

Review

Max Hooper Schneider at François Ghebaly

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Max Hooper Schneider, *Fossil Epizoon (dyrosaurus)*, 2021, Eocene epoch fossil, aluminum machine, custom base. Installation view. Photo: Paul Salvesson.

Max Hooper Schneider

Max Hooper Schneider's show "Falling Angels" unfolded across four dim chambers as though it were an eerie sequence of dreams evoking a postapocalyptic world in which humans have gone extinct, making way for all manner of strange creatures and growth to take over and repopulate the earth.

It all began innocuously enough: A roomful of pedestaled sculptures from the series "Dendrite Bonsai," 2023, featured arborescent morphologies that suggested hybrids of vegetation and humanoid nerve cells. At first, these copper-electroplated assemblages seemed tamely ornamental, like baubles intended for opulent interiors, but, the closer you looked, the more their nubbly coralline forms called to mind feral horror-movie beings. Broom-like protuberances extended in myriad directions like severed electrical wires or monstrous fingers, casting lacy shadows across the white plinths. Globule-encrusted sinusoidal branches zigzagged upward and outward, as though each one were some sort of arthropod poised to crawl away. In *Dendrite Bonsai (Corn)*, six ears of maize protruded vertically from fruticose shrubbery in a configuration resembling a candelabra, channeling fears of genetically modified mutations. Cameo appearances by plants such as bananas or lemons, grown for human consumption, are everywhere in the series but evolve into bizarre poisonous entities that defy easy classification.

In the next gallery was *Fossil Epizoon (dyrosaurus)*, 2021, a cross between a science experiment gone awry and a natural-history museum display. The work features a spidery steel form sporting more than a dozen legs hovering over a gharial skull. The metallic insect has been affixed to the cranium by a glob of metal resembling a crumpled wad of aluminum foil. As one approaches, the arachnoid entity's jointed legs move up and down—the startling creepiness of this effect was here heightened by sudden sounds of electrical popping and crackling emanating from a nearby piece, *Falling Angel*, 2023, in which a cascade

of chains and fluorescent light tubes descend from the wreckage of an airplane cockpit suspended high over a reflecting pool harboring glowing snippets of neon text. The Hollywood-style artifice and scale of this assemblage recall the ersatz decor of theme restaurants or shopping malls. But far from evoking the quaintness of such contrivances, the work instead suggests the aftermath of some mysterious man-made catastrophe.

Hooper Schneider's themes of death, destruction, and mutation reach a crescendo of dark humor in a tabletop diorama titled *ROUTE 666*, 2023. This intricately detailed dystopia—the only work on display containing overt representations of people—features a campy, Egyptian-themed drive-in movie theater. Masses of dead bodies are draped across trees; skeletons and wrecked cars litter the ground; an oil field has sullied a now-blackened palm grove. Almost everything is in shambles, except for the tiny TV screens scattered throughout the tableau, the largest of which features a low-tech video displaying the slow-moving exploits of improbably animate lichen-like growths. Movies are playing, but no one is there to watch them. At intervals, miniature oil wells suddenly begin pumping, plumbing underground depths to fuel abandoned vehicles. Everyone, of course, is extinct, but the damage lives on. The artist seems to suggest that the Earth might be better off without us. At this stage of our planet's demise, largely brought about by mankind, who could argue?

François Ghebaly