

Mathias Kessler

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After Casper David Friedrich

*Das Eismeer,
Die gescheiterte Hoffnung*

Commissioned by Kultur Vorarlberg and the Bundesministerium für
Kunst, Kultur, öffentlicher Dienst und Sport (BMKÖS) Vienna

The melting landscape functions as both a climatic process and a historical metaphor, tracing how the ideological promises of modernity—like the ice itself—fractured and dissolved under the pressures of war, industrialization, and environmental change.

This project reinterprets *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24) as a historical, political, and climatic model. Painted in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the work has long been associated with the collapse of Enlightenment and nationalist hopes that military conflict might lead to German unification. The shipwreck at the center of the composition can be read as an image of ideological failure—of aspirations immobilized and crushed rather than fulfilled.

Positioned at the onset of modernity, Friedrich's painting precedes the industrial transformations that would eventually bring German unification, while also setting in motion the conditions that led to two World Wars and the ecological crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The frozen landscape thus operates as a suspended historical threshold, holding together political disappointment, technological emergence, and the early stages of human impact on the environment.

By overlaying the painting with two centuries of climate data, this project extends Friedrich's historical condition into the present. A three-dimensional reconstruction of the image is gradually altered according to recorded temperature increases and glacier retreat, allowing the landscape to melt from 1824 to 2024. The resulting transformation collapses historical time, aligning ideological erosion with environmental degradation.

The use of charcoal drawings as translations of the digital simulation reinforces this parallel. Each drawing marks a specific decade, functioning as both an image and a document of loss. In this framework, melting becomes a dual process: the physical disappearance of ice caps and glaciers, and the dissolution of political and cultural narratives that once promised stability, progress, or unity. The work proposes climate change as the material consequence of a modern history whose foundational ideals have steadily eroded.

The Movie:



Animation Film

After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1824–2024, 2026
3D animation based on climate data and historical visual research
5 min

Click on image or [here](#) to view the Movie

Characoal drawings

1823-24



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1823-24, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1880



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1890, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1910



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1910, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1930



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1930, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1950



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1950, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

1960



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1960, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

1970



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1970, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1980



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1980, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1990



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1990, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

2000



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2000, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

2010



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2010, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

2015



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2015, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

2025



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2025, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

