

## Interview with Mariele Neudecker

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Interviewer: Toyama Aruma (Towada Art Center)

**Let's start with some very basic questions. Why did you become an artist? What kind of influences did you have?**

There were many different influences, I think. My sister also studied art. My dad was a biology teacher, and also a chemistry, physics, and geography teacher. That probably in hindsight influenced me, just being surrounded by science and knowledge. He was always experimenting and visualizing things. I found that process really intriguing, and my mother was also drawing a lot and making a lot of creative crafty things. Anyway, the house was full of books. I think that really influenced my thinking.

After having taken a holiday hitchhiking with a friend in Ireland, it seemed really urgent and important to go to Ireland and study there. When I was eighteen, I felt like I had to get out of Germany and start being an art student, which seemed really interesting for me. I also wanted to learn traditional techniques. I did a lot of drawing, printmaking, and sculpting using traditional techniques. I started in Cork, Ireland, when I was eighteen and spent two years studying there before realizing I was actually much more interested in contemporary work and wanted to move to a more appropriate place and context. London seemed the obvious choice, so there I went.

**You studied at Goldsmiths. Doing fine art?**

Yes, a really interesting fine art course. The year before we graduated, the Young British Artists movement was founded with the *Freeze* exhibition, initially led by Damien Hirst along with Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, and others. They were mostly all above our year in Goldsmiths. We were hosting their degree show, which was really quite fun, and because there was such a hype in London about them already.

**Was that the time you started making or experimenting with sculpture?**

I was making a lot of work with books that I found in charity shops and a lot of sculptural work anyway already, and then I joined Curtain Road Arts, which was an independent artist studio near Old Street in London. That's when I started making landscape-based tank works. Before Goldsmiths, I was experimenting a lot and casting objects out of plaster, bronze, other metals, and concrete, though not yet fiberglass. I cast a lot of things into concrete, and really enjoyed the casting process. For example, I would go to Greenwich and take a cast of the meridian line in the ground: a mold for a multiple cast of the meridian. Because in London, it is such an important landmark: back then [in 1884], it was a political decision to start measuring space and time all over the world from the Greenwich meridian as the official line marking zero longitude. I started looking more closely at maps. And then afterwards, I began making memory maps and those kinds of things related to maps, which became very important for me to develop the tanks or even the piece in Towada to have a different scale, to look at size, human measurements, and relativity. But that was when I was still at Goldsmiths.

I took a year out from my studies, and then applied for an MA at Chelsea School of Art, also in London, by which time I was getting very familiar with the city, which had a really busy art scene at that time. After that, I learned a lot about programming and film editing, and made a few short animation films. Technology became more interesting to me from that point.

### **Can you tell me about the work at Towada Art Center, *This Thing Called Darkness* (2008)?**

Towada was amazing: to be asked to develop a work for a piece of architecture that didn't exist yet. It was a real privilege that the architect would listen to the ideas from the artists and then design the building more or less in accordance with those, as much as it was realistically possible. I came up with some really crazy ideas with different access points and floors and visitors climbing down into a space and all this sort of thing. A lot of it was then put to one side and changed into something more realistic that I've done with the forest. I felt it was a really exciting opportunity to try something life-size that was ambitious, rather than making a tank. I was making so many tanks by then that I took that as my starting point to build something that is clearly inside the architecture, inside the space, but refers to an outside landscape and confronts the viewer in a different way from a tank, because tanks are quite small and often reference similarly sized paintings. *This Thing Called Darkness* in Towada was referencing a real place and space. The crop like I have in the tanks, this kind of edge, which became a really important thing, is a physical trim that happens inevitably with images as well as architecture. Every time you take a photo or when we look at anything, any image is kind of cropped. This carried through from the tanks to the Towada piece a lot. In a way, it was really important to develop the forest as a rectangular piece referencing media and photography, and how we see things on the screen as well as perceive our surroundings.

