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Michael Sailstorfer: Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati

By Jeffrey Saletnik

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Michael Sailstorfer is not the first artist to upend a tree; no doubt, he won't be the last. Georg Baselitz inverted pictorial tradition in his iconic *Der Wald auf dem Kopf* (The Forest on Its Head), 1969; Rodney Graham's photographic series "Oxfordshire Oaks," 1990, depicts singular oaks in reverse, as they are actually received by the eye (and analog camera); Natalie Jeremijenko's live, upturned trees, suspended in the air, perversely twist into seemingly unnatural forms in a vain attempt to right themselves in *Tree Logic*, 1999. Together, these constitute an offbeat iconography amid which one might situate Sailstorfer's *Forst* (Forest), 2010/2014, a work that, in its current iteration, consists of three inverted felled trees hanging from a steel framework. Each is attached to a motor that slowly rotates the trees in place at different yet consistent speeds. Branches gently touch the gallery floor as friction and decay cause bits of detritus to slough off, thereby creating circular patterns of needles and bark beneath. This choreography is accompanied by the creaking of the armature, strained by the revolving weight it bears. The aural component of the piece recalls the eerie din of the forest, yet, for Sailstorfer, it also allows the work to assume a presence beyond its corporeal manifestation. One can't quite escape the sound of *Forst* when moving throughout "Every Piece Is a New Problem," the artist's first comprehensive exhibition in North America, on view through September 14.

As have several of the aforementioned artists, Sailstorfer defamiliarizes a recognizable form—the tree—as a way into a Conceptual practice, which, for the artist, often draws upon Romantic tropes, such as the ruin, and mines the dynamics of humankind's fraught position relative to the generative and destructive extremes of nature. In *Forst* and other works in the exhibition, Sailstorfer takes command. In *Anti-Herbst* (Anti-Autumn), 2012–13, a nine-minute video loop, he attempts to defy the notion of nature as being forever in a state of becoming. We see a lone ash tree that appears not to lose its leaves as the landscape surrounding it degenerates at the onset of autumn. We don't see what took place behind the scenes, between cuts: Sailstorfer and his team gathering, painting green, and reattaching leaves that fell from the tree over several weeks in October 2012 so as to craft an artificial nature. Whereas the artist offers the illusion of arrested decay in *Anti-Herbst*, he hastens destruction in *3 Ster mit Ausblick* (3 Steres with a View), 2002. Ten photographs document various stages in the dismantling of a modest wood cabin in the German countryside. Although, again, we do not bear witness to the act itself, over the course of a day Sailstorfer and artist Jürgen Heinert cut away the structure, burning the debris in the cabin's own woodstove. The oven devours all 3 Ster (an amount of wood akin to a cord) of the building, leaving only stove and chimney still standing in the landscape. Here, Sailstorfer's intervention assists in the creation of a ruin by effecting the swift erosion of a structure destined to be consumed by its environment and repurposed—as eventually most things are.

It is crucial that we not see the mechanics of transformation in *Anti-Herbst* and *3 Ster mit Ausblick* insofar as this absence enables a link between the hand of nature and that of the artist. The unseen also opens connections among the works on display that question the parameters of sculpture, another concern of Sailstorfer's practice. Many works lurk, as nature does. *Forst* makes use of sound to achieve this effect; *Wolken* (Clouds), 2010, engages olfaction to define the work's contours. The aroma of an entwined mass of

black rubber inner tubes suspended from the ceiling is meant to fill the gallery space, thus extending the sculpture's boundaries. (Alas, the piece, scaled to match Zaha Hadid's modestly sized galleries, doesn't actually do so.) And while the explicitly multisensory dimension of Sailstorfer's work points to the many ways form inhabits space, it also is in keeping with the Romantic tenor running throughout the artist's oeuvre. To invoke Novalis: "We are united by closer bonds with the unseen, than with the seen."