

# Guillaume Dénerveau: as beautiful as post-apocalyptic can be

By Samuel Haitz

*Guillaume Dénerveau forms a delicate interpretation of a post-apocalyptic scenery, managing the effects of our carelessness towards our environment*

Besides having read George Orwell's 1984 (1949) once, I seldom engage with science fiction media—my knowledge is strictly limited, and hence contains a variety of utopian and dystopian narratives. The work of Swiss contemporary artist Guillaume Dénerveau is deeply influenced by the literary genre, sitting somewhere within the spectrum of futuristic narratives. In his paintings, which transcend the abstract and the figurative, the artist simultaneously evokes microscopic views and the sensation of organic life as it takes back the planet. In this post-apocalyptic world, plant matter overgrows that which was made and subsequently destroyed by the humans of the Anthropocene.

In Guillaume Dénerveau's current exhibition, *Ozoned Station* (2023), at Swiss Institute, New York, we encounter six of these paintings, meticulously rendered in pencil, tempera, and oil on linen. His technique uses architectural drawing stencils, which are a relic from pre-computer times. Forms which are open to interpretation as flowers, fireworks, fan and windmill-like shapes, planets, and neural networks sprawl densely over these canvases. The paintings' earthy yet vivid tones are derived from Dénerveau's use of natural pigments, won from flora, fauna, and minerals, and which are spread in translucent layers, the flatness with which paint is applied here seeming to refer to a method of drawing rather than "actual" painting. /Users/shiva.m.abadi/Downloads/Archive Jpegs/SI Denervaud 05.jpg  
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Installation view, Guillaume Dénerveau, "Ozoned Station," Swiss Institute, New York, 2023. Image: Daniel Pérez, Swiss Institute. Courtesy of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

The task of discussing Guillaume Déneraud's work within the strictures of the discourse on contemporary painting is complicated by his vast arsenal of techniques and references. Though he compares his process of diluting Cassel brown pigments obtained from lignite mines to using Van Dyck brown, the unstable bituminous coal-based colour used by the eponymous Flemish Baroque master and his peer Peter Paul Rubens, he does not excise directly from their technique. "I did a lot of research about historic and natural pigments," he explains, continuing, "the ground of my paintings is prepared with a mixture of rabbit skin glue and a grey-green mineral pigment which dries to create a very absorbent painting surface ... I like to contrast a technique which could be considered archaic, even obsolete, like tempera or casein, with subjects linked to industrialisation or the idea of an anthropic nature." Déneraud's works function in the singular ecosystem of his oeuvre. His paintings are not *trendy*, but then again, they do not feel old, and while they are as beautiful as post-apocalyptic scenery can be, it would be imprecise to call these canvases "decorative." This is an "ambivalent asymmetry," in the artist's terms. Feigning categorisation, Déneraud is not easily described as contemporary or even as *un-contemporary*—the elusive, genreless charm of these canvases is what triggers my simultaneous interest.



Guillaume Déneraud, *Volatility Orb'1*, 2023, blown glass, light bulb, electrical cable. Image: Daniel Pérez, Swiss Institute. Courtesy of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

The presentation at Swiss Institute also features three framed drawings executed in China ink which expand on the subjects of his paintings to almost comic ends. (One of them, *Whisper Something*, 2022 features two alien-like figures whose corpuses Guillaume Déneraud has incorporated with an interconnected, almost tangling system of hoses and tubes.) The walls of the exhibition space have been treated with paint containing bituminous coal resulting in a patina which invokes dusty residue left by industrialized production and the pollution that comes with it. “This gesture is more related to painting than the works on canvas,” the artist explains. Regarding the S-shaped steel sculpture (*InOut Capacities*, 2023), Déneraud is open about its potential modular, social function. Another ceiling fan-shaped sculpture (*Please note, they are fading*, 2023) translates one of the artist’s preferred painterly motifs to the three-dimensional plane, doubling down on the (post-)industrial mood of the show. The most surprising, fresh pieces can be found in the hallway leading to the exhibition space. *For Volatility Orb '1*, *Changeability Orb '2*, and *Levity Orb '3*, all 2023, Déneraud hung three handblown glass orbs in different colours, inadvertently forming a miniature solar system. One professes to float; the two others are more fatigué, stuck in mid-air, perched against the wall. Each of the lightbulb-equipped orbs provides an eerie glow and a psychedelic feel to the hallway, an effect detectable throughout the presentation.



Guillaume Déneraud, detail of *Mr Miles Adjusts the Filaments of the Lantern*, 2023, oil, tempera, and pencil on linen. Image: Daniel Pérez, Swiss Institute. Courtesy of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

With *Ozoned Station*, Guillaume Dénervaud forms a delicate interpretation of an abandoned post-apocalyptic scenery, managing the threatening effects of our carelessness towards our environment while avoiding adopting the moralistic tone employed by many of his peers. Instead, his work seems to propose a liveable outcome for generations to come, suggesting the possibilities of ecological recovery, or more guiltlessly, the ability of nature to adapt positively.

Further regarding adaptation, Guillaume Dénervaud's practice is not characterized by significant aesthetic shifts but by continuous evolution. One step leads clearly to another. Rooted in his drawing practice, Dénervaud calmly branches out into new formats, techniques, and even dimensions. While his drawings do not come off as precursory sketches, there is clear evidence of their influence on the visual language he applies toward working in other mediums. The artist maintains his position clearly: "I can draw without a precise project in mind," he says, adding "which is impossible when making a sculpture, for example." Revealing the two halves of his philosophy in general, he explains how he thinks through the lens of drawing during the conception period of an exhibition, as well as after a show has opened, "as a form of archiving." One could dismiss this strategy of endless repetition and variation as too boring, or too slow for the lightning-quick art world, yet in the case of Dénervaud, it feels not derivative, or self-plagiaristic, but convinced and sincere. This constant recursion emphasizes the inherent notion of a "practice" as precise and reiterative.



Guillaume Dénervaud, *Whisper Something* (detail), 2022, China ink on watercolor paper, 12 x 9 in. (30.5 × 22.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

Within the smooth consistency of Guillaume Dénervaud's oeuvre of drawings, paintings, and sculptures, there are flecks of tension between futurism and realism, the galactic and the dystopian, and the abandoned and the reliclike. The artist has succeeded in honing a thematic and visual niche. Geometrically speaking, Dénervaud is only drawing a tangent to a circle of omnipresent depictions of disaster and other anti-aesthetics in contemporary art.

Two nights ago, I had a dream stimulated by the occupation of this very artist: Walking hand-in-hand with a recent acquaintance, we entered a house in Zurich, the same house in which I lived some years ago, but now dilapidated, as if it had been abandoned for centuries. Most of the windows were broken and the accumulation of dirt and dust on the crumbling walls resembled the patina of those in *Ozoned Station*. All my furniture was still in my room as if I had never moved out, albeit the plants had overgrown, smothering all available surfaces. A swarm of Asian stink bugs—first introduced to Switzerland during the 1998 renovation of the Chinagarten Zürich—had settled in the closet, gladly ignorant to the sentimental value of the memorabilia stored there. The bulb in the cheap rice paper lamp still worked, but the shade was ripped and discoloured, an image I think my brain created by merging memories of a series of glued paper towel lamps by disgraced artist Tobias Madison, also Swiss, and Guillaume Dénervaud's early glass orbs, *Strata* (2020). The destruction of my former home by an unknown force and the invasion of nature in its place—a narrative cognate to Dénervaud's oeuvre—unfolded in my dream. Similar to the odd association of beauty in his work, the post-apocalyptic scenario in this dream