### **Why did you want to make it life-size?**

Because it was a big museum, and I could. In a way, I felt this was a really great opportunity. For a museum with that premise of making spaces for big pieces or pieces specifically developed for the space, I felt that casting the trees in life-size would be really exciting; it would mean having an artificial replica of a different space inside. It became really important for the model to have a path inside it, as I also often have in the tanks. I have had a lot of conversations about the tanks as things that are a landscape, rather than a piece of nature that's untouched. It was a really important point and I was looking at a lot of paintings, which influenced me where you have a small figure, or turned figure (*Rückenfigur*), as if you were about to go down a path into the landscape.

This relationship with how we see a landscape became quite fundamental. Especially today, it's more complex because of what is happening with our environment. The connection to nature really became a connection to landscape, to manmade nature. In a way, to cast something life-size is to make it, to remake it, if you like, and cast it. We cast the trees live so they could carry on growing. We just did it in the forest to take the molds and then took the molds away to make these trees.

My attention to detail became really rather obsessive. It was important to me to have that amount of detail, to make sure that the piece is as close to reality as possible and is as much like a 3D photograph as I could make it. That it became a reproduction of a real, cropped section of a forest. Because I was always getting paranoid that the work shouldn't be confused with modelmaking for train sets or theater stage sets, which lack that kind of realism and detail.

The relationship with miniature was often a difficult one, because a lot of people refer to the tanks as miniatures. I kept insisting that what I am doing is not miniaturizing. It's taking images from the size of the paintings we are looking at. Even newspapers and magazines are smaller and yet they are never referred to as miniatures. They're just reproductions and images. I was always very aware that the word "miniature" is wrong for what I am doing, because it is much more about our relationship with a reproduced landscape. And it is not about nature as such, but about human perception of a space and landscape, and how it's reproduced, and how we see things in books and magazines. Even through our eyes, though the perception is slightly different because you don't have the sharp crop, you're still very limited. It all ends up as something relatively small or massive in your head and imagination. So why call it a miniature?

**Can I ask about the process of making the work? You already had this idea before actually coming to Japan and seeing the scenery in Towada?**

Well, I had never been to Towada before, but I had traveled around a bit when I had an installation in Yokohama. I traveled to Kyoto and the north, but not to Towada.

**The reason I asked the question is because I wanted to ask if you made this reproduction of the forest after having seen the actual mountains or forests in Towada.**

No.

**It's more like a fictional representation of the forest in the Western culture you inherited?**

Probably, yes, because the trees were cast in England and it's certainly a Northern European forest. I didn't see those forests in Towada, but I've seen others in Japan. I've also seen some of the traditional, Japanese woodcuts, such as the woodblock prints by Hokusai. It's interesting how one perceives a shrunk temple or small figures in a big landscape. I think that's quite an interesting connection visually, but it's so different in regard to its history, meaning, and interpretation.

One thing I realized when we went to Kyoto was that the garden at the temple Ryoan-ji was very similar to *Unrecallable Now* in terms of the dimensions and the amount of rocks in the garden. But it has a very different starting point in many ways. I am from a different culture, that of Romanticism and the Northern European landscape. It was a surprise to see so many echoes of that in Japan, yet in very different ways.

When I installed *Unrecallable Now*, which is similar in size and also has the same number of rocks, it felt very weird. When I saw it, it was surprising and bizarre. I had purposely placed twelve lights that were like big, very bright showroom lamps to light it from above, because the paint does something when it's really bright—it glows. I wanted the white to look really white and luminous, so I put these really bright lights in the space. In the catalog when they printed some information from the Yokohama Triennale, they got rid of the reflections in the water and I was getting really upset. I said, "No, no, this is really important that it's lit like this. You have to see the lights and you have to see the reflections. Everything has to be very real, because it's about this reality of the thing and then the reality in your head and how you read things." That's where it got really interesting with the Kyoto garden and the interpretation and subjective understanding of what it could mean.

