

Hervé Charles Albedo

Artist

Hervé Charles (Nivelles, 1965) primarily works with photography and video. He holds degrees in Fine Art and in Arts and Communication Sciences (ULG), and as a student received the second prize of the prestigious "Preis für junge europäische Fotografen," or Young European Photographer Prize, from Deutsche Leasing (Berlin), along with the "Photographie Ouverte" (Open Photography) prize in Charleroi. He also won a public commission from the Commission des Arts de Wallonie [Wallonia Commission for the Integration of Artistic Works] and has presented his work at venues including Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin, the Triennale di Milano, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Bozar in Brussels, as well as in several private galleries and contemporary art fairs.

He also works in various related artistic fields, notably teaching and exhibition curation.

Exhibition

For this monographic exhibition, Hervé Charles has chosen an enigmatic title: "albedo", a Latin word meaning "whiteness". In the Middle Ages, the term was used by alchemists to refer to the second stage of the Magnum Opus, the Great Work aimed at transmuting impure materials into gold – the most noble of metals.

In the 18th century, it was adopted into French as "albédo" by the mathematician and astronomer Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728–1777) to describe the reflective power of a surface. Simply put: the lighter and more reflective a surface (like fresh snow), the higher its albedo. Conversely, a dark surface (like cooled lava) has a low albedo.

This phenomenon is a crucial factor in climate regulation, as albedo influences how much energy the Earth absorbs: by reflecting a significant portion of solar radiation back into space, a bright surface helps to lower ambient temperatures and thus limit atmospheric warming. In contrast, a dark surface absorbs heat, contributing to a rise in temperatures.

The title *Albedo* thus encapsulates both the artist's environmental concerns and his reflections on his chosen medium: photography. Light is, after all, the raw material of photography, whether in its imprint on photosensitive film (analogue cameras) or electronic pixels (digital cameras). Hervé Charles uses both techniques to capture fragments of natural landscapes. Indeed, the Earth – with all its upheavals and transformations – has been central to his work since his earliest creations in the 1990s.

Curator: Pierre-Olivier Rollin

From the outset of his career, the artist distinguished himself with a photographic series entitled **CLOUDS AND CONSEQUENCES**, focused on snow, ice, and liquid water – phenomena he considers to be "consequences of clouds", thus establishing a direct link between sky and earth.

This photographic ensemble, dating from the mid-1990s, already testifies to his ability to capture a world in constant transformation through the sheer power of synecdoche: a skilful frame isolates a fragment that evokes the whole, inviting the viewer to pay close attention to visual subtleties.

The display format chosen by Hervé Charles for each of his series lends a distinctive quality to his images. Initially printed in black and white, and later in colour, his early works are mounted on transparent supports, either rectangular or circular. This technique allows the artist to highlight the object-like nature of his photographs while asserting their relative autonomy from their subject. It is one of the recurring characteristics of his work, granting his prints a general value that transcends the method of capture or the contingencies of their location.

One piece from this series of tondi – a term borrowed from the circular supports used in painting and bas-relief sculpture – already points to the next stage in his research; it shows the emergence of dark, jagged textures from cooled layers of lava.

Early videos, new explorations

The volcanic theme begins to emerge around the year 2000, in parallel with the digital shift. Keenly attuned to the changes this entails, the artist explores new printing possibilities, striving to find the most fitting plastic formulations. One video from these early experiments – presented in the Entresol – depicts a lava flow in slow motion. It introduces the **VOLCANOES** series, through which the photographer probes geological and climate-related upheavals.

Since the late 1990s, Hervé Charles has explored active volcanoes across Europe – primarily in Italy (Stromboli, Vulcano, and most of all Mount Etna), but also in Iceland – capturing their spectacular manifestations. He ventures as close as possible to these phenomena to take tightly framed, high-contrast photographs. Devoid of any clear sense of scale, the viewer cannot identify the subject at first glance: only the reddish hue of the molten lava, set against the dark mass of solidified rock, gives away the volcanic origin.

Environmental concerns

In the early 2000s, the artist's focus shifted more overtly to ecological issues, reflecting heightened awareness of the human impact on the natural environments he documents. Though human figures are absent from his compositions, they are implicitly responsible – the off-camera cause of the disruptions evoked.

Two major photographic series were born during this period:

MARÉE NOIRE [black tide], which records the devastation caused by the oil tanker shipwrecks Erika (1999) off the coast of Brittany, and Prestige (2002) off the coast of Galicia in Spain; and **MARÉE VERTE** [green tide], also in Brittany, which addresses the invasion of the shoreline by algae – an outcome directly linked to intensive livestock farming and agricultural pollution.

In these series, Hervé Charles explores a visual paradox: the forms taken by these environmental disasters possess a disquieting visual beauty (the dark swirls of oil on water, the undulating decay of green algae), yet they simultaneously reveal the brutal damage inflicted on ecosystems, wildlife, and flora. The power of his photography lies in this tension: creating aesthetically compelling images that confront the viewer with disturbing realities.

Photo-tableaux

During the first decade of the 2000s, the artist travelled across icy and desert landscapes, primarily in Iceland but also in Quebec. These journeys gave rise to the photographic series **GLACIERS**, with its vast white expanses and high albedo.

