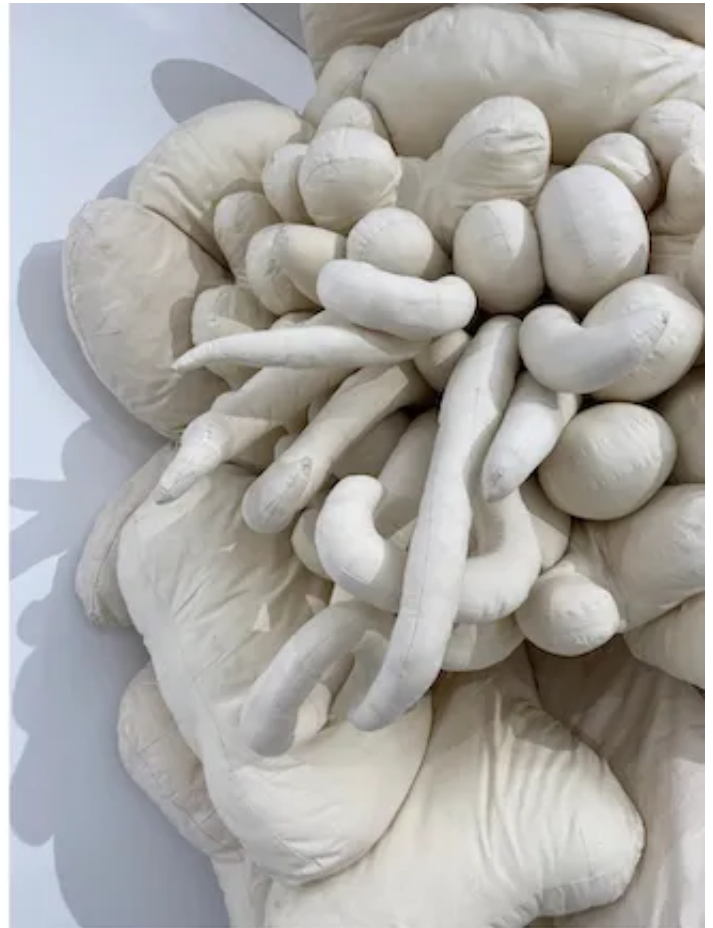


Yayoi Kusama / Sébastien Mettraux at Gowen Contemporary

To celebrate the opening of its new space in Geneva, Gowen Contemporary presents a unique installation by Yayoi Kusama and Sébastien Mettraux



Sébastien Mettraux, *Untitled (In Silico n°11)*, 2021, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm

Yayoi Kusama, *Death of an Illusion* (detail), 2001, mixed media (stuffed cotton fabric, wire), 750 x 200 x 130 cm

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« I'm interested in exploring the interconnection between contemporary practice and that of established, world-renowned artists, how those at different stages of their career respond to shared artistic preoccupations. »

Laura Gowen

Launching a new gallery given the uncertain, *stop-start* nature of life for the past eighteen months seems like no mean feat. Yet that's exactly what Laura Gowen has just accomplished. The opening of a second space in Geneva's Old Town is a formidable milestone for the Swiss gallerist. To mark

the occasion, Gowen has united two artists, notably the grande dame of the Japanese art scene Yayoi Kusama and Swiss contemporary artist Sébastien Mettraux in a complementary show which occupies the newly-painted interior at Grand-Rue 23.

"I want the exhibition to offer the opportunity for observation and dialogue where visitors can consider the relevance between different artists within a contemporary framework. The idea is to present one or two pieces by world-leading artists, perhaps from private collections, which provide an art historical background for a larger series by a younger artist".

Gowen's approach is valid and nudges iconic works back into the spotlight. In this inaugural show, the headliner – fresh from her first large-scale retrospective at Gropius Bau in Berlin – is Kusama. With a career which began over sixty years ago in New York, her practice has spanned multiple mediums from provocative performance to film, printmaking, literature, fashion, marketing and environmental art. Her *Infinity Rooms*, *Pumpkins* and polka-dotted sculptures are some of the most recognisable artworks across the globe.

The triffid-esque *Death of an Illusion*, 2001 is a seven and a half metre textile bulk which coils in a corner opposite one of seven oils by Mettraux. Previously shown in numerous venues including the Centre Pompidou, its monochrome form is familiar (it is, after all, a flower). Peculiar, padded protuberances however signal the unnerving undercurrents which course through this nonagenarian art superpower's oeuvre. It's menacing demeanor looks like it might instantaneously spring into life, or collapse and die.



Installation view: Statement – Escape Line, works by Yayoi Kusama and Sébastien Mettraux, Gowen Contemporary, Geneva, 2021

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"After 15 years of working on constructed, functional, predictable and man-made forms, I now have an interest in the random, for what we cannot calculate, for the accident, for the organic."

Sébastien Mettraux

The hybrid nature of Kusama's convoluted sculpture tethers firmly to Mettraux's new series *In Silico* which he began last year.

"I wanted to move away from a figurative practice, to capture the unknown, unpredictable aspect of life observed through nature. There is a freedom to the new paintings which is absent from my earlier series", he explains.