But equally, it was very important to me that you can see what the work is made of. That informed quite a lot of what I did in Towada: to put a hole in the wall, to show all the supporting

metal and materiality. These are the things that show the reality of how it was made very clearly, but via this small observation hole. You could have access; it's kind of not that obvious, but it's there. That was important to me, to allow that gap. It's like there is a different reality that you can see, but you can also decide to ignore it. With all these things, it's important that the viewer can make up their own subjective mind, which became interesting in quite a few pieces that I made, where the interpretation can be very different from different people—but in a way that's really interesting. With a model or miniaturizing, it is important to get that right; but there's a point when I just let go and want people to read whatever they think is the best way to understand and interpret, whatever it is: a landscape in a tank or the trees in Towada.

**You said that your idea changed over the course of planning and having discussions with the art center. The conversations were about practical matters or the conceptual aspects?**

I think both, though it was mostly very practical. My work combines the physical and conceptual, and ultimately the architectural. My early plan was just not very practical to realize. Initially, I wanted to have a regular but random geyser eruption in that space, within a large cast landscape.

**So the idea of the work was already fixed before you started production. Did you think about the relationship with the other artworks that would be installed in the art center? Your work in Towada is a little different from your other forest works. The audience can walk around it and will realize there is the window underneath the forest. You seem to find this balance in your landscape work between fiction and reality.**

That's what I kind of meant just now with physical and conceptual, in a way. How it's made and the physicality and materiality of it. At the same time, you're very conscious that you're looking at a sculpture in a space, but also, your mind knows this particular image from other experiences.

**I also want to ask about the lighting of the work because it's very obvious lighting. I mean, the light itself is embedded in the sculpture—it has a physical existence in the work—and that's probably a little different from your other works.**

I think there's two things that made me decide to do it the way I did. One was the architecture, with this line of ceiling lights going all the way around the corridor. I felt that was quite a strong decision to light the corridor that way. I didn't want to put anything into the ceiling that would light the piece. I wanted the piece to be kind of independent of that architectural space. I could have put a light hanging off the ceiling pointing into the forest - like I did in Yokohama. I just felt like it needed to have a light somewhere and maybe it's part of the work and I can see how it works, once I had put it inside. For this work, it felt good to have the light connected inside to where the spares and everything is stored underneath, to have it become completely independent down there. The light had to be part of the work and be in it.

**And also the spotlight makes the work look like there were humans there.**

There definitely were humans because there's a path and chopped tree-trunks!

**But the spotlight is more out of context for the forest, I think.**

It's interesting to trigger that thought, because the forest is in the art center. This is possibly a different perception from something like the garden at Ryoan-ji or the piece I did in Yokohama

with the mountains. How physically you want everything out of the image that is to do with technology or anything nonnatural. As you say, the path is a human path. You can recognize that in other forests. You can see it in the forest. However, you would never encounter a lamp, but in a way, it asks interesting questions, because it is a sculpture made of plastic. It needs light to be visible and be seen. We need to perceive the piece. We need to see the light source. Is it possible to ignore that lamp?

I had a lot of conversations in Japan particularly about the ability to see what you want to see. For example, to allow your understanding and interpretation to eliminate a flyover or a pile of rubbish. You see the garden as a beautiful thing, regardless of context. That was an interesting and different perception in Japan, I felt; that there was this capacity, desire, and ability to see beautiful things regardless of some traffic in front of it. Do you know what I mean? In England, it's quite different. Under the flyovers, you wouldn't find a nice garden at all. You'd find a pile of rubbish and neglect. I really appreciated that attitude in Japan. There were amazing and very beautifully tended gardens under concrete flyovers. There was this attention to detail and beautiful things; being able to see that and ignore some of the more horrible things outside. It's something that really opened my eyes to it. Over here, the attitude is more like, it's ugly, so let's just shove more horrid things over there.

