



NATURAL SUBLIME | ARNAUD RIVIEREN





Natural Sublime Arnaud Rivieren

**CUSTOT**  
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DUBAI



# NATURAL SUBLIME

In our current clime of planetary instability, the sublime has a shaky reputation. Once conjuring feelings of awe and exhilaration before nature's incalculable scale and unfathomable might—profoundly dark, star-peppered nights, towering snow-capped cliffs, thunderous waterfalls—the sublime today has either become relegated to the stuff of slowed-down-yet-alarmist nature documentaries, or repurposed as soothing reassurance that we haven't entirely destroyed the planetary ecosystem just yet. Witnessing wildfires tear through swathes of parched land and floodwaters submerge entire towns, we are confronted with a visual spin on the sublime that downplays contemplative beauty, amplifying instead the threatening, the overwhelming, the terrifying. Awe has been trumped by awful.

Conceiving the sublime has been fundamentally hinged to the viewer's place within nature, whether helpless in relation to its apparent 'all-powerfulness,' or existentially insignificant within the vaster cosmic scheme. Yet as we become more brazen inhabitants of the planet, fueled by a well-oiled ideology of productivity and mastery that even propels billionaires to colonise space, the state of the sublime is precarious at best.

Arnaud Rivieren champions this retreating sublime through sculptures that prompt us to reconsider two simple notions—respect and attention. Awe for him is less in the overwhelming than in the intimate. His series of enlarged fruits and vegetables freeze-frame and magnify what we often overlook: these mundane, commodified 'usual suspects' of our shopping trolleys suddenly demand a more acute interrogation. Plump and reflective, poised and charismatic, their appeal is akin to a sense of awakening, arousal even. Much like the sublime that he attempts to channel, Rivieren's specimens embrace both the universal and the individual. *Touffaha Hamra* (all works 2021), for example, embodies 'apple' in its archetypal form, almost as the perfect signifier of the storied fruit. Yet it bears idiosyncrasies—surface pocks, textural patches, a defiant stem—that make it this-and-only-this apple, unique among all others.

Swollen to a scale that obliges us, as onlookers, to assess our own physicality in relation to theirs, the fruits and vegetables not only foreground a structural complexity bestowed by nature—the geometric intricacy just below the surface of *Tyn* the joint-like structure of *Karaz*, or the easy regularity of *Felfel*'s curves—but also invite an odd intimacy. In nature, these vegetal bodies are deeply photosensitive, continuously responsive to variations of light and shadow. Geo-philosopher David Abram believes that this photosensitivity is a form of seeing; an orchard, in this logic, is capable of sensing humans' chemical and physical presences. Similarly, Rivieren's fruits and vegetables, transplanted to the gallery, reflect: the stainless-steel surfaces mirror our movements, projecting our bodies back to ourselves. Nature sees, the artist seems to attest, as he shepherds us into this most intimate communion.

Rivieren's works transcend the mere fetishization of nature's simple-yet-wondrous bounty precisely because they revel in an 'out of nature,' a wilful glitching of context. One imagines their displacement from a realm of 'pure' vegetal existence into the alien space of human social, cultural, and economic activity—the gallery, the city, the market. The humdrum here is in permanent tension with a pondered there, a tension that echoes the conflation of organic forms and industrial media that constitutes the fruits and vegetables' very materiality.

This physical stand-off between the place occupied by the works and the environment from which they (symbolically, as mimetic objects) hail, conjure the so-called 'erratics'—ancient boulders that have been transported by glaciers and deposited into regions where they differ from native rocks in both scale and composition. Looming menhir-like over their alien surroundings, the erratics are compelling not for their arrival or the contrast of being in/out of place, but rather for their journey. This wandering (*errāre* in Latin) across vast expanses of the planet over geological ages is an expression of the sublime collapsing both space and time. Like the erratics, the organic sculptures have been spirited to the gallery from somewhere profound. While most literally evident in the series of rocks and stones, Rivieren's gesture of enlarging and endowing all the works with an otherworldly nobility indexes them to the erratics' 'double sublime.' Accordingly, the artist relishes a sly theatricality in the works' placement: the spaces between the pieces hold as much gravitas as the works themselves.

Despite the painstaking toil required to manipulate stainless-steel on this scale, the fruits and vegetables appear effortlessly plump, smooth, and enticing, in their own industrial way. They invite touch, an urge amplified by their reflective quality. The stones and rocks, while more angular than the caressable curves of the vegetal specimens, attract by a seeming suppleness. *Jebel Jais*, for example, appears to be made of lead, or some irregular, malleable coating in which fingerprints might be lodged. Less pristine than their botanical counterparts, the stones are nonetheless deeply tactile, yet their tactility is couched in an eerie solemnity: touching the stone feels ritualistic, ancient, startlingly unlike a sensual brush with the skin of *Felfel* or the dimpled *Tyn*. Rivieren's intention here seems graver, wound up in a weighty reflection on permanence. The fruits and vegetables inhabit a realm of irony: the 'eternity' endowed the perishable fruit by the corrosion-resistant stainless steel is a witty confounding of nature, just as the monumentalizing scale intensifies this impermanent-made-permanent twist with Pop Artist aplomb. But the stones slow us down. They ask us to reckon with them, to stand still and be silent. They are an homage to the truly eternal. Perhaps even a secret plea for its respect.

