

Review: Utopia Banished at The Angela Meleca Gallery

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Angela Meleca Gallery kicked off its fourth season of exhibitions with a bang. *Utopia Banished*, curated by George Rush and Ryland Wharton, presents a compelling visual exploration of our unflagging (and as yet unfulfilled) desire to create a perfect society. Using Kim Stanley Robinson's award-winning *Mars Trilogy* as their inspiration, Rush and Wharton have assembled a group of eclectic contemporary artists whose works provide a variety of perspectives on our utopian aspirations. The result is a show that is provocative, enigmatic, and in the end, wholly successful.

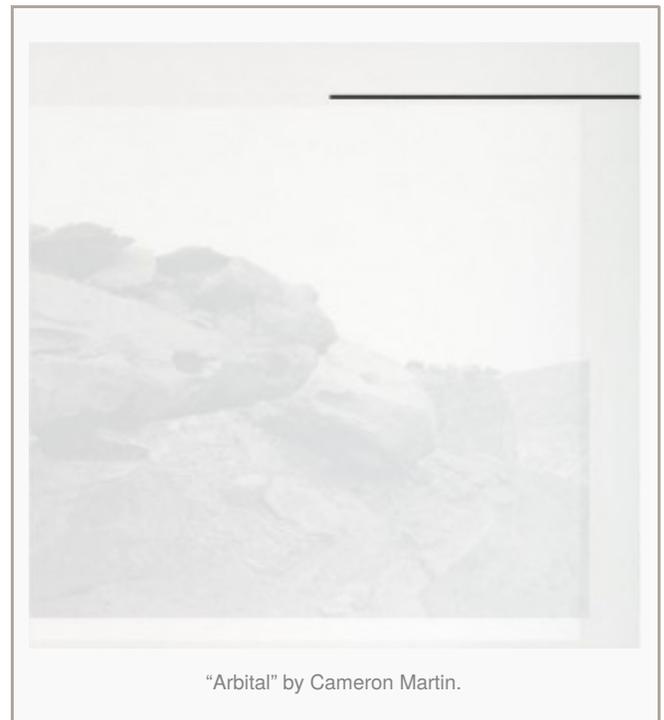
The curators themselves offer little in the way of exposition save a terse and somewhat pessimistic paragraph declaring the impossibility of large-scale utopias. I suppose that's a reasonable stand to take given our current political (and geopolitical) environment. Still, it made me wonder if utopias are really meant to be large scale endeavors. Human history is replete with utopian communities, and while their footprint is usually small and their life expectancy is usually short, their impact can last much longer. Small-scale utopias offer a kind of petri dish for social change; creating environments where people can experiment with new or forward thinking social practices that challenge prevailing norms.

Ohio, for its part, has a rich tradition of utopian communities. There was a time after all when our great state was the frontier, the edge of civilization, the place to get away from it all. As such, it became a magnet for all manner of social activists, disenfranchised religious groups, and charismatic charlatans. If you had a great idea for some upstart social order, Ohio welcomed you (see also: The Moravians (Gnadenhutten, Ohio) the Shakers (Union Village, Ohio), the Mormons (Kirtland, Ohio), The Society of Separatists of Zoar (Zoar, Ohio), the Owenites (Yellow Springs, Ohio) and others). That these endeavors were often fleeting is perhaps less a matter of failure and more a matter of evolution. The precepts behind these utopias would die, spread or be snuffed out depending on their utility.

Of course this frailty plays into the allure of utopias. They fascinate us largely because they are so theoretical, so fragile, so hard to sustain in the real world. In that sense, banished they are. The origin of the word utopia after all translates roughly from the Greek to mean "not a place," but it's in this transient place, the place of the non-existent and the unreal, that the art in *Utopia Banished* starts to make eerie and prescient sense. Here the works function like cryptic dispatches from places outside our known world. Here they present alternate takes on the reality we hold so dear.

Dennis McNulty's *Maybe Everything That Dies...* is a perfect case in point. Like the last known signal from some abandoned, unknown place, McNulty's work auto-broadcasts its cryptic message one sad and slow letter at a time. The spare arrangement of wires and switches, combined with the solitary 14-segment VFD display, gives McNulty's piece a haunting, lonely poignancy.

