

*Max Hooper Schneider at François Ghebaly*

By Vanessa Holyoak, May 25, 2023



Max Hooper Schneider, *PARALLAX LAGOON* (2023). Custom acrylic cobalt vitrine, UV borosilicate mushrooms, modeled habitat, sliced agate, gems, minerals, marbles, natural and synthetic corals, found objects, custom blacklight and aluminum armature, and custom pedestal, 16.25 x 15.75 x 9.75 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly. Photo: Joshua White.

The dimmed entrance to François Ghebaly belies its spectacular, neon-hued contents, which come to life as viewers are submerged in semi-darkness. Max Hooper Schneider's first solo presentation with the gallery, *Falling Angels*, stretches across four separate rooms that viewers navigate as one might the aftermath of a disaster. While the sculptures and installations demonstrate a diverse and eclectic use of materials, they all occupy the same visual universe. From copper-coated vegetable assemblages to fluorescent lights cascading down from the suspended

wreckage of a helicopter, these are flourishing dystopias—speculative habitats breeding new life in the absence of humans. Schneider refers to his environments as "Trans-Habitats," a neologism for a relational ecosystem in which cohabiting lifeforms are in a constant state of transformation, generation, and decay. In the context of the Anthropocene and its maximalist disregard for the nonhuman, *Falling Angels* embraces decay and dystopia as potentially generative states, nesting grounds for emergent forms of life.

The first gallery holds six “sculpture-specimens” from the *Dendrite Bonsai* series (all 2023) placed on widely spaced pedestals. What appear to be copper replicas of carefully pruned bonsai trees are quickly revealed as uncanny curiosities: Unlikely grafts of corn, lemons, broccoli, bananas, and ginger sprout from bonsai-like branches as if merged with their host plants. Assemblages of real fruits, vegetables, and wood are coated in copper via an electrochemical process, forced into an atypical cohabitation that evokes chimera plants or genetically modified organisms. The unsettling vegetal composites suggest speculative growth processes and novel interactions between species from which radically new and distorted lifeforms might emerge.

In the largest of the four galleries, viewers encounter *Falling Angel* (2023), a hanging helicopter wreckage that shoots down beams via fluorescent light rods suspended by chains. The lights sporadically make contact with Tesla coils in a fiberglass “pond” below, producing a glitchy illumination of color accompanied by a violent rattling sound, while eerie music plays continually from overhead speakers. Shrouded in crushed concrete, the pond is covered in vintage neon signs bearing dubious consumerist invitations (“KISS,” “PASTELES,” “DEEP TISSUE,” “BEAUTY,” and “GAME OVER”) that read like messages from a *Bladerunner*-like, not-so-distant future in which our pursuit of pleasure at any cost has led us to a point of no return.

One of the remaining galleries houses four “maritime vitrines” illuminated by black light that contain fantastical, red and blue microcosms featuring compositions of sliced agate, glowing UV borosilicate mushrooms, natural and synthetic corals, and an array of other objects (*ABYSSAL BELL*, *PARALLAX LAGOON*, *UNDERTOW MOON*, *BENTHIC SIREN*, all 2023). Each aquarium-like sculpture is carved with a porthole that opens its internal environment to exchange with the outside, rendered porous to the possibility of generative transformation through cross-contamination between vitrine and gallery ecosystems.

Each of the exhibition’s microcosms plays out a macro-reality of ecological devastation, gesturing toward a speculative future in the wake of human existence. “Humans may be gone,” says Hooper Schneider in the exhibition’s press release, “but their relics survive and have become the homes of new settlers.” The falling angels evoked by the exhibition’s title are not the transcendent, anthropocentric angels of the Renaissance—these sworn protectors have vanished along with humanity—but a new kind of angel aligned with emergent processes of transformation, renewal, and decay. With humanity and its benevolent guardian angels long gone from this postapocalyptic world, the angels’ ominous counterparts govern a radical overhaul. The rebel angels who now reign are not quite fallen, but suspended in the continual process of falling—as are the nascent habitants of the world they oversee. *Falling Angels* imagines a home for these new divine and mortal settlers, and asks what sublime, uncanny, and devastating forms they might take.