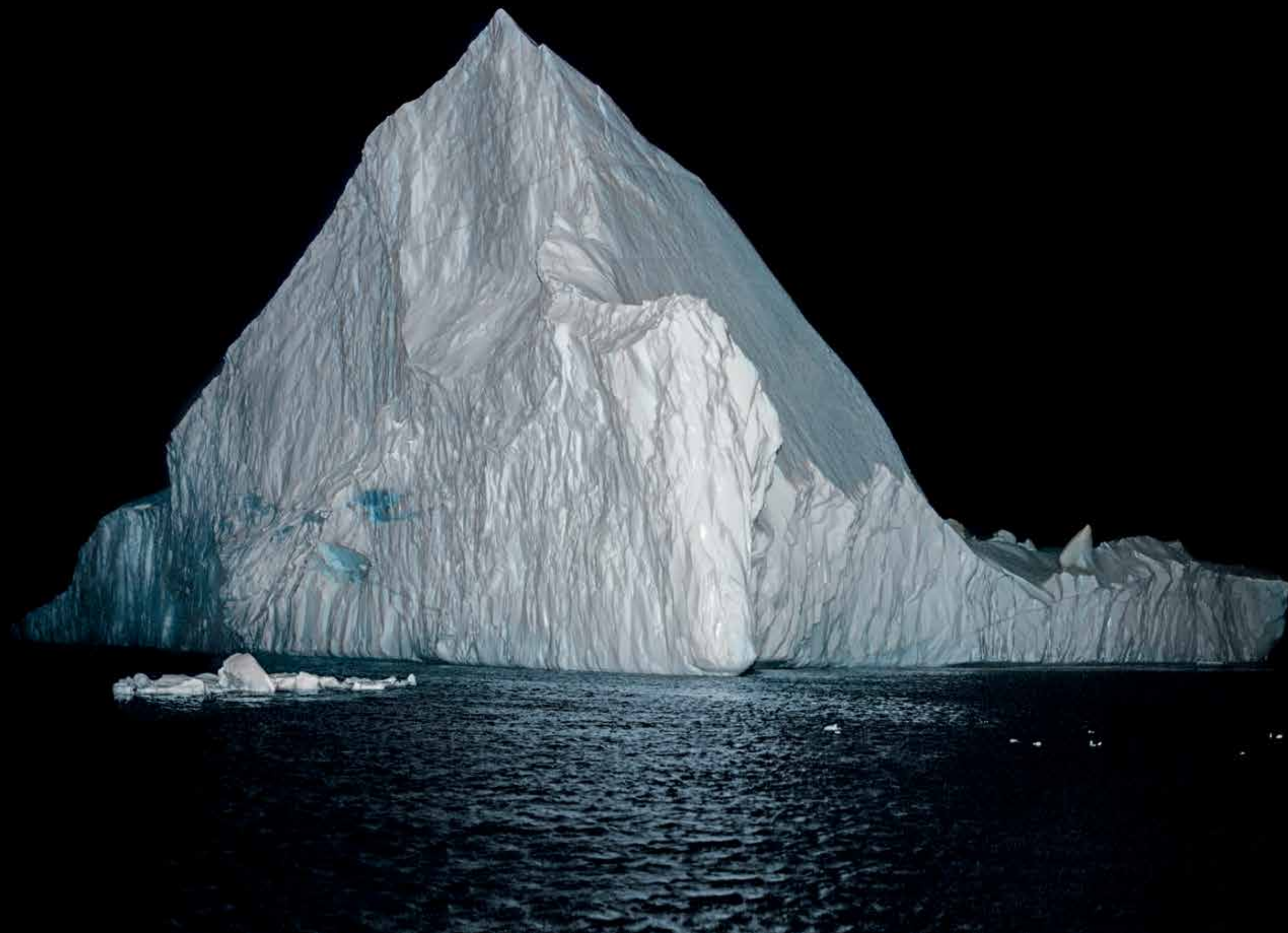
Staging Nature

Ilulissat, Greenland, 2007

For the series, Staging Nature, I embarked on an expedition with a group of scientists to explore the Arctic Seas with the intention of capturing the sublime images of ice in Greenland. In the still darkness of the night, I projected high-powered Hollywood cinematic lighting onto the larger-than-life iceberg formations, creating eerie, plastic images, so dramatically detailed — more detail than can be seen with the naked eye — that the viewer is left questioning the reality behind the image. I recognize expeditions are an important recurring theme within my work, allowing me to question the commodification of nature, embedded in the western history of exploration and exploitation.



Ilulissat 011Y, Greenland, 2007

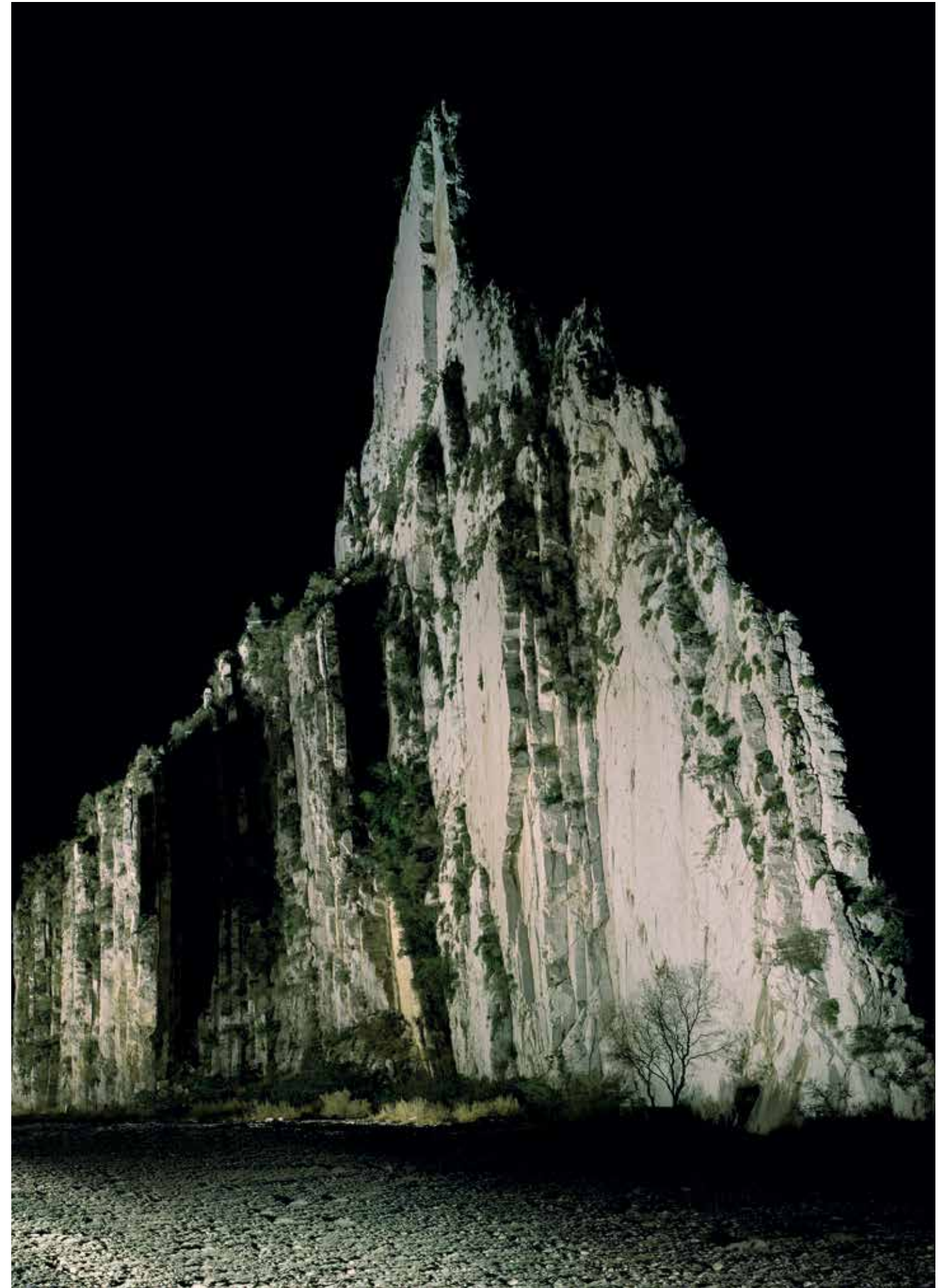


La Huasteca, Costa Careyes, Mexico, 2004

Staging Nature questions not only basic formal photographic principles but also conceptually addresses how we stage ourselves in the backdrop of a natural environment. Staging Nature questions our relationship with nature, as captured by western European art production. Nature today is an 18th-century fantasy that in the wake of climate change and 6th extinction slowly dismantles into a frightening apocalypse.

