

Geoff Diego Litherland

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Past

On August 20th 1977 NASA launched Voyager 2, an unmanned space probe. It's mission, to study the furthest reaches of our solar system before travelling on into interstellar space. In addition to its complex technology it carried a gold plated audiovisual disc containing images and sounds of the earth, recorded greetings from world leaders, and music from across the globe. Thirty-six years later this cylinder of now largely obsolete technology is still spinning through the cold vacuum of space, a fusion of science and art travelling into the unknown, a beacon of human culture reaching out to explore the stars.

More than a century earlier, in 1863, Albert Bierstadt, a German American landscape painter visited the Yosemite Valley in California. Like other members of the Hudson River School he wanted to depict the world as a place of luminous wonder, where humans would live in a peaceful coexistence with nature. By heightening and slightly distorting reality Bierstadt sought to reveal the sublime beauty of these monumental landscapes. In the process he transformed these forests, streams and granite peaks into a romantic, sacred vision that not only contributed to the establishment of Yosemite as a National Park in 1890, but helped to shape attitudes to the American wilderness that continue to this day.

The intimate relationship between humanity and nature that underpinned the vision of the Hudson River School can also be seen in the 1972 film, *Silent Running*. But in this dystopian world the relationship has been corrupted, the world's flora destroyed. The Earth's only remaining plants are now preserved in geodesic domes floating in space on the back of a fleet of space ships orbiting Saturn. It is a film that pits innocent nature against human greed, impassive technology against sensuous beauty. The final scene portrays a single dome floating alone in the vast expanse of space, the lights set up to nurture the plants shining like stars in the darkness.

From these, and other diverse sources including Hieronymous Bosch and modernist soviet architecture, Geoff Diego Litherland draws us into a future of both hope and anxiety. Weaving together these disparate cultural references into portraits, maps and landscapes, he creates an overarching narrative, an

invitation to journey into the unknown as explorers of what might be. In these works of fluid beauty and technical bravado Litherland constructs the future from the past, fiction from fact. He sends us out into the stars as settlers of new worlds, where in the face of impending environmental disaster we can start again.

Portraits

Although human figures are largely absent from Litherland's paintings, a series of portraits offer the viewer a glimpse of the 'future explorers' that might have once inhabited these landscapes and travelled aboard these spaceships. Whilst the inspiration for these figures comes from some of the great scientists and artists of the past, these identities are now lost. Deprived of any identifying features and dressed in the same archaic spacesuits, these timeless individuals are now members of a new world order where existing distinctions are broken down. Scientist and Artist, Rationalist and Believer fuse into a single new category - Explorer. Reminiscent of the naive portraits painted by early colonial settlers these paintings confront the viewer with a piercing gaze, challenging us to follow where they have already gone.

Portholes

Through three octagonal 'portholes' Litherland allows us to glimpse dramatic landscapes; oceans, forests and mountains that are in a state of flux, hovering between solid and liquid, abstract and figurative, creation and destruction. They are seen through patinas of light and rust, painterly veils that enhance this sense of ambiguity, leaving us to ask, are we witnessing the final hours of a dying world, or the first minutes of one that is newly born?

Planets

As they float amongst vast, iridescent clouds of instellar dust, Litherland's abandoned space ships would appear to be the harbingers of a dystopia where technology lies redundant and humanity is absent. But these are no ordinary space ships, for on their backs, shored up by wooden scaffolding, they carry vast landscapes, wildernesses lying exposed to the cold vacuum of space, the remnants of an earthly Eden carried out to reseed the heavens. But there is ambiguity here as well, for these landscapes are also paintings of paintings, transcriptions of works by Bierstadt and other Hudson River Painters, a reflection of Litherland's own fascination with the relationship between art and illusion, and a reminder that our experience of nature is shaped as much by art as by direct contact and study.

Paradise

In 'We were never here', Litherland borrows extensively from Hieronymous Bosch's, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. But in this new paradise it is wild animals rather than humans that roam freely amongst structures whose inspiration comes from modernist soviet architecture. This is an Eden before the Fall, a place to dwell in delight. This sense of perfection is reinforced by the synergy that exists between the curving, organic forms of the buildings and the surrounding landscape creating a vision of an interconnected future, where we are called to live in harmony rather than separation. This monumental painting offers us a choice. We can either see it as a doom-laden vision of dystopian disaster, a portrait of a post-human world. Or we can see it as an invitation to rediscover paradise, to set aside past mistakes and start anew.

Plans

For those wanting to explore these worlds, to step into this possible future, Litherland provides maps, etched charts that resemble ancient charts and animal skins that are part cartography, part painting, part tribal artifact. These strange hybrid creations are a combination of alchemical symbols, mandalas, geometric forms and images of the hadron collider in Cern that don't offer the viewer a geographic knowledge of these worlds, but a wider epistemology, the charts to a more interconnected way of living. This is a more tribal future that is both/and, rather than either/or, where scientific study and an innate desire for mystery have fused into a new experience of mystical reason.

Paint

These paintings are not only held together by their underlying narrative of future hope, they are also united through Litherland's exuberant delight in the possibilities of paint. Like the worlds he portrays that are pregnant with possibility, these paintings reveal paint as a vibrant medium, full of dynamic potential. As abstract marks coalesce into figurative forms before falling away again into luscious layers glinting with light, Litherland gives the viewer an invitation. Come and follow - the future awaits.