



With roots in both Austria and California, Raditsch has strong bonds with both states, granting him insight to the intricacies and similarities between both.

Stories of Smoke and Fire

For his latest exhibit, Austro-American artist Florian Raditsch juxtaposes Tyrol and California to explore the human impact on nature

by **David Sievers**

Charcoal is both a reminder of destruction and a tool for renewal. Even the fiercest conflagration doesn't destroy completely, but leaves the tools for creation – as charred wood remains after a fire, it can also be used to create art. This is how Austro-American artist Florian Raditsch sees it: He uses needle-sharp charcoal pencils to visualize a complex narrative on nature, cultural appropriation and the influences thereof in creating identity.

Fire and charcoal are no stranger to Raditsch. Born in 1987 and raised in rural California, wildfires and evacuations were a constant factor in his upbringing. Even today, the possessions and livestock of friends and

family fall victim to fires. Currently working on the finishing touches of an exhibition at the Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum in Innsbruck, Raditsch is feverishly comparing and analyzing the rich natural environments of California and Tyrol and the striking similarities between two very different worlds. Both are subject to humans seeking to control the elements, a goal that stands opposed to the equally human longing for untouched, pristine nature.

It is this contrast that fascinates Raditsch, the ways humanity adapts to the landscapes around them. It can be seen in everything from agriculture to engineering, and even the places we call home: The architectural style of Alpine modernism plays a huge part

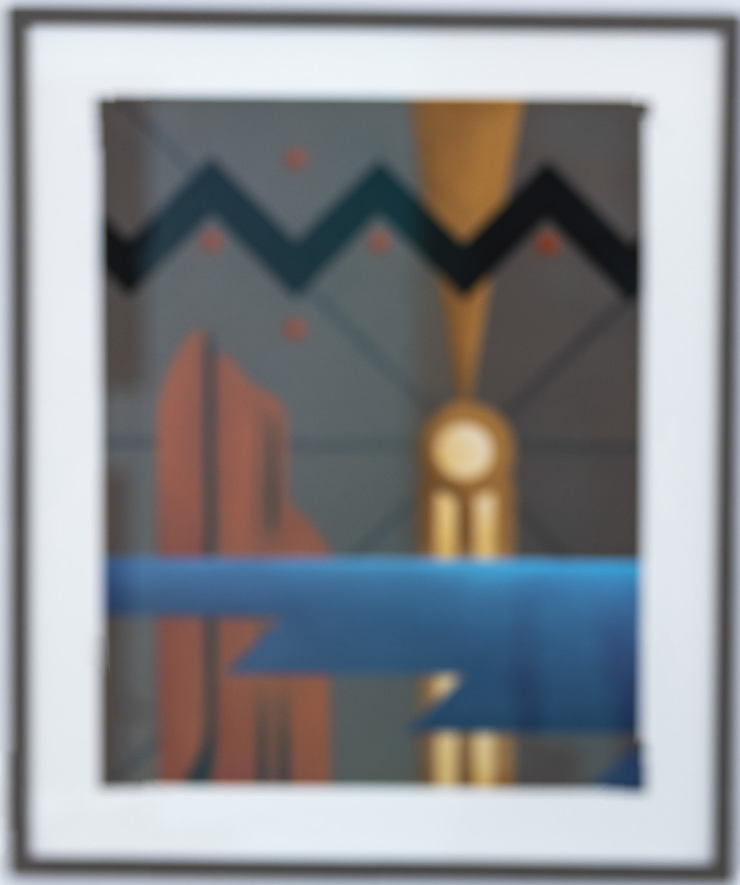
in his work. "I'm referencing two hotels in my exhibition. One was built in south Tyrol in 1929 and the other one in California in 1927," he explains. "Both were built in a style adverse to the trends of the time. Of course, the people who built them had heard about Bauhaus, but they made the choice to go against what they perhaps perceived as soulless modernity. Instead, they went for a style informed by regional architecture and local history."