This work exists as an ongoing reflection of the European colonial practice of expedition and as a critique of the insatiable colonial desires that propelled exploration and conquest.

For me, this project encompasses several dichotomies that surround my work – curiosity/discovery, fear/beauty, life/death, man/nature, and art/commodity. I often realize that the expeditions that allow the work, become themselves the work, recreating, and reinterpreting these experiences in a performative manner. In my series of mountains and caves, I document sublime images of deep, dark settings that birthed our primordial myths. Virtually “untouched” by human hands, these geological wonders feel foreign, alien, and unfamiliar. At the same time, they exist as some of the most basic natural formations in nature, making all the more apparent our own detachment from the natural world and echoing the consequences of our past actions, which will inevitably confront us on our way ahead.





Island 03, Careyes, Mexico,

Kanzelwand

Commissioned by Bergbahnen and Kleinwalsertal Tourismus,
Austria



Kanzelwand 01, Austria, 2009

KANZELWAND



🎥 www.video.mathiaskessler.com/10



Acupan Tepuis, Gran Sabana, Venezuela, 2009

In 2009, I joined an expedition with a private explorer, Charles Brewer, and a scientific team from various universities in the US, Canada, and Europe to explore one of the oldest cave systems in the world.

Placed on top of the Tepuis in the Gran Sabana, we entered the 100 million-plus years old landlocked Galapagos where evolution took a different turn. On top of this strange and alienating landscape, we entered a cave system that was truly new to humanity. As an artist and photographer, I took the role of documenting the geological structure inside the cave with giant flashlights so the scientists could identify the geological makeup of this giant cave, simultaneously taking the role of a tourist that captures a foreign place.

Addressing the idea of the expedition as an intrinsic colonial strategy, many works emerged from this 3-week long process, highlighting how European hegemony eradicates indigenous cultures, undermining knowledge and traditions, ultimately destroying self-sufficient peoples through assimilation powered by evangelicals and plastic goods in the hopes of acquiring control of their natural resources.



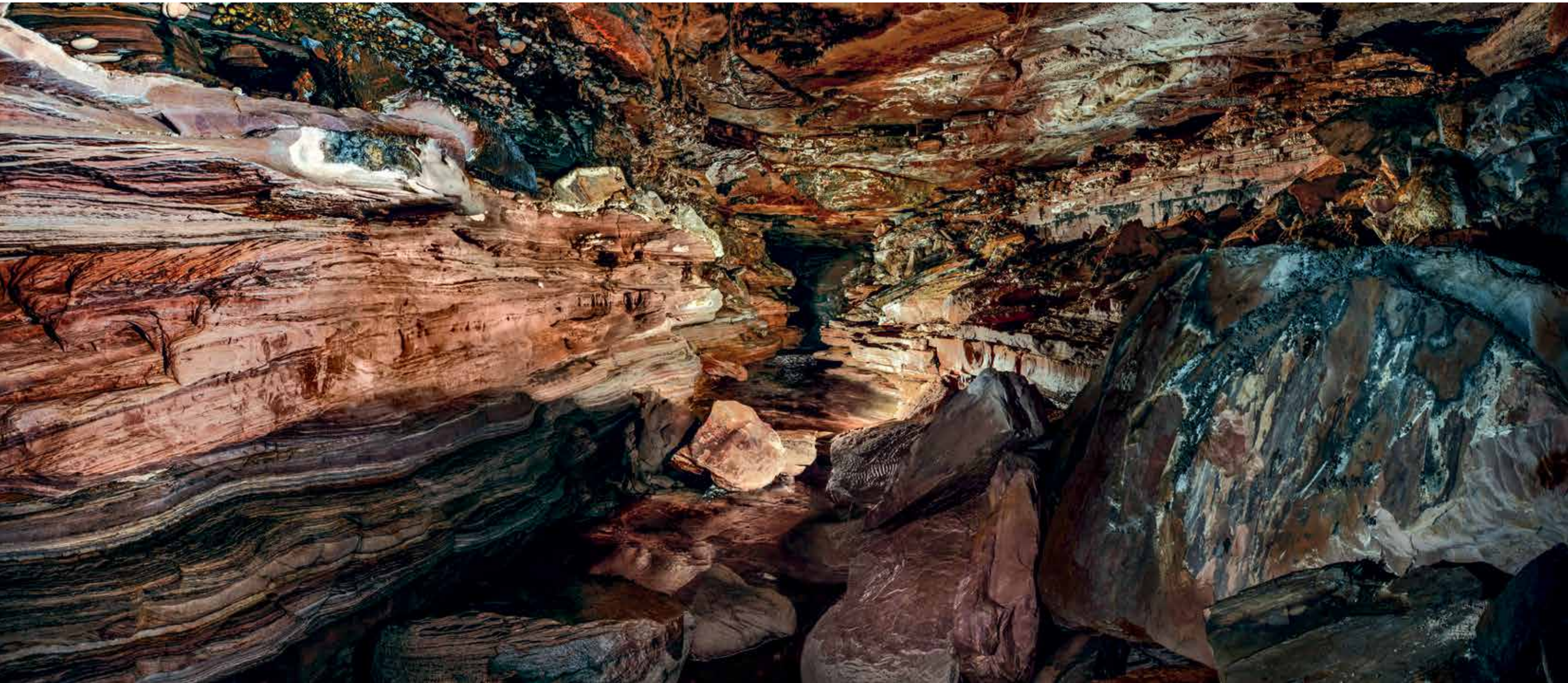
Film stills from Bringing Light to the Mountain, Guiana Highlands, Venezuela, 2009



