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Olaf Breuning's attempt to brainwash you with nature

By [Ann Binlot](#)

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[Olaf Breuning](#)'s newest body of work—on view in an exhibition titled *Brainwashed by Nature* at [Carbon 12](#) in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue until March 15—has a childlike innocence to it, void of the slick, Photoshopped images many artists use in their work today. Perhaps it is the way the fervent gestures of the rough background stamped on the canvas resemble hurried crayon strokes, or the vivid color palette—a mix of pastels, primary colors, and earth tones. The artist also carved out crude wood stamps with references to nature—waves, stars, raindrops, and blades of grass. The works draw on a simpler time, when humanity was more in touch with nature and not somewhere deep in the rabbit hole of their iPhones as our planet deteriorates as a result of our own doing.

Those are the sort of existential things that Breuning has been thinking about, years after he decamped New York City for more bucolic surroundings upstate. The works are meant to resemble chaotic weather maps that serve as a metaphor for the rapid pace at which [climate change is affecting our environment](#). Breuning hopes that they are also a call to action, or at the very least, a reason to think about our relationship with mother nature and the consequences of our actions. Document talked to the artist about his realization, his need to return to a more primitive process, and why we need to wake up and do something about the planet if we want a more sustainable future.

Ann Binlot: What made you realize that the consequences of our actions are so detrimental to the future of the environment?

Olaf Breuning: It is all over the media and most people are aware of the upcoming challenges. If someone thinks it is still a conspiracy theory, he or she is wrong. It's no longer a media trend you can swipe away tomorrow and replace it with the family drama of Prince Harry and Meghan. It's there!

Ann: Why do you think that we're no longer in the present?

Olaf: It's a new conception of time where the future plays a big and also frightening role. I am sitting in the airport waiting for a flight to Mexico. Only 10 years ago I would feel good about traveling the world like a maniac. Today this has a bitter aftertaste. Not so cool anymore. Now we talk about the consequences our present life has on our future. This changed and I guess it will change more, which is a good thing. It's now up to you to change your behavior.

Ann: How has your move upstate brought you closer to the environment?

Olaf: Well nature is all around me. I guess it made me understand that I am a part of nature and not the opposite. If you live in New York City you think you are in charge of your surroundings. Of course you don't have this feeling when you use the subway! But most of the time the concrete jungle is a pleasant enough home to ignore nature. Only a few times there is an unpleasant nature visit like Hurricane Sandy in 2012. At this point we realize the fragility of the urban space.

Upstate you are always exposed to nature, power outages, ploughing snow, cutting trees....it makes you feel smaller as a human.

Ann: Why did you feel the need to return to a more primitive way of making work?

Olaf: Because I am primitive! And also because I don't like the material 'show off' today. If an artist makes a painting these days, it has to be a photograph painted over with oil wrapped on a stick, or whatever...sometimes I remember my friend Brian, who told me: 'KISS, keep it simple stupid!' And somehow I do like simple direct languages very much. It suits me. And of course that does not mean simple cannot be intelligent. My language is straightforward and I am very happy to work like this as an artist today.

Ann: Where did you get the materials from and what were they?

Olaf: I use wooden blocks I cut with the chainsaw and carve some shapes into them. After I paint them with acrylic colors and press them on canvas. Quite simple.

Ann: Tell me about the symbols and color palette used in this body of work.

Olaf: The symbols are easy to understand for everyone. Symbols such as clouds, fires, bushes, trees, rain drops...all images of nature. The color palette I just do with my feeling. No plan. I stand in front of a new painting and choose the colors which feel just right for the moment. Don't ask me why. I guess this is the magical secret of being an artist.

Ann: What statement are you making with your paintings?

Olaf: I use nature to talk about the future problems we will have with nature. Such as storms, sea level rising, less drinking water. This is what I am thinking to myself, what motivates me to do these paintings. The rest is up to the people looking at them. They can see whatever they want. Best scenario would be that the viewers would get motivated to think about this or that. But at the end of the day I want to produce attractive paintings. I am a visual artist after all.

Ann: What will it take for society to stop ignoring our detrimental actions?

Olaf: It's not that easy, even if the case would be that we don't ignore the facts anymore, it is nearly impossible to change our habits. The last hundred years burning oil brought us incredible wealth and comfort. In order to change things to more moderate ways we all would have to consume and use less in general. And this is sadly not the way we are. It's very difficult for us to scale back, unless we have to. I am not pessimistic, but I somehow believe we have been better off as hunters and gatherers. Most things are just too complex and complicated to understand for us. I really don't want to say we are too dumb for the world we created, but somehow it shows all over the place that we are.

Ann: What are some things that you think we can do to get back in touch with nature and the present?

Olaf: I know I sounded depressed so far, but I do believe this challenge also has a good side. Making a better future, we all have to conquer the global problems together. And maybe with a new generation, we will focus on it more and more. Change needs time, even if we don't have it. But I guess this is the best we can do.

But in general, I think it is wise to keep a healthy connection to nature, just in case the thin ice of our technological achievements will break. We should be aware about the artificial iPad and iPhone world we live in—myself included. I am still a tech junkie living in the forest. And this is a schizophrenic situation: on one hand we really are geniuses with our knowledge and inventions on the other we are a bag of molecules, like other living organisms on our planet, not different at all. We sometimes forget that!