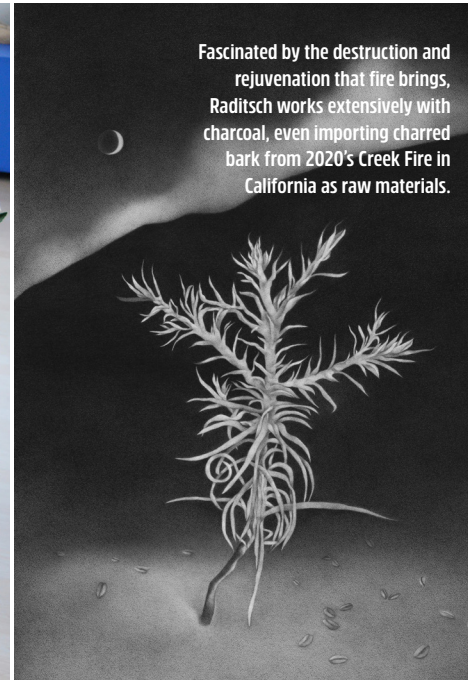
Nostalgia is indeed a powerful force, both in Tyrol and California. And while often quaint, it can also be sinister – "tradition" and "folklore" were mainstays of Nazi propaganda, which sought to create an idealized common past. In fact, the Volkskunstmuseum itself helped produce a standardized German *Tracht* during the Third Reich: To Raditsch, an abuse of identity, a symbolic attempt to bend nature and history to human will.

THE MANY SIDES OF FIRE

However, wood is perhaps his most important motive in the exhibition. Both in the mountains of California and Tyrol, timber is

Florian Raditsch – Im Schein von Rauch und Flammen / In the Halo of Smoke and Flame Sep 10-Jan 23
 Tiroler Volkskunstmuseum, Universitätsstraße 2, 6020 Innsbruck florianraditsch.com





Fascinated by the destruction and rejuvenation that fire brings, Raditsch works extensively with charcoal, even importing charred bark from 2020's Creek Fire in California as raw materials.

an integral part of the local identity, and economy. Durable and delicate, it's sustainable yet constantly exploited by overlogging or threatened by wildfire. Naturally, the raging blazes in California – particularly the Creek Fire of 2020 – have left their mark on Raditsch's work, as both a force of destruction and creation. For instance, the seeds of the giant Californian sequoia trees germinate especially well within burnt soil, something he references through a dance performance by Magali Moreau that depicts the cycle of entropy and renewal. He also had charred bark from the Creek Fire shipped to Austria, to be transformed into expressive masks that are to play a large role in the exhibition.

While wildfires are no danger in Tyrol, the artist nevertheless hints upon what might happen as nature endures human interference. With climate change everpresent in his work, Raditsch is relieved as an American that the current administration seems more willing to address the issue – better late than never.

ROOTS IN BOTH WORLDS

Still, Raditsch benefits immensely from his background, which gives him the emotional attachments needed to grasp the many subtleties hidden beneath the surface of his two homes. With family roots in Vienna, Lower Austria, and Tyrol, Raditsch's mother is from Los Angeles, while his grandmother

emigrated to New York from Vienna in the 1960s. After studying photography in California and art in New Mexico, he spent several years on the road between Alabama, the Southwest and parts of Europe before eventually getting accepted at the Universität für Angewandte Kunst.

Having arrived from the States, Raditsch recalls how totally different the approach to art was in Vienna, especially within academia. "I was constantly being told what art should be - and what it definitely should not be." He quickly points out though that Vienna and its art

scene has changed for the better in recent years, which he attributes to the increasing number of young, international students and professionals who are trying to bring change to the city. "I myself grew up with numerous different and interesting influences, which has helped me to tell many sides of any given story," Raditsch continues, explaining his process of telling stories through art. "The culmination of multiple perspectives has always been a way for me to present an engaging and thought-provoking narrative within my work."

Indeed, his influences come from everywhere, with beat poetry and literature in particular leaving a clear mark: Raditsch frequently references Japhey Rider, a character in *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac, a fictionalized version of real-life beat poet Garry Snyder. It was one of his poems that actually gave him the title of his exhibit: *With a halo of smoke and flame behind*, which centers on the fire safety mascot of the US Forest Service, Smokey Bear, reimagined as a sacred entity exacting revenge on those exploiting nature.

Indeed, his exhibition in Innsbruck would not be possible without a mixture of numerous different influences from both the old and the new world. On closer inspection, they have more in common than meets the eye – after all, the human desire to manipulate the environment is universal. **M**



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