

ARTFORUM



Thiago Rocha Pitta, *seascape with cianobacteria*, 2017, Fresco, 28 x 35 7/8 inches 71 x 91 cm

Thiago Rocha Pitta

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For those growing fatigued by contemporary art's ongoing invocations of the Anthropocene and its attendant aesthetics of detritus and scorched-earth urban sprawl, Thiago Rocha Pitta's show "The First Green" offered something of a reprieve. The sculpture, video, photograph, and series of paintings in this Brazilian artist's second solo endeavor at Marianne Boesky Gallery together formed an arcadian vision starring an unlikely subject: cianobacteria.

Before the Dawn, 2017, a video Rocha Pitta shot at Australia's Hamelin Pool, features a sea of rock formations known as stromatolites, or layered accretions of cianobacterial colonies and sediment—half living, half dead. Countering the video's meditative feel was an ominous yet absurdist sculpture further into the gallery: an atoll of moss partially engulfed by a piece of fabric that the artist hardened with concrete into a floating, hoodlike form. Perhaps most intriguing, though, was Rocha Pitta's "Seascape with Cianobacteria" series, 2016–. Rendered in amped-up, incandescent greens and blues, this group of paintings depicts cianobacterial blooms sometimes loosely, sometimes with eerie accuracy. The works alternately evoke aerial shots and traditional landscape perspectives—or possibly just a topsy-turvy aqueous realm where a viewpoint's relation to the horizon means nothing.

As it turns out, these seascapes are frescoes: The artist daubed and diffused dry pigment straight into flat stretches of wet-lime plaster, creating surfaces infected and colonized by a sort of material stand-in for microbial growths. And if fresco painting—with its drying, hardening, heat-releasing plaster—offers obvious connections to geological processes, it also ambitiously conjures church-painting traditions. You have to wonder if the artist's choice of medium represents a reach back to a time when the didactic and the sacred could coexist in artworks to wondrous effect. Perhaps Rocha Pitta means to consecrate a secular origin story that began eons ago, when cyanobacteria, as the earth's earliest life forms to photosynthesize, laid the groundwork for present-day ecosystems. "We are here because of the cyanobacteria," he said in a recent interview with *Discover* magazine. "We should have temples for them."

There's certainly something refreshing about an artist willing to make reverence one of the salient affective registers of his ground-floor Chelsea gallery show—someone unafraid to evoke *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) and Monet where his peers might worry about seeming too wide-eyed. Ultimately, though, "The First Green" was best served by its most menacing undertones. Cyanobacteria, roughly 2.3 billion years ago, caused what's known as the Great Oxygenation Event. Proliferating insidiously, the microbes excreted so much oxygen that the climate careened off-kilter, sparking mass extinctions even while paving the way for the Edenic green worlds now familiar to us.

Which brings us back to our recent, collective propensity to discuss the Anthropocene ad infinitum. As urgent as the topic may be, how much of our willingness to engage it derives from a grandiosity of its own—a self-regarding fascination with the unique ability of our own species to change the earth on a geologic scale? In the face of such anthropocentrism, Rocha Pitta's show seemed to put us in our place. We may indeed be a breed powerful enough to wreak mass climate havoc. But in that regard, we're hardly one of a kind.