

## The Alternative Guide to the Universe

Hayward Gallery London 11 June to 26 August

From personal cosmologies to expanded theories of the cosmos, Hayward Gallery's 'The Alternative Guide to the Universe' presents a three-dimensional guidebook of artworks made outside the normal channels of the institution. Twenty-three artists, with work spanning roughly 50 years and every continent, demonstrate how their impulses lie at the outer reaches of imagination, through sculpture, drawings, painting, photography and architectural models.

Expecting an exhibition closely linked to science fiction and ideas of space and all its possibilities, as suggested by the title, I was surprised and somewhat confused at how the works fell into two distinct categories. The first could be identified by their literal alternative imaginings of the universe, through science, urban planning, mathematics, physics and science fiction. For example, Paul Laffoley's vivid, technically brilliant paintings and drawings such as *Thanaton III*, 1989, and *True Liberation*, 1963, communicate the artist's polymathy in quantum physics and parapsychology born of his own reported correspondence



with extraterrestrials. Yet the second grouping was a sociological, psychological and psychic conception of the universe in decidedly more human, quotidian and earth-bound terms. This was evidenced in self-styled Impressionist painter Lee Godie's public photobooth series from the 1960s onwards in which the artist posed in a plethora of guises, often decorating the prints by hand. The homeless Godie lived on the streets of Chicago and her images span many years, acting as a triumphant self-portrayal of the artist that at times belies her unfortunate circumstance.

For the Hayward Gallery to set a framework for exploring the universe on macro and micro levels is certainly an interesting concept. To describe an artist's work that sought to advance understanding and technology in these terms, given our minuscule understanding of the vastness of the universe, is logical, acceptable even. Yet to pathologise or pick apart personal histories is not quite so straightforward; there is an uncomfortable dichotomy at work that alternates between the patronising and the celebratory. Overtly naive but nonetheless exuberant and

utopian are US artist William Scott's paintings of a soulful, all-singing and all-dancing 'Praise Frisco'. In these, smiling African-American faces invite the viewer to San Francisco 20 years from now, where quality housing is available for all, and free time is spent praising the Lord and building happy communities. The benevolence envisioned by Scott is extended through AG Rizzoli's intricate and expertly configured drawings and architectural plans for YITTE (Yield to Total Elation), a future world where his friends and family are represented by buildings, and where classically inspired architecture is evoked to usher in a new age of enlightenment for all. In one particular work, Rizzoli, who lived with his mother all his life, documents his traumatised state at seeing, for the first time, the female anatomy laid bare in the form of a child playing naked in front of his house. He responds with a terrifying drawing titled *The Primal Glimse at Forty*, 1938, which bears the inscription 'Interpreting the reactions experienced during that incomparable moment', of a building that in its phallic extremism was both saddening and unsettlingly violent.

Presented in the first space is George Widener's intriguing *Magic Square 12-21-2012 (Conspiracy)*, a grid of 25 smaller canvases with stencilled dates from the year 2012. Here the days – whose orange numbers pop out from the carbon-blue background – in any line, vertical, horizontal and diagonal, add up to 65. This is also the total reached by combining the eponymous dates on which the Maya prophesy stated the world would end. Reminiscent of Jasper Johns's lithographs 0-9, 1960-63, 1963, or On Kawara's 'Today' series, 1966, there is a renewed sense of urgency and impetus to record, in Widener's work, compounded by the seemingly random circling of snatches of sentences in the background that invoke the conspiracy of the title. His work is the only one to transcend place within the exhibition, and various paintings and remarkable drawings – of futuristic cityscapes scrawled straight onto paper napkins and coded for alien intellects that give the impression of a feverish, almost impulsive production – appear dotted throughout, rubbing up against other works and gladly threatening the tight compartmentalising effect of the curatorial framework. Unlike The Museum of Everything, which lent many works to the show (and which has been invited to exhibit the work of Nek Chand in the Hayward Project Space concurrent with 'The Alternative Guide' and has been fuelling an interest in the work of untrained artists over the past four years in London and internationally – Features AM353), the Hayward Gallery steered away from the *wunderkammer* aesthetic. Instead,

white walls, even lighting and regulation panels denote the ultimate modernist white cube. In doing so, Hayward Gallery pays respect to these artists, many of whom it is hard to argue are really 'outsiders' any more, having been shown at the abovementioned MoE in the UK and internationally, and given prominence at the 2013 Venice Biennale's main exhibition 'The Encyclopedic Palace'. However, there is a flattening and institutionalising effect at work in the exhibition, which could otherwise have taken some inspiration from the liveliness and novelty of MoE's previous displays, which rightly acknowledged the artists' original contexts of production and dissemination. The sheer number of works shown, in many cases what seemed to be entire oeuvres, on the one hand demonstrated the veracity of the artists' production but, on the other, had a diluting effect due to their overwhelming presence.

Of the 23 artists shown there is a real gender imbalance, with only two female artists represented. Curator Ralph Rugoff, interviewed for the *Guardian* online, opines this fact as disappointing and says that 'maybe [this is because] women are more down to earth'. This is a poor excuse that hints at the wider levels of exclusion and sexism experienced and decried by, for example, women science-fiction writers, where the field sadly remains a 'boys club'.

Many works offer glimpses into the characters of the artists. Perhaps it is the element of autobiography that makes the works so appealing on a direct, humanistic, curious level; when we look at artworks, are we not trying to reconcile what we see and what we know (about the artist, period in history, context etc)? If so, the work gives us endless insight into the artists' stretches of unbounded imagination and the dedication they show to illustrating their ideas that teeters on the obsessive. Although the dynamism of the work loses some of its power through a conservative display, this does not entirely diminish the potency of many of the ideas of Utopia, exquisite skill, and a desire to share personal and universal narratives. As the Hayward Gallery promises, 'The Alternative Guide to the Universe' offers up fresh perspectives on the world we live in, and an opportunity to view works made on the periphery of the art world. To its credit it reminds us of the beauty in uncertainty and the subversive potential of an imagination that cherishes the irrational. ■