Acopan Tepuis, Venezuela, 2009



(Previous pages) Chimanta 003, Venezuela, 2009



Cueva de Charles Brewer D001, Venezuela,

Making Something out of Noth-

On Capitalism and the Plastic Trade

**by
Mathias Kessler
&
Ahmet Civelek**

Years/Places: 2022–2025 — Adana (TR), Istanbul (TR), Vienna (AT), Frankfurt (DE), Kleinwalsertal (AT), Busan (KR).

Project Statement

Making Something out of Nothing follows the transnational afterlife of plastic—tracking exported European waste as it moves into Turkey’s informal economies, then returning it to public view as collectively made artworks. The project spans on-site research, participatory workshops, and context-specific installations, weaving together documentary images from Adana with week-long public performances in Istanbul and exhibition chapters in Vienna and beyond. By turning packaging and beach plastics into large woven carpets and suspended “flags,” the work refuses the notion that waste is an endpoint; instead, it reveals how materials keep acting on bodies, landscapes, and policies long after disposal. The result is part testimony and part social sculpture: a shared process that exposes the failures of export-driven recycling regimes while inviting audiences to step inside an architecture of color, texture, and accountability.

Adana Turkey, Field Research September 2024

Kessler, together with Ahmet Civelek and photographer André Schönherr, documented how mixed European plastics—often shipped by intermediary companies and relabeled as “recyclable”—are intermingled with demolition debris, then illegally burned, buried, or dumped without oversight on the outskirts of Adana. The team’s images and footage show how these practices contaminate soil and air and shift environmental risk onto local communities. This foundational research anchors subsequent chapters, supplying both the visual evidence and ethical urgency that the project carries into gallery spaces and public programs.



Adana Tuerkei, September 2024



Adana Tuerkei, September 2024



OG Gallery, Istanbul — Performative Weaving (Sept 2024)

At OG Gallery, the space was transformed into a participatory workshop where visitors, neighbors, and local school classes joined the artists in cutting and weaving strips of plastic waste collected throughout Istanbul. The process unfolded publicly over several days, with tables, tools, and makeshift looms filling the exhibition space.

Children and students took part in scheduled sessions, turning the gallery into an environment of learning and collaboration. Layer by layer, the woven sections evolved into colorful carpets, each carrying traces of many hands and spontaneous decisions. The result—50 hand-woven carpets, each roughly 110 × 150 cm—was later assembled into large wall-sized works (around 4 × 5 m). These surfaces record both the material history of plastic and the collective gesture of transforming what was once discarded into something communal and alive.



Making Something out of Nothing, 2025, OG Galleryl, performance



Making Something out of Nothing, 2025, OG Galleryl, performance



Making Something out of Nothing, 2025, OG Galleryl, performance

Making Something out of Nothing

Austrian Cultural Forum

November 2024

A project by Mathias Kessler and Ahmet Civilek, with contributions by Christina Elsaesser and André Schönherr

At the ACF Istanbul, the project shifted toward photographic architecture. Large-scale prints (each 2 × 2 m) based on the Adana research were mounted as panels that created a walkable maze through the exhibition rooms. The viewer navigated between these image walls, encountering fragments of industrial landscapes and plastic textures on every side.

Within and between the sections, woven plastic carpets subdivided the space, acting as both sculptural floor elements and connective tissue between the image structures. This combination of printed documentation and tactile weaving emphasized the circulation of material and memory, transforming the exhibition into a spatial translation of the recycling loop itself.



Making Something out of Nothing, 2024, ACF Istanbul, site specific installation



Making Something out of Nothing, 2024, ACF Istanbul, site specific installation



Making Something out of Nothing, 2024, ACF Istanbul, site specific installation

Imagine Climate Dignity

Kuenstlerhaus Wien, March 2025

Mathias Kessler, Ahmet Civelek

The Istanbul performance pieces were recomposed into one expansive wall, re-situating the participatory carpets within an exhibition architecture that makes the relation between art and waste physically legible. Here, the project's logic of transformation—trash into pattern, pattern into structure—meets the museum context, inviting slower looking and public debate. Photographs from Adana and the OG workshop, installed alongside mirrored and printed film surfaces, extend the documentary thread while foregrounding the tactile presence of the plastic fibers themselves.