With the forest, I thought it's a very potent image of beautifully lit woodland. That's what I've kind of enjoyed about the image of the forest; that it's got really beautiful connotations, but there's also something quite sinister about it. The forest implies a whole spectrum of things from the very beautiful to the quite horrific, because of what the forest represents in fairy tales. In culture generally, there are many interpretations of woods and forests. I was probably very aware of those different readings and trying to represent the forest so that people could bring to it what they want to subjectively—and not impose a particular understanding.

It'd be really interesting to hear from some of the viewers at Towada, because the first time I used a forest in a tank, it was intriguing to just hear what was going through people's minds. What they were thinking. What would trigger them to talk about their experiences of seeing a forest? It's a very universal and familiar image. I think you have specific forests near Towada. They're probably very different to other places in Japan. But the image of a forest in the cultural sense is a very universal one, shaped by all the paintings and representations, more often in two dimensions, of the whole spectrum of forests, from the beautiful forest to the very dark and scary ones. It's a similar thing to the sublime, where you have the romantic sublime and the beautiful sublime going all the way to the very technological and terrifying sublime. Those kinds of thoughts are latent in the work. The light is a theatrical device and offers an interpretation on it already, because it is an artificial forest anyway. It goes hand in hand with the reproduction and representation of what it is.

**The lighting is also ambiguous in terms of time. It could be dawn and dusk. The viewer comes from a bright glass corridor into very dark gallery space, so they have to adjust their eyes. After some time, they see the work more clearly.**

It's the sort of size where you would walk around long enough for your eyes to adjust. In a way, that sense of darkness is really important, where you can't see everything in detail, but then you see more and more the longer you spend there. It's a little bit like being in a dark room when an image gets sharper and slowly appears. You need to spend a bit of time with it.

**I want to ask about the title. I read that it comes from Shakespeare.**

It is from *The Tempest*. I was trying to find sentences that had a lateral connection. I have often found sentences or phrases for titles in books, clips of radio programs, or slightly amended lines from books that I would take and then twist a little, or even just take them as they were. *This Thing Called Darkness* was lifted straight from Shakespeare. But if people aren't familiar with *The Tempest*, it isn't really that relevant. It helps maybe, but it is not important to know the source. In a way, what's more important is that sense of the materiality of what's going on, to understand the difference between the material and the ideas, and to understand the concept and experience of it all, and how you read into images.

### **Why did you decide on this title?**

I settled on this one because I thought something about the statement is quite grand and fundamental. It's something to do with the inside of your head and your body, and also the outside in terms of nature or the landscape. I just really liked it as a notion of something that is essentially to do with human perception inside and outside darkness, and contemplating what you're looking at and what it is.

**I see. The title makes the viewer aware of the darkness they have seen, but also the light. I also thought the lighting might represent the human desire to see the nature, to see through nature, to understand what nature is to human beings, or perhaps it even represents Enlightenment thinking?**

Maybe. I mean it's interesting when you say to understand and see nature and humanness, that separation. I think that's one thing I wanted to try to do, by alluding to this sense of darkness inside our head and outside in the woods; that we are part of nature and that nature is also inside us. We are nature as well as the forest is nature. Humans have put a path through that forest and it's sort of owned. There is a question here of ownership and territory; it's really crucial and significant to understand that it is a landscape and you are looking at it as a human being, and that it is all part of nature. It's the nature of humans to build things like a path and steps in the woods, and it's all connected in a weird way.

I think there are so many pieces I've made that are trying to encourage people to think about human nature as only part of a much bigger thing. For example, the flight recorder series I made (*Final Fantasy*). A flight recorder is a piece of technology, a very advanced technology that helps us find out what happened in accidents by recording data of air travel. There's something really interesting about how technology is also looked at outside of human nature; that nature is outside of humans and then there's technology outside of humans, but actually humans invented, made, informed, and programmed it to do certain things to help humanity trace back what happened. I think all the information that's trapped in these digital recordings is also connected to a more conceptual, dark place in our heads or in our need to understand—and to make sense of things.