Cameron Martin's *Arbital* conjures up a similarly enigmatic sense of isolation. His bleached and monochromatic



landscape is cold and foreboding. That it could come from anywhere; the other side of the earth, or the other side of the universe, adds to its ethereal and unknowable quality.

Jorge Orozco Gonzalez also offers a fantastical depiction of place. His *Views of the Autumnal City – No. 03* offers an Escher-like depiction of a world that is at once intricate and terrifying. In this multi-media drawing, geometric lattice work weaves and criss-crosses through a series of biomorphic shapes. Given the relentless tangle, it's impossible to tell if the lattice imposed itself on the more organic forms or if the forms somehow grew around the grid. The fact that the piece bleeds to the the edge of the paper on every side creates the dizzying possibility that this "city" goes on forever.

While not an exploration of place, Sharon Core's photographs offer an apt metaphor for both the idealized perfection and likely impermanence of utopias. The sharp focus, impeccable lighting, and near perfect execution of these works present the subjects with such hyper-realism that they become almost unreal (One imagines the other side of the uncanny valley, the place where the depiction of a thing can become almost too real.). And while the images have been captured in astounding vividness, the subjects themselves ultimately will not last.

So it goes throughout *Utopia Banished*. Clues appear. Other worlds present. Alternate endings are suggested. Too mysterious to be conceptual and too conceptual to be exposition, *Utopia Banished* functions like a kind of detached 21st century Surrealism. It asks that we make lateral leaps. It's the kind of work that needs to be approached not head-on and demanding answers, but from the side and drawing surprising connections. See this show. Let these works in through your peripheral vision. Let the images and ideas rattle around your subconscious. Then imagine the other worlds we could invent.

Curators George Rush and Ryland Wharton will be giving a talk on *Utopia Banished* on Wednesday October 19th, 6:00 – 7:30 PM at Angela Meleca Gallery, 144 E. State St., Columbus, OH 43215.

Utopia Banished is on view through Saturday, October 22nd at Angela Meleca Gallery.

For more information, visit www.angelamelecagallery.com.

Walter Sutin
Secret Forest
2016



"Maybe Everything That Dies..." by Dennis McNulty.



"Early American Apples" by Sharon Core.

Pen and ink
11" x 14"

Dennis McNulty
Maybe Everything That Dies...
2013

Electronics, wires, drawing pin, dropped ceiling,
programming, lyrics
Dimensions variable

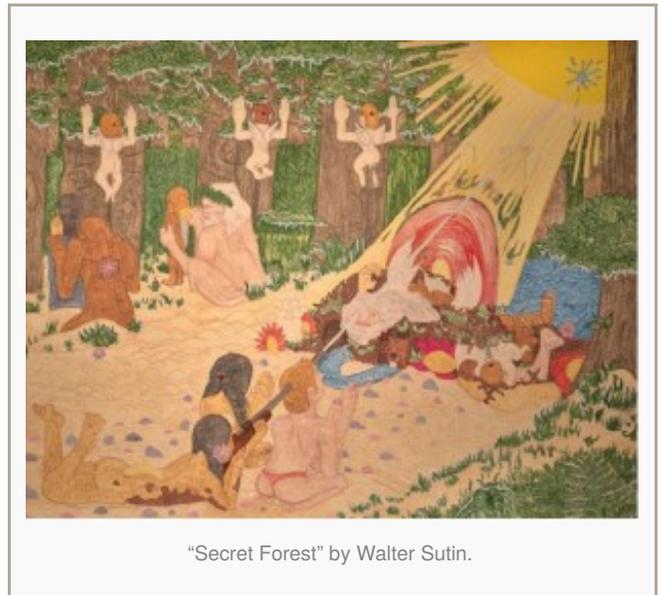
Cameron Martin
Arbital
2012
Acrylic on canvas over panel
24" x 24"

Jorge Orozco Gonzalez
Views of the Autumnal Cities – No. 3
2016
Ink, marker, colored pencil, pastel and watercolor on watercolor paper
27.5" x 39.4"

Sharon Core
Early American Apples
2009
Chromogenic print
9" x 15" (edition 7 of 7)

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"Secret Forest" by Walter Sutin.