These glacier images – as well as his images of tides and volcanoes – stand out not only for their subject matter but also for their form. They belong to what French critic Jean-François Chevrier (1954) has described as *photo-tableaux*. The square format, bordered by a white margin and a solid frame, the meticulous composition and tight framing, the organisation of depth, and the colour intensity all contribute to creating a self-contained object that distances itself from its referent and confronts the viewer directly, holding their gaze. Moreover, the unusually large format – particularly uncommon in photography during the 2000s – invites viewers to become fully immersed in the image.

WATERFALL turns its attention to another form of water – not static, but in motion. The photographs show Icelandic waterfalls, captured in the 2000s, as well as Victoria Falls on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe, photographed around a decade later. These later images mark the emergence in Charles's work of the issue of water stress, an environmental concern that continues to inform his practice. The prints play with light to render the image of the waterfall – somewhat depleted – as fluid and mobile in its materiality.

Technological reconstruction

A three-dimensional model of Lago di Piana degli Albanesi, an artificial lake near Palermo in Sicily, reveals this water reservoir now threatened by drought. Earlier this year, Hervé Charles visited the site to carry out a photogrammetric survey, turning this landscape into computer-generated imagery. This digital treatment serves as the basis for an anaglyph video – an image designed to be viewed in 3D using colour-filter glasses – displayed on an LED screen to offer an immersive visual experience.

Destruction

The artist's work continues to evolve as he explores new natural elements – wind and fire – in the context of climate change. In his series **TEMPÊTE** [storm], he documents the damage wrought by Storm Klaus (2009) in France.

Since 2010, in **FIRE WALK WITH ME**, the photographer has focused on scorched forest landscapes in Corsica and mainland France, as well as in Spain, Portugal, and Italy. These photographs sometimes depict the fires as they occur, with thick plumes of smoke rising from the blaze. As with his images of African waterfalls, these works mark a temporary departure from the square format in favour of a vertical one, better suited to the subject matter – the towering shapes of charred trees and smoke columns.

In **EXTRACTION**, the artist continues his reflection on environmental destruction, this time focusing on the excesses of mining. Created in 2024 on the partially decommissioned Rio Tinto mine site in southern Spain, the works depict polluted waters tinged red by metal residues. When printed on transparent film, like the Victoria Falls images, these photographs use the material's translucency to present colour overlays reminiscent of sediment swirls animating riverbeds.

Upstairs, in the Salle Pierre Dupont, a video from the **WATERFALL** series reveals a close-up of an Icelandic waterfall. These moving images are considered by the artist as "photographs that unfold in time." They are played in slow motion and in reverse to remove the immediate recognisability of the subject and emphasise the intrinsic visual qualities of the cascade.

Facing the video, a series of cloud photographs evokes the beginnings of Hervé Charles's artistic journey – witnesses to his earliest explorations. He continues this investigation with the **CLOUDS** series. To capture clouds tangibly – almost to touch them – he photographs them from a small aircraft with the side door open. The resulting images are devoid of orientation or spatial reference, readable in any direction, and reminiscent of Alfred Stieglitz's cloud studies (1864–1946).

The **VOLCANOES** series is then represented by a set of images printed on transparent film and mounted on plexiglass, suspended a few centimetres from the wall in the manner of *CLOUDS AND CONSEQUENCES*. This method of presentation, which creates a sense of depth through the spacing, is enhanced by lighting effects; angled or lateral light allows the images to reveal themselves from within. These prints turn synecdoche into metaphor: the lava channels become wounds brutally inflicted upon the Earth.

In the same vein as the lava video presented in the Entresol, Hervé Charles turns his attention to the phenomenon of volcanic mud bubbles. In Iceland, he photographs these bubbles before recreating them through morphing, generating computer-generated images based on real, natural forms.

Technological reconstruction, continued

Echoing the red-hued tones of the volcanic landscapes, the ground floor of the Salle Pierre Dupont is dedicated to the artist's recent investigations around the Rio Tinto, a landscape saturated with the same colours and explored in the **EXTRACTION** series. Here, the photographer once again employs photogrammetry, a three-dimensional modelling technique based on analysing large numbers of photographs taken from different angles. Widely used in archaeology, geology, and cartography, this process generates precise digital renderings of real objects or locations.

The artist presents a large immersive video installation that brings the exhibition to a close. It is a kind of hallucinatory voyage, in which the viewer's eye glides freely across shapes, textures and colours, losing all sense of physical, temporal or spatial orientation – somewhere between indexical image (captured from reality) and virtual image (digitally constructed).

Produced specifically for the exhibition, this installation not only ties his current environmental concerns to those that have long informed his work, but also bears witness to the photographer's ongoing engagement with the technological evolution of his medium and its societal stakes – particularly in this so-called "post-truth" era. Voted "Word of the Year" in 2016 by the Oxford English Dictionary, the expression *post-truth* refers to a form of information dissemination that excludes any consideration for factual accuracy or verifiability.

By plunging us into the heart of this imagery, Hervé Charles once again harnesses the power of synecdoche: the immersive experience of his video installation crystallises the one we endure daily in our hyper-connected media societies.

Cultural mediation

Petit Musée

The Petit Musée is an educational area designed specifically for children. It offers a selection of works from the collection that echo the naturalist dimension of Hervé Charles's images.

To help young visitors explore the theme of the four elements, an envelope containing activity sheets is available at the museum reception. Feel free to ask for one, settle in, and get creative using the materials provided!