Hence, I'm really attracted to what's happening at CERN. I'm working in a similar way that I'm trying to look at nature, technology, humans, and landscapes, and how human behavior impacts our understanding of everything. At CERN, it seems more to do with the Big Bang and the universe and those kinds of questions. But it's fundamentally a similar question that I'm asking about the darkness in the forest.

I've also worked a lot with ocean research. People are looking at the furthest crevices in the darkest places, where they can only see things with lights and record things with a torch while

the robots go down into it. In a similar way, I'm looking at the forest. It's almost like a forensic understanding of what it is.

**How about the height of the work? It's above eye level.**

The height of it is floor to ceiling, about five meters, and we tend to see and perceive it from human eye level. I wanted to make sure people don't walk into the work. I wanted to ensure it remains purely visual. In a way, the tanks also function at the same eye level. The forest is, so to speak, not inviting people to physically go in, but it's also important what is happening on the eye and head levels. In a sense, it's undulating. Some parts are really high and you cannot even see the forest floor. And then, some areas are relatively low where the stairs are, but you are forced to visualize the whole thing. To see it, rather than to go in and experience it.

**You have to imagine what's there because you cannot see everything. I thought you might also like playing with the human desire to understand everything. Not allowing a perfect view of something resists that desire.**

I really enjoyed looking at how people would find their own favorite spot to look at it. Some people prefer standing there at the low end. Some get really stuck looking at the metal underneath. Others prefer to just keep walking. It was intriguing that people were trying to see everything, as you said. Trying to understand everything, trying to see everything. In some way, I wanted to let that happen. Similarly to the tanks or looking at things in everyday life, you can't see everything all the time. You're looking at me now, right? So you can't see over there. It's impossible to look 360 degrees all the time. To make a forest that has this restricted visibility is totally human and normal. Because you can't possibly see the whole forest or image; you're always looking at one particular thing, not everything at once. You have to trust your imagination to fill in the blanks, and accept the unknown.

**Let's go back to a more fundamental question. Could you explain why you became interested in landscape? Especially in your early career, you were obviously looking at Romantic paintings. Why were you interested in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German Romanticism?**

There are probably a lot of answers. You might get a different answer every time you ask. At that time, when I started to look at that more and more, it became clear that there was an interesting difference between Germany and England in this regard. Coming from Germany, I understood the different cultural connections to Scandinavia and the very British version of Romanticism with Turner and Constable, and their interpretation of landscape and experience. I was really interested initially in looking particularly at Casper David Friedrich, because it was very apt to look at him in connection to what's happening today, and how the Romantic sublime developed through figures like Vilhelm Hammershøi, who worked in the early twentieth century. His work became a key stepping stone from Caspar David Friedrich to contemporary work. Look at his paintings of interiors and the way he was representing space and landscape outside the windows. It was something that I was very curious about, along with Gerhard Richter or other German painters, plus British painters, but the British slant on Romanticism probably didn't influence my work that much. I was looking at the continental Europeans and became very aware that I was one of many outsiders coming to Britain and living in this culture. This became a curious dialogue with a different culture that was connected but actually fundamentally quite different to what was going on in some of the German and other Northern European work.



I think I got very carried away for a while looking at Caspar David Friedrich's early works, the *Tetschen Altar (Cross in the Mountains, 1808)*, for example, where he was the first person to represent Jesus on the cross as a carving and not a man of flesh and blood: a representation of a representation. He made these interesting connections between humans and landscape, and how they are kind of stuck in the middle, in the mid-ground, and how important foreground and background were, which was something really fundamental to the tank works and the pieces I made. The foreground, background, and midground were always interchangeable, because you could walk around them three-dimensionally. That made me focus a lot on how we see and read things, how we understand things, how subjectivity works, and how that connects back to maps, and all these things I was really intrigued by.