Making Something out of Nothing, 2025, Kuenstlerhaus Wien, site specific installation



Making Something out of Nothing, 2025, Kuenstlerhaus Wien, site specific installation



Making Something out of Nothing, 2025, Kuenstlerhaus Wien, site specific installation

Busan Biennale

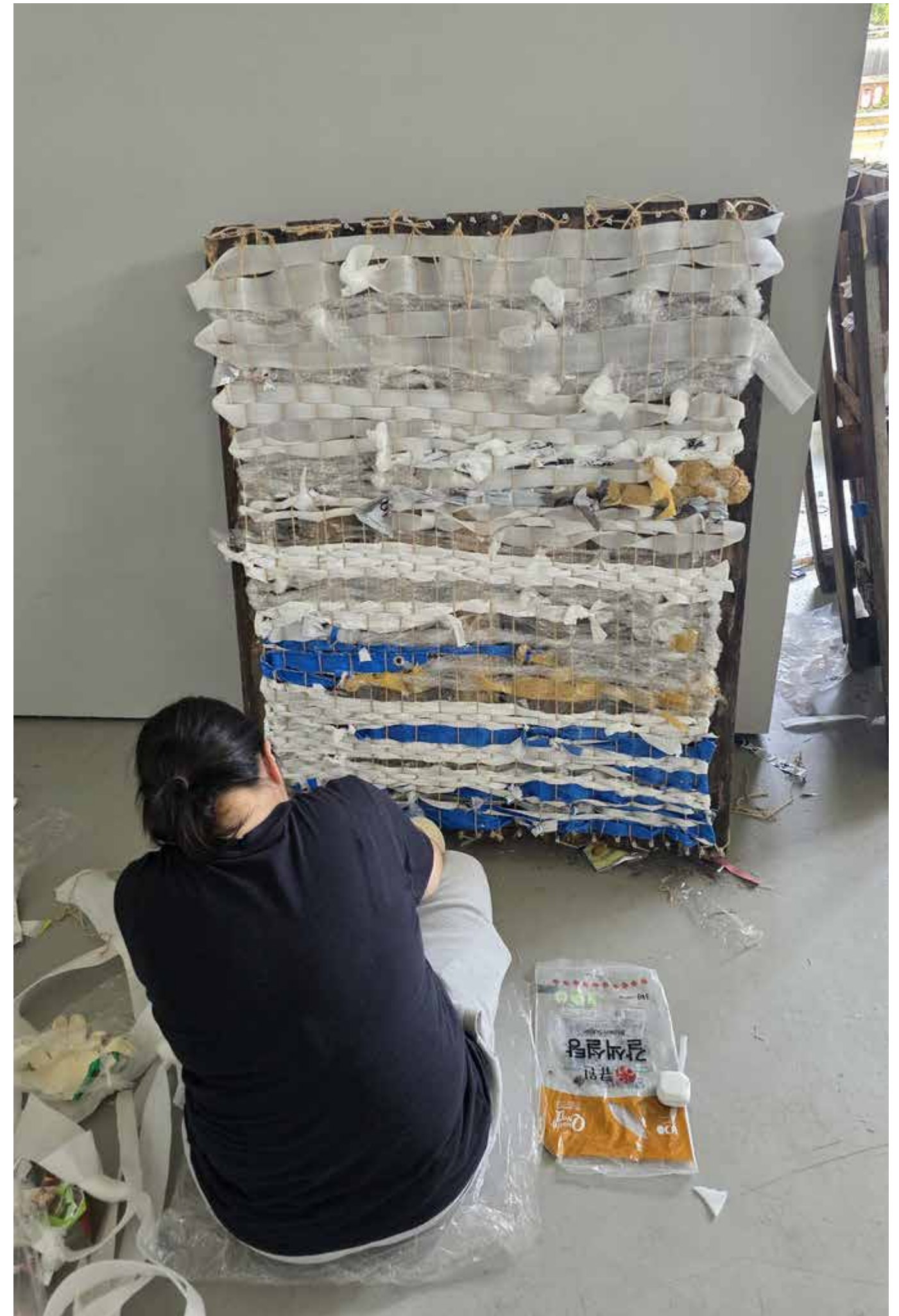
Sea Art Festival 2025

Undercurrents: Waves Walking on the Water

Dadaepo Beach, Busan, October 2025

Mathias Kessler, Ahmet Civelek

In Busan, the project turns seaward: discarded packaging and beach plastics gathered around Dadaepo Beach are hand-woven into a monumental carpet (approx. 600 × 1200 cm), then suspended on two metal structures to produce a wave-like canopy. Visitors can walk beneath it, reading colors, seams, and residual traces up close—a bodily scale that mirrors the planetary scale of marine pollution. This chapter extends the project's collaborative ethos, linking local collection and making to a shared public, and reframes the shoreline as a threshold where global supply chains visibly wash ashore. able materials and invites us to reflect on the global cycle of consumption and pollution.