Graduating in 2006 as a Visual Arts postgraduate from the Ecole Cantonale d'art de Lausanne, Mettraux's work has evolved from the stark, industrial landscapes and mechanical-themed compositions inspired by his upbringing in the town of Vallorbe in the Swiss Jura (his studio is located in the town's railway station where the Orient Express used to pass through).

The artist came of age around the year 2000 *"when there was this underlying sense of fear and uncertainty surrounding the Y2K bug, of viruses like H5N1 and other crises which all fueled a climate of paranoia"*.

His response was to paint a series of enclosed spaces called *Dernier paysage I*, featuring bunkers, caves and underground nuclear shelters (Switzerland has built enough of them to accommodate its entire population) as imagined final landscapes in time of catastrophe. Evolving the theme, *Dernier paysage III* (visions du paradis) shifted the foreboding tone to explore the notion of happiness *"which throughout art since the Renaissance, has the commonalities of vegetation, water and verticality"*. Mettraux's depiction of modern luxury villas re-appropriated from estate agents brochures remain technical and devoid of human presence, but *"always reference natural elements found in the lémanescapes of Vallotton or Hodler"*.

Images of mechanical tools followed in *Ex Machina* and a series entitled *Vanités*, featuring medical prostheses and plant motifs as modern *memento mori* addressed the role of technology in transhumanism.



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For his latest work, Mettraux reflects upon the erratic nature of the world, depicting generic botanical forms, roots or fractal objects. The result is a fluid aesthetic which leans loosely towards abstraction. Close-ups of intertwined, phantasmagoric scapes are meticulously painted in muted colours against atmospheric, ombré backgrounds but the origin of his subjects is not immediately fathomable. Using smart, visual trickery Mettraux confounds the viewer's interpretation to question whether the motifs are intended as plant fronds, muscular fibres, human neurons or even watercourses.

"Scale is not a primary concern here", he states.

Only one piece, *Untitled, (In Silico n° 11)* bears resemblance to a real plant. Its composition calls to Georgia O'Keeffe's Hawaiian pineapple bud paintings commissioned for Dole in 1939 (fittingly, O'Keeffe enjoyed a thirty-year correspondence with Kusama).

The obvious commonality across Mettraux's series is *chaos* which he paints in a highly precise way. Is it by chance that *In Silico* feels so pertinent?

"It's been a time to reflect" says the artist, who has twice recovered from Covid. *"This series is a partly-autobiographical response to the recent health crisis, and the realisation that no-one could have anticipated its disordered effect on such a large scale"*.



Installation view: Statement – Escape Line, works by Yayoi Kusama and Sébastien Mettraux, Gowen Contemporary, Geneva, 2021
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"The central architecture lends itself to guest talks, where perhaps we lead discussion on an individual artwork in relation to a wider presentation of complementary pieces."

Laura Gowen

The edge-to-edge, gauzy pattern in *Untitled, (In Silico n° 8)* suggests that the viewer might be

observing life under a microscope in the same way that Kusama's repetitive patterns spread to fill the compositional field of view. *Flowers* (2005) is her second piece to complete the exhibition. Displayed in a raised alcove in the gallery's high-ceilinged inner sanctum (where Gowen envisages group discussions), its two-toned array of black and bright pink dots, triangles and curves creates a meshed still life of blooms in a handled vase.

Several small black & white lithographs by Mettraux hang in an intimate side room to complement Kusama's monochrome palette.



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With its wide, glass-clad frontage and several interconnecting spaces partitioned by thick, stone walls, the gallery feels more museal than the simpler premises that Gowen has recently vacated. *"That space will be given over to other specific projects in the future"* she confirms of the building which is located directly behind.

Gowen's objectives are set. The scope is infinite.

Statement – Escape Line

Yayoi Kusama Sébastien Mettraux

Gowen Contemporary, Geneva

Until 23 October 2021

For further information go to www.gowencontemporary.com

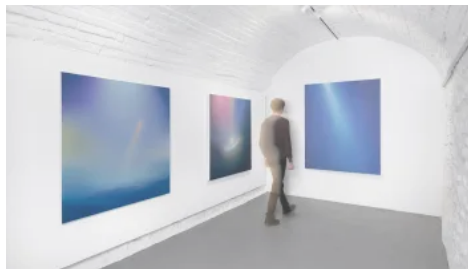
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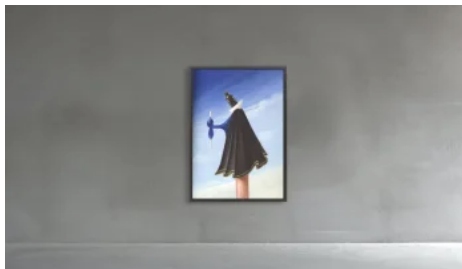


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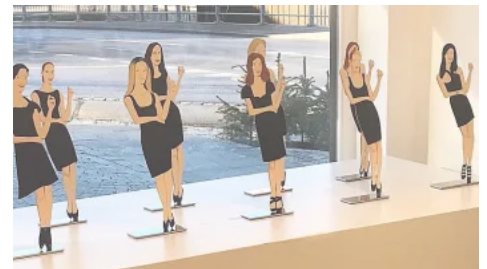
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