A Barbican employee walks past a film installation by New York-based artist Peter Coffin at the Curve Gallery in the Barbican arts centre. Photograph: Carl De Souza/AFP/Getty Images
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Artist of the week 30: Peter Coffin

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Jessica Lack continues her series on major contemporary artists with a sighting of Peter Coffin whose eclectic work is inspired by UFOs, mythology, mysticism and Jung

Jessica Lack
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Last July, the inhabitants of Gdansk were visited by a UFO; it spun across the sky over the Baltic Seabefore disappearing into the dockyards where it came to rest like some glorious Spielbergian welcome wagon in the city's industrial heartland. Onlookers documented the event by photographing the flying saucer as it circled the Gulf of Gdansk on their mobile phones and digital cameras. But the resulting images were as grainy and blurred as those suspicious smears and black marks on photographs of UFO sightings since the early 1900s.

The project, conceived by the conceptual artist Peter Coffin, was inspired by Carl Jung's theory that UFO sightings increase during times of extreme social unrest. Coffin's interest in such phenomena is born out of his fascination for and scepticism over Jung's idea that the UFO becomes a uniting symbol in the collective consciousness in these times.

The New York-based artist was born in 1972 and grew up in Berkeley, California, the centre of the hippy movement and a place of radical left-wing politics during the McCarthy era. The city embraced New Age ideas and practices, particularly the writings of the influential thinker and founder of analytical psychology, Jung. Coffin chooses to work with beliefs and practices he claims not to understand, creating conceptual artwork inspired by dreams and different mythologies, religions and philosophies.

From pasting postcards of rainbows into a psychedelic spiral to making trousers for trees, Coffin creates witty artworks in response to our knowledge and interpretation of the world.

However, it's his ongoing series, Aura Portraits, that perhaps best encapsulates his practice. Playing on telepathy and the idea that a photograph can steal your soul, the artist used a specially adapted camera to photograph his subjects. The resulting images emerged as bleached white ovals surrounded by a watery haze of colour, as ghostly as phosphorescence and as intangible as the subjects Coffin sets out to uncover.

Why we like him? For Untitled (Greenhouse), 2002. Coffin invited musicians, DJs and sound artists to play in a greenhouse in order to investigate the beneficial effects of music on plants. The resulting CD, Music for Plants, features 40 artists including Ara Peterson, Christian Marclay, Dearraindrop and Mice Parade

His ultimate chat-up line: "At parties people often ask, 'What are you working on?' Sometimes I say, 'Psychic sculpture.' They

might ask, 'What is that?' And I'll say, 'It will come to you.'"

Where can I see him? Peter Coffin can be seen at The Curve Gallery, Barbican until 10 May. He is also exhibiting in Altermodern at Tate Britain until April 26

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