Works

Project Summary

Selected Photographic work from the Exhibition at the Austrian Cultural Forum Istanbul and Kuenstlerhaus Wien 2025:



Making Something out of Nothing I, 2024, Istanbul, Turkey, 500x600 cm, woven carpet out of plastic garbage



Making Something out of Nothing II, 2025, Adana, Turkey, Chromogenic Inkjet Print, 60x90 cm, framed



Making Something out of Nothing III, 2025, Adana, Turkey, Chromogenic Inkjet Print, 60x90 cm, framed

Across sculpture, photography, computer-generated landscape, installation, and performance

Mathias Kessler (*1968, Österreich) ist ein in New York lebender Künstler, der den Begriff der Natur kritisiert und neu interpretiert. Mit Zitaten aus Kunstgeschichte, Philosophie und umweltpolitischen Debatten inszeniert Kessler Darstellungen natürlicher Prozesse neu. Romantische Malerei, Land Art und digitale Renderings konkurrieren und kollidieren, um vertraute Gegensätze wie Natur und Kultur, Repräsentation und Erfahrung und im erweiterten Sinne Ideologie und Ästhetik aus dem Gleichgewicht zu bringen. Arktische Eisberge, dramatisiert durch filmische Beleuchtungstechniken, werden zu leeren Hollywood-Sets. Ein menschlicher Schädel mit lebenden Korallen blüht auf, während er zerfällt. Ein Miniatur-3D-Druck, der Caspar David Friedrichs Gemälde Das Eismeer in einem Bierkühlschrank zeigt, erzeugt eine interaktive soziale Skulptur, die als Ort des Trinkens und der Reflexion über die Lebensmittelproduktion gedacht ist. Kesslers Beitrag zu aktuellen utopischen und dystopischen Debatten ist intelligent, ernsthaft, komisch und visuell atemberaubend zugleich.

Mathias Kessler erhielt seinen MFA in Art Practice von der School of Visual Arts im Jahr 2013. Er hat international ausgestellt, darunter Einzelausstellungen im Kirchner Museum in Davos, Schweiz, Kunsthal Rotterdam; Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, Colorado; Palmengarten Frankfurt, Deutschland; Künstlerhaus Bregenz, Österreich; Site:Lab, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Rosphot National Museum for Photography, St. Petersburg, Russland; GL Holtegaard Museum, Kopenhagen, Dänemark und Kunstraum Dornbirn, Österreich.

Seine Arbeiten wurden in internationalen Publikationen veröffentlicht, unter anderem in: KUNSTFORUM International, Art Forum, Art in America, New York Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Cultured Magazine, Blouin Artinfo, Bloomberg Press, Kopenhagen DK, Eikon, Kunstforum, Studio 360, ORF SAT 3, Camera Austria, Die Zeit, Forbes, Prefix Magazin, und Art Bulletin.
www.mathiaskessler.com



Making Something out of Nothing VIII 2025, Adana, Turkey, Chromogenic Inkjet Print, 60x90 cm, framed



Making Something out of Nothing XI, 2025, Adana, Turkey, Chromogenic Inkjet Print, 60x90 cm, framed



Making Something out of Nothing IX, 2025, Adana, Turkey, Chromogenic Inkjet Print, 60x90 cm, framed



Plastic Carpet from Istanbul to Germany I, 2025, Adana, Turkey, woven recycled Plastic 100x120 cm, Framed

Pump it UP!

Commissioned by Kunsthaus Graz

With Pump it Up!, media artist Mathias Kessler presents a dynamic interactive installation at Kunsthaus Graz that examines energy, sustainability, and the nature of work through a playful, competitive lens. In this project, visitors on a home trainer generate energy and see their results compared in real-time with data from Velo, a Graz-based food delivery service whose couriers' output is tracked via a custom app. The BIX media façade of Kunsthaus Graz becomes a lively scoreboard as this “team Museum” vs. “team Velo” challenge lights up two digital airdancers with each watt generated, visually linking physical effort to energy production.

Set within the 24/7 exhibition on the nature of modern labor, Pump it Up! bridges the analog and digital, taking inspiration from the social phenomenon of “soul cycling” and the high-energy demands of 24/7 consumerism. As visitors cycle, their energy output is converted into light animations on the BIX façade, and the installation evokes a retro video game aesthetic, merging '80s high scores with contemporary themes of sustainability and urban labor. Bicycle couriers, seen daily weaving through the streets in bright uniforms, are honored in the project as both an expression of physical labor and a critique of modern urban rhythms.

The installation culminates on October 19th with a lecture by ethnologist Konstantin Mack on the role of bike couriers in urban spaces, followed by a discussion with the artist. Pump it Up! invites the public to reflect on energy, physicality, and the intertwined demands of labor and consumption in a shared, tangible way.





