in history, and because its label is orange and green. The last song on it is "When The Levee Breaks", and very much like everybody in his era (that includes Roger Waters) Robert Plant fears not having a place to stay, when the levee breaks. Roger Waters sings (himself) in "Brain Damage": *And if the dam breaks open many years too soon, And if there is no room upon the hill...* "Plant" and "Waters" have fear, what more can I say?



"Plastic Hippy", Giclée print on archival canvas, 180x120-cm, 2019



“Good Robot Bad Robot #1“, Giclée print on archival canvas, 180x120-cm, 2019



"Europe, A Restauration", Giclée print on archival canvas, 180x120-cm, 2019



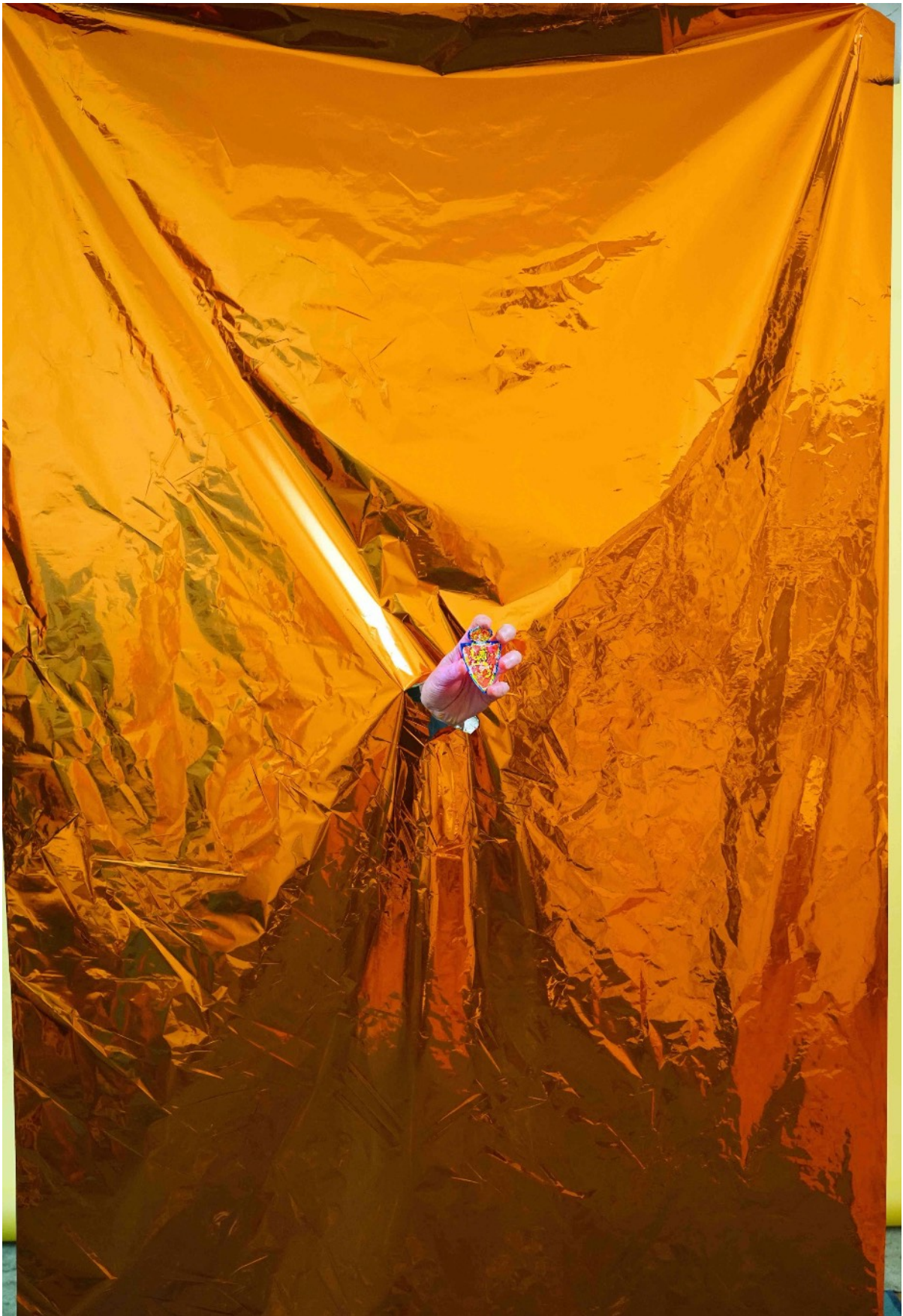
"Silent Spring", Giclée print on archival canvas, 180x120-cm, 2019



“When The Levee Breaks“, Giclée print on archival canvas, 120x180-cm, 2019



"Apocalypse Then", Giclée print on archival canvas, 180x120-cm, 2019



"Zaragoza", Giclée print on archival canvas, 180x120-cm, 2019



"Wave", Giclée print on archival canvas, 180x120-cm, 2019