

ARTFORUM

David Balula

GALERIE FRANK ELBAZ

7 rue Saint-Claude

April 21–June 16

By piling several tons of dirt onto the gallery floor and covering the mound with a custom-built deck—upon which visitors are invited to climb and walk—David Balula has created a large-scale vivarium in Le Marais—a district whose name translates as “the marsh,” which is exactly what this now chic and gallery-laden Parisian neighborhood was, prior to the twelfth century. Grasses and other weeds have already sprung up through the slatted wood flooring and around its edges, hinting at the fecundity of this historically reminiscent ecosystem. Yet there is more than plant matter germinating here. In the spirit of previous works that Balula has made using natural elements (“River Paintings,” 2008, and “Burnt Paintings,” 2009), here he has buried six blank canvases, subjecting them to organic corrosion for a two-month period. The “Buried Works,” 2012, will not be exhumed or displayed during this exhibition. Instead, Balula focuses on the odd experience of a biotic studio: a “natural” environment that has been contrived to specifically—and independently—create art. Enveloped by the palpable odor and succulence of damp soil, the viewer enjoys a removed—but still visceral—encounter with the invisible minerals, matter, and molds that Balula has coopted as artistic collaborators.

Though the installation may be physically akin to an institutional critique—calling to mind, for example, Urs Fischer’s eight-foot-deep crater at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise (*You*, 2007)—conceptually, Balula’s penchant for art generated by nature harks back to Yves Klein, who in the early 1960s exposed canvases to wind, rain, sun, and dust to create a series called “Cosmogonies.” Balula’s results will likely be subtler than Klein’s (who once famously drove from Paris to the Côte d’Azur with a canvas affixed to the roof of his car), but we will have to wait to see. The gallery is charged with keeping the soil moist and the temperature regulated during the exhibition, but the artist has not yet determined when or where the unearthed “Buried Works” will be shown publicly.

— Mara Hoberman



View of “Buried Works,” 2012.

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