I grew up in a very scientific household, but also a very religious household. To look at Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, the first time anybody ever painted the scene of a wood carving of Jesus on the cross on a mountaintop, I thought: "Wow, this was really new back then," because it's a representation of a representation. That was very brave thinking at the time. Even at Goldsmiths, my dissertation was about this simulacrum and about the qualities of different realities or what repetition means and what reproduction means, and how you could possibly reproduce anything, or if that's even possible, and how artworks try to capture essence and represent something in very particular ways.

### **But more simply, why Romanticism?**

Because there are so many things with those paintings that really spoke to me about the reality of what's in an image, what does representation mean. Caspar David Friedrich was the main figure in German Romanticism but he was not able to go to the Arctic, but could make a lot of paintings by referring to journals and things he was told or read about. I was also initially working always just in the studio, never traveling. And then I started making work by traveling abroad and this fed into my thinking in a really good way to inspire my understanding of the tank pieces and the fore- mid-, and backgrounds.

I was always looking for a very particular landscape and image that would talk in some way to an audience because it's familiar, yet at the same time making it strange was really important. Because obviously, there's a big difference between the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century pieces. We live in the twenty-first century and things feel odd when looking back. But I also found myself in these weird discussions about, for example, the sky always having been there. It's the same molecules moving around over time. So what is contemporary? What is historical? At what point where does it seep across as one temporality? There's a constant renewal of your body cells, the air; everything is functioning in a rotational, cyclical way. It's a continuum, the particles and so on are moving around, which is something that then informs a lot of the works that I've done with CERN. These are probably less related to landscape, and more to do with technology and how humans connect to renewal, that artificial re-enactment.

### **Then you started collaborating with scientists?**

Yes, I was lucky. Long before CERN, I was working longer term with a scientist initially via Invisible Dust, which is an organization in London and now also in Scarborough. They put me together with Alex Rogers quite a long time ago, around 2007. He is a marine biologist, now working as a professor at the University of Oxford. I worked with video and images he would bring back with his team from deep-sea exploration trips on ships, where they sent down remotely operated vehicles to film the deep sea and seabed, plus the transition on the way



down. As you can imagine, this is totally the sort of thing I would love to look at, because it's a really weird quality of images that they bring back. It's very different, of course, but has a similar significance to some of those paintings that I'm looking at. Because they can only see in the light. Otherwise, everything is hidden in the darkness.

The process at CERN is similar. They have so much potential information, and they have to trim and cut it down to whatever is humanly possible to look at, because there's just so very much of it. In a way, there is a similarly very specific focus in the paintings and images that I deal with. It goes back to that lamp; just looking at what's visible because what else can you do? In a way, it's a lot to do with interpreting what you can and cannot see, what you know and don't know.

**You became known for your tank works in the 1990s. At that time, your work was interpreted in terms of its relationship with Romanticism. And then, you started working with scientists. Whether it was your intention or not, I can't help looking at your work in relation to climate change right now. The interpretations of the works change over time. Was there any change in yourself?**

I think so and hopefully everyone has a different awareness now of the urgency regarding our environment. There are some pieces that I would have made quite a long time ago that now, in the light of what's happening with climate change, they are now interpreted differently. It is inevitable.

It is difficult for an artist to totally subscribe solely to an ecological message. I'm really reluctant to do that, because I think work is so much more complex, politically and culturally. It doesn't exist to promote political ideas. I think it's a lot to do with a much more fundamental understanding, reading, and questioning of what's there, and maybe questioning how to understand certain things so that you can do whatever you think is right. If it does affect how you might see climate change and global warming, that's a subjective reading. It's more important to look more generally at how we interpret and understand, and what we actually do. I suppose this is one of the things that might seep through in certain pieces. I think my work encompasses the difficulty of inaction versus action, rather than a lot of talk about doing something. For example, *What If We All Just Stopped* (2018), takes on a whole different meaning now because of the pandemic, when everybody "stopped." It seemed to have repercussions, to suddenly have a whole other layer. What I'm trying to say with climate change is a layer, perception is a layer, size and scale are layers. There are loads of layers in all these pieces and I would not encourage anyone to look at just one of them.

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