Kunsthaus Graz



00:00



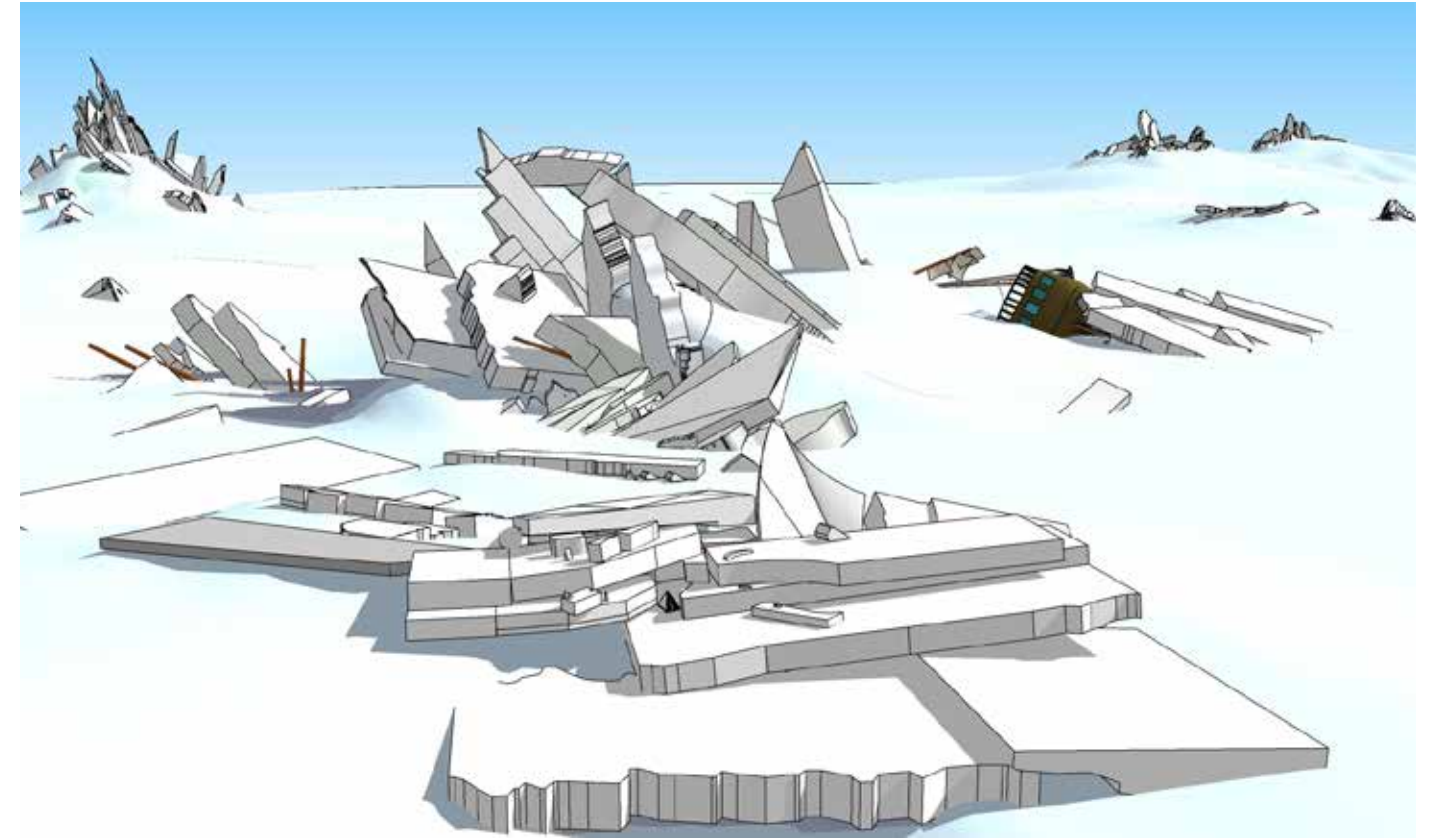
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Das Eismeer

Die gescheiterte Hoffnung, 3D Model,
2012

Das Eismeer/Die gescheiterte Hoffnung is derived from an oil painting of the same name by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1823–1824). The painting has many historical layers, one referring to the crushed hope and despondent mood which prevailed following the Napoleonic Wars when the much-hoped-for political freedom in Germany from the ruling elite failed to be achieved. On the other side, there is a romantic landscape-fantasy, fueled by the search for the Northwest Passage, like the Franklin Expedition where ships and men were lost and never found.

For this piece, a recreated a 3D-printed model of Friedrich's famous painting was housed in the freezer compartment of a mini-fridge. The refrigerator is stocked with beer, I invite viewers to drink from the fridge and engage in informal discussions. The opening and closing of the fridge help continue the life cycle of the ice sculpture, while the beer facilitates comradery and intellectual exchange. In the process, a social sculpture is created.



Das Eismeer, Die gescheiterte Hoffnung, 3D model, (The Sea of Ice, The Wreck of Hope), 2012



