

## **Time Machines of the Gods?**

### **Essay by Michael Davidge**

“It took courage to write this book, and it will take courage to read it.” So wrote Erich Von Däniken in the preface to his international bestseller, *Chariots of the Gods?* Published in 1969, the year Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, the book argued that advances in technology had led to perhaps the greatest discovery in human civilization: that spacemen had traveled to the Earth 40,000 years ago, spawning intelligent life on this planet. This discovery was made possible because we have now reached a stage in our development when we can begin to properly interpret the evidence (found in petroglyphs and Aztec ruins for example) that has been right before our eyes all this time. The exhibition *Paleofuturity* asks that its visitors be as courageous when viewing the artworks on display as they would while confronting Däniken’s text. As he writes, “The time has come for us to admit our insignificance by making discoveries in the infinite unexplored cosmos.” The artists in this exhibition (Jason de Haan, Lauren Hall, James K-M, Mac McArthur, Iriz Pääbo, and Holly Ward) are adept adventurers who make leaps through time and space if not as cosmonauts then as hermenauts, bridging the vast chasm delineated by the neologism of the title. *Paleofuturity* will define itself as a kind of primitive futurology. Research has only just begun.

Although they may appear to be the least futuristic looking works in the exhibition, the paintings of James K-M were the main inspiration for this investigation of paleofuturity. With an economy of means, relatively simple geometric patterns painted with acrylics and stain on plywood, K-M has been working through permutations of a code whose implications could be apocalyptic. The paintings express a metaphysics related to the end of the Mayan calendar, which occurs at the winter solstice of 2012. The implication is that if society continues to run the same course it has taken for millennia then certainly the end for us is nigh. K-M’s paintings attempt to short-circuit any self-fulfilling prophecy by establishing new patterns for thinking that break with old identifications. K-M has described his paintings as “contemporary pictographs” that “point to a non-rational language beyond mind.” A painting like *I Opener* (2007), for example, not only puts forward a notion of the artistic process as perceptual and not conceptual, but also intimates that the ultimate point of reception is the annihilation of the self. K-M’s practice is certainly at odds with the reigning “Vancouver School” of thought, whose clerical photo-conceptualism is ultimately conservative. K-M finds a more kindred spirit in the work of the Canadian West Coast Hermetics, like Gregg Simpson and Gilles Foisy, who have been

marginalized since the '70s. The concise, almost rudimentary, statements made by K-M's paintings are prolegomena to further explorations of arcane subject matter, outside of time and after the end of time. As K-M says about his painting *Question and Answer and Stars* (2007), "When you ask a question of the unknown you have to ask it in a way that can be understood." The answer will invariably be a reflection of the question.

Iriz Pääbo explores an even more complex network of patterns that emerge from the interaction on multiple levels of co-existing realities, each with their own laws, rules and relationships. Pääbo's practice shifts across disciplines while maintaining connections via synesthesia, perhaps most clearly in her filmwork. The digital animation *Watergazing* (2009) delineates points of transformation and continuity in the role that water plays in the cultural imagination. Her video invites the viewer to engage in an act of watergazing, an age old meditative practice that has one calmly and peacefully observe the movement of water to the point that images rise from the depths of consciousness. Flowing water becomes a figure of time, which the practiced watergazer can enter and peer into the past or future. The surface of Pääbo's reflecting pool buzzes with mutant colours, forms and sounds. A natural scene is transformed into a portal to another world, the passage of time made indefinite through an infinite loop.

A visual echo of the natural world can be seen in Lauren Hall's sculptural work, which uses space-age materials to describe distant realms, be they mountain ranges in Patagonia or on the moon. With an affinity for post-minimalism and abstraction, Hall harnesses the awe-inspiring forms and phenomena of human-engulfing nature. Her hybrid objects share natural geometrical features but they are further estranged through their artificiality and they border on a reverse face that surpasses understanding: the technological sublime. Examining concepts of the picturesque and the sublime have been integral to Hall's attempt at describing nature through culture. The simple forms and cheap materials of her work are engaging in a light and playful manner, as in the polystyrene mountain peaks described in her *now glittering, now dark, now reflecting gloom* (2010). However, a chilling element is present, as in the icy regions where the Thing still wanders. For example, the work *the colours are not so easy to see in the dark... the moon rainbow appears white* (2010) suggests a world once-removed, vacuum-sealed for forms that won't need oxygen to survive.