The British sculptor Henry Moore once wrote that any sculptor is "obsessed with the form and shape of...anything and everything," and began the ensuing list of examples capable of engrossing a sculptor with "the growth of a flower." The 'shape of growth' might be a fitting subtitle to Rivieren's series of trees. Unlike the fruits, vegetables, and rocks engaged in their dance with the eternal, the tree sculptures sing a song of the cyclical, of retreat and renewal. The three works—*Oak* (2020), *Ghaf* (2021), and *Maritime Pine* (2021)—hold nothing extraneous: the architecture of the tree alone matters, and each transmits its unique tangle of life, from trunk to crown. The spare treatment is more than a simple refusal to embellish. The starkness foregrounds limbs that inhabit a freeze-framed moment in a specific life cycle. For while Rivieren might be tempted to argue that cherries and rocks are sentient, his trees clearly assert themselves as life-bound, 'rooted' in the ground, and tethered to time. Of all the works in *Natural Sublime*, these are the least intimate, yet they are the most emphatic. In the wake of artists who have fought for the legally inscribed rights of natural entities within the context of human/non-human relations, Rivieren injects his works with a subtle yet simmering activism. His rallying cry seems to be less about conservationism, more about emancipation: admit nature's agency, and respect its will. It is here, perhaps, that a new sublime resides.

By Kevin Jones



VEGETALS

**Felfel**  
stainless steel  
127 x 99 x 97 cm





*"Any sculptor is obsessed with the form  
and shape of ... anything and everything"*

*- Henry Moore*





Touffaha Hamra  
stainless steel  
117 x 98 x 110 cm









Touffaha Khadra  
stainless steel  
132 x 110 x 99 cm





**Karaz**  
stainless steel  
90 x 27 x 57 cm







Karazten  
stainless steel  
86 x 26.5 x 56 cm



Tyn

stainless steel

127.5 x 111.5 diameter in cm











TREES



Oak  
stainless steel  
610 x 630 x 600 cm



## Maritime Pine

stainless steel

660 x 740 x 570 cm



Ghaf  
stainless steel  
535 x 510 x 495 cm







MINERALS

**Hatta**  
stainless steel  
188 x 146 x 134 cm







View 1

**Jebel Jais**  
stainless steel  
198 x 212 x 70 cm



View 2



**Jebel Ali**  
stainless steel  
153 x 170 x 186 cm







Erratics - Jumeirah,  
Tanya and Warqa

stainless steel

72 x 69 x 56 cm, 62 x 62 x 55 cm,  
58 x 55 x 61 cm





## Biography

Arnaud Rivieren, born in Brussels in 1966, is a Dubai-based contemporary sculptor specialized in repurposing discarded industrial materials, which are scavenged around the dense industrial areas and scrapyards of the UAE.

Working in Dubai since 2002 after having lived in Singapore, Arnaud Rivieren has set-up his foundry in Jebel Ali, the heart of Dubai's expanding industrial landscape, in front of a scrapyard serving as source material for his large-scale outdoor sculptures.

Involved in the Oil and Gas field, Arnaud Rivieren has worked extensively in the steel industry, influencing his sculpting approach, teaching him the different properties of metals and alloys, bending, contorting and twisting, as well as industrial finishing techniques.

Rivieren transforms raw materials, such as tubular steel, iron beams and barrels through rigorous steel crafting techniques to produce large-scale outdoor sculptures. These structures contradict the solid and rigid function of the initial material and reveal a completely new shape, form and purpose for what was once deemed as disposable and forgotten.

This environmentally conscious practice has come to define the heart of Arnaud Rivieren's work. Often looking back towards nature for his inspiration, expanding it and subliming it through the lens of a metal-bending master, creating a dialogue between the organic natural elements and industrial recycled materials.

Arnaud Rivieren exhibited in solo and group exhibitions at B21 Gallery (2006 and 2008), Dubai; Gallery Leila Heller (2009), New York, LKFF (2011), Brussels and La Galerie Nationale (2014 and 2017), Dubai. In 2012, his installation Paper Plane was presented in the heart of Brussels and at Parc Egmont as part of Art Brussels's Art in the City programme. His works were exhibited in the Belgian Pavilion during Shanghai World Expo in 2010 and he has participated in the first two editions of Bastakiya Art fair (now Sikka Art Fair). He has participated in group shows at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde curated by Amanda Abu Khalil in 2016 and curated by Yasmina Reggad in 2017. Collections and public acquisitions include TDIC Culture (UAE), Masdar (UAE), Fondation Herpain (Brussels) and the Randolph Hearst Collection (USA).





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GALLERY  
DUBAI

First published in 2021 for CUSTOT GALLERY DUBAI  
to coincide with the exhibition

**Natural Sublime, Arnaud Rivieren**

7 October - 4 December 2021

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Photography: Úrsula Rénique and Pia Torelli Photography  
Special thanks to Vivek Perumal (Master Fabricator)



