

Leonardo Bürgi Tenorio the paths we walk

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This is the first major institutional solo exhibition of this scale by Basel-based artist Leonardo Bürgi Tenorio, which occupies the entire upper floor of the new Kunsthhaus Baselland. The artist views the three large spatial structures as three chapters of a narrative that gradually—as we walk through this dense display—reveals itself to us as viewers.

I meet Leonardo in the run-up to the exhibition in his Basel studio, where he has spent many months developing this exhibition featuring a wide variety of media, materials, and formats. In this display, the artist explores a theme: he examines the history of vivariums and terrariums—structures for rearing and cultivating plants or animals—in order to unpack and simultaneously critique our relationship to people, culture, exoticism, and our native habitats. He does this without neglecting the poetry and power of art. We meet for a conversation about his work and his background: he has close ties to both Switzerland and Latin America. I wonder whether it is precisely this frank gaze from different perspectives that enables him to explore topics such as colonialism, global trade, humanity, and environmental issues in such a convincing, sensitive, precise, and genuine way. “The majority of Latin American societies,” he explains, “are predominantly made up of *mestizos*. This refers to people of both European and Indigenous descent, especially in Latin America. As the son of a Mexican mother and a Swiss father, I am almost something of a neo-mestizo. I think that the identity and reality of people with mixed ethnic backgrounds in our world reflects the complexity of colonialism.”

However, it is not just his own story that Leonardo Bürgi Tenorio has been telling through his artistic work over the past few years—he would not want to indulge in such navel-gazing. This is why he chose the title *the paths we walk* for his exhibition. This “we” is specifically us: modern, contemporary people who view countries and topics from our perspective—a Western perspective that we recognize as privileged, especially with regard to the Global South.

During our conversation, I remember a text by the philosopher Eva von Redecker on the concept of freedom. From a Western perspective in particular, it remains very much associated with the freedom to travel and a thirst for adventure. This idea of exploring the landscape, but also of expansionism, is interwoven with what Leonardo Bürgi Tenorio calls the romanticized image of travel and the “discoveries” made by colonialists—but also by scientists, such as Alexander von Humboldt. *the paths we walk* takes up this notion of moving and wanting to move, but it also raises the question of which well-trodden, old, or even questionable paths we are walking on, which we must finally—today, here and now—walk in new ways.

In addition to major health restrictions, the pandemic era also constituted a significant restriction of freedom for so many people, not only because going outside was restricted, but also travel on a larger scale. The world was suddenly confined to our four walls—and so many people increasingly brought nature into their private spaces. Houseplants, aquariums, and terrariums as habitats for plants and animals from the tropics and jungles—in other words, from a variety of different climates—enjoyed a huge revival during this period.

It makes sense, then, that during our conversation in Leonardo Bürgi Tenorio’s studio we are surrounded by glowing terrariums—a central theme of his exhibition at the Kunsthhaus and his artistic work. “What particularly intrigued and fascinated me about this research,” says the artist, “is the aspect of scale. You can see this in the paintings, the incense pyramids, and the architectural models in the aquarium installation, for example. The architectural elements are adapted to meet the requirements of the plants or vice versa. Thus, flower pots, aquariums, terrariums and the like are ways of creating a habitat in an otherwise hostile environment. In my opinion, the relationship between humans and plants is already deeply ambivalent, as caring for a plant involves affection as well as pruning and controlling it. I was also interested in how the initial Western fascination with the tropics and subtropics has been translated to the present day. In my view, however, this enthusiasm for tropical landscapes in miniature has become somewhat trivialized and more of a fantasy.”

Altering the scale gives us an overall view and a sense of feasibility, but also a safe way of discovering the exotic — while at the same time ensuring that the size remains manageable. Is this an unprocessed legacy of colonialism? I continue to walk with the artist through his studio, and we spend some time in front of the large new painting that he completed shortly before installing the exhibition. A vast mountain landscape opens up before us, surrounded by water and plants that burrow their way through the earth like mangroves. The incense pyramids set up in the room, one or two of which already have an ash cone, seem to be a continuation of this painted world. It is only at a second glance that a shadowy formation of pith helmets and jellyfish emerge, which seem to float in front of this landscape as an additional plane. Here, too, Leonardo Bürgi Tenorio draws on historical sources. According to him, this is a humorous commentary on an original copperplate engraving by Alexander von Humboldt: a westernized image of a landscape that obscures the West's own role or the impact it made on the land. "The *pith helmets* were part of a military uniform, but are more commonly known as explorer's hats. In this way, they highlight the misconception of colonialists and explorers or even scientists." "Jellyfish," he continues, "are also regarded as important indicators in the current discourse on climate change and also as so-called harbingers of global warming."

They also remind me of the flexibility inherent in jellyfish and even more so in octopuses. Perhaps, then, they are also an indication that we can transform this very complex subject through our mental attitude and, hopefully, flexibility in our actions? Does the artist see it the same way? "That's a nice thought. I find jellyfish very ambivalent creatures. They have an incredible elegance and there is also something deeply mysterious about their gelatinous existence. However, this elegance and beauty also contain something threatening and dangerous. Perhaps we humans are similar to jellyfish in our polarized existence."

As I return from the studio, the book on freedom comes to mind again and in particular the idea that we should establish a new freedom to stay — that is, to see a new freedom in being able and willing to stay where we are. So, if we make more of an effort to become more aware of others — and not just from a Western perspective, but from a global one — then not only does it become possible for us to tell new narratives, we can also rewrite them. We can develop a greater mental flexibility in relation to new topics, like the octopus, and perhaps then we will feel even more comfortable where we are and want to stay.

Leonardo Bürgi Tenorio (b. 1994)

Education: 2023 Master in Fine Arts at the Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel • 2018 Bachelor in Fine Arts at the Institut Kunst HGK • 2017 exchange with FAD UNAM, Mexico City (MX)

Residencies: 2024 Tokyo Arts and Space, Tokyo (JP) • 2022 SMAA, St. Moritz • 2021 Proyecto Urra, funded by Atelier Mondial, Buenos Aires (AR) • 2020 Dogo Residency, Lichtensteig St. Gallen • 2018 Espace Libre, Biel/Bienne • 2017 member of the workshop "Taller La Colmena," Mexico City (MX)

Scholarships: 2016 and 2018 Jugendkulturpauschale, Basel

Numerous exhibitions (solo/group shows) including: 2023 *Living Things*, Art in Architecture, Kunstcredit Basel-Stadt • *¿Desde donde miras el sol?*, CAN, Neuchâtel • 2022 *Exo Terra*, Kunst(Zeug)Haus, Rapperswil • 2018 *Superior*, Espace Libre, Biel/Bienne • *Dogo Totale • Blindspot*, Ausstellungsraum Klingental, Basel und FAQ Galerie, Basel, *Büro für Geldbeschaffung* • 2018 *Artachment*, Basel • 2017 *Bosque – Als sähen wir den Wald vor lauter Bäumen nicht*, Galería Autónoma, Mexiko-Stadt (MX).

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