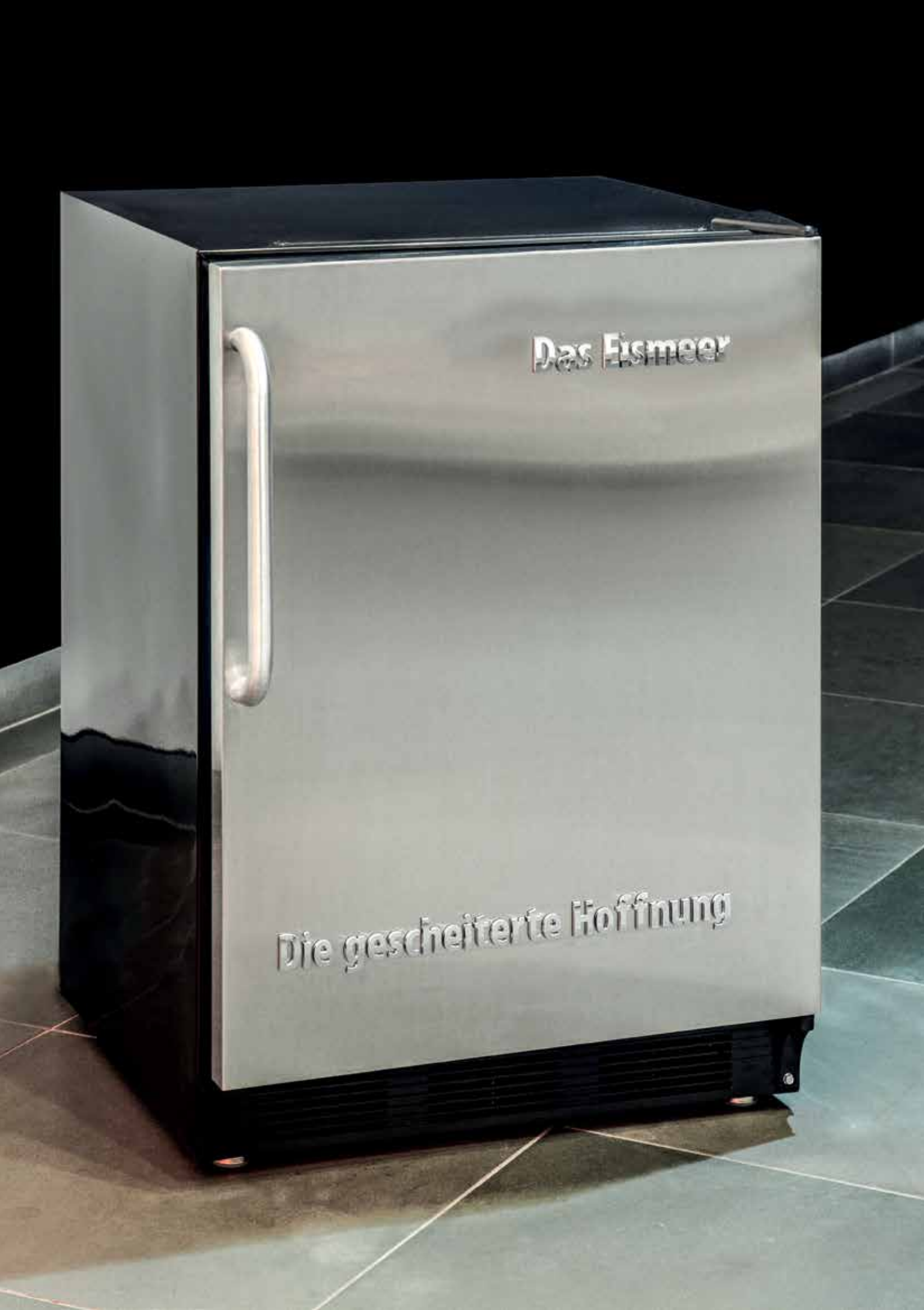
Caspar David Friedrich, Das Eismeer, Die gescheiterte Hoffnung (The Sea of Ice, the Wreck of Hope), 1823–1824



Das Eismeer, Die gescheiterte Hoffnung, 2013, digital C print from a 3D rendered Maya file, 90x127 cm, face mounted on gallery plexi



Das Eismeer, Die gescheiterte Hoffnung, printed 3D Model in freezer compartment of an under-counter fridge, (The Sea of Ice, The Wreck of Hope), 2012



Both pages:
Das Eismeer, Die gescheiterte Hoffnung, (The Sea of Ice, The Wreck of Hope), 2012

Nowhere to Be Found

Commissioned by Kunsthal Rotterdam / Dom Museum Wien

Nowhere to Be Found

Nowhere to Be Found (2010) ist ein Spannungsfeld: Ein menschlicher Schädel hängt über mehrere Jahre in einem Salzwassertank und die Koralle ernährt sich vom Kalzium des Schädels und bildet somit ein Korallenriff. Diese Arbeit steht in der Tradition der Vanitas - Stilleben und baut auf die Aspekte von memento mori und Carpe Diem auf.

Im Unterschied zu den meisten anderen Vanitas-Darstellungen ist Nowhere to Be Found jedoch mehr als nur eine Illustration einer Idee. In diesem Fall habe ich den natürlichen Transformationsprozess innerhalb dieser Installation künstlich eingeleitet. Die Korallen, die in den Schädel implantiert sind, benötigen das Kalzium des Schädelknochens, um zu leben und zu wachsen. Es wird das Problem der menschlichen Auswirkungen auf natürliche Prozesse angesprochen, welche ein wichtiger Teil meines künstlerischen Schaffens ist. Die Natur wird als Ursprung, Zustand und Ergebnis der menschlichen Existenz gezeigt.

Men wanted for hazardous journey.

Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete
darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful.

Honor and recognition in case of success.



Nowhere to Be Found, Kunsthal Rotterdam, 2016



Nowhere to Be Found, Kunsthal Rotterdam, 2016



Nowhere to Be Found, Kunsthall Rotterdam, 2016



Nowhere to Be Found, Kunsthal Rotterdam, Rotterdam, 2016