The subject matter of Mac McArthur's digital images appears to inhabit such an airless void. The intense black space in which his figures appear is not interplanetary, however. It is the void of an empty scanner flatbed. With the

picture plane turned 90 degrees, his figures are not “grounded” in the usual sense but appear to float outside of the gravitational pull of our everyday world. McArthur’s compositions employ a range of materials that include wood, glass, fabric, mineral, metal, and most significantly, carvings and sculptures from his own personal collection. They also incorporate the random effects of the scanner bar’s set priorities and the chance physics of the optical interface of glass and stone. In McArthur’s work, the interface of contemporary technology with traditional stonework and raw materials is a productive clash, but it signals a shift from production to reproduction and from creation to appropriation. Interestingly, the early definition of postmodernist work that Leo Steinberg applied to Robert Rauschenberg’s silkscreened collages in his 1968 essay “Other Criteria” could equally apply to McArthur’s, most significantly in the use of the term “flatbed.” The term signaled a shift from nature to culture and a reorientation of the pictorial field to a surface that could receive a vast heterogeneous array of artifacts that were previously incompatible. McArthur’s work suggests another shift, from Steinberg’s “flatbed” which referred to the printing press, to the flatbed of a digital scanner. Paradoxically, the shift from analog to digital, with its supposed loss of indexicality, seems to result in the return of an auratic presence to the images.

A flatbed of a different sort appears in Holly Ward’s *Object Relations, Second Version* (2008 – ongoing). It is a loose compendium of found objects with suggestive forms, like a wooden penis and a Darth Vader Pez dispenser, along with speculative texts by authors such as Alvin Toffler and Stanislaw Lem and with titles like *The Astral Mirror* and *How to Build a Time Machine*. These items, again selected from the artist’s own personal collection, are arranged on two flat surfaces in order to develop dialogues and create constellations of interrelated ideas that gesture to possible worlds inferred by the viewer. Ward’s ongoing body of work investigates representations of social progress and the utopian imaginary in instances of science fiction, experimental architecture and collective action. Similarly, the arrangement of objects and their containment in *Object Relations* suggests an organizing principle, no matter how personal or idiosyncratic, which gives credence to the potency of form and the potential for speculative thinking to have an impact on the future.

Though each work in the exhibition creates its own energy field through the dynamic elements they incorporate and employ, none do so dramatically as Jason de Haan’s *Hope, Love, Peace, Healing, Generosity, Purpose, Harmony* (2008). The work presents a collection of crystal specimens that are activated by an oscillating frequency relayed through the speakers on which they are displayed. Practitioners

of crystal healing therapy claim that specific crystals have ameliorative powers according to the frequencies at which they vibrate, which are said to correspond with certain metaphysical energies that are present in all people. The sound of the installation is determined by the relative frequencies of the crystals in the collection and the resulting vibrations from the amplification extend the qualities of the crystals throughout and even beyond the space it is in. The work has the potential to realign and rejuvenate the natural and healthy vibrations of visitors to Modern Fuel as well as passersby. De Haan, similar to the other *Paleofuturity* artists, employs the technology available to us today in order to release the immanent properties of the materials he works with, properties that lay dormant until activated by an intelligent design foreign to them.

More than speculative fictions, the works in *Paleofuturity* do not simply demand a suspension of disbelief. Rather, they elicit the buoyancy of belief. Belief proffers the levitation required for an out-of-this-world experience. Whether or not the future is utopian or dystopian, it will be important to remember that salvation is usually understood to lie in something altogether other, completely foreign and outside ourselves. Threshold experiences of worlds beyond that the works in *Paleofuturity* evoke introduce us to the previously unknown and offer opportunities for the intense imaginings of other arrangements.