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LA Exhibition: Identities From Outer Space

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Thursday, July 24, 1997

Contact Lenses

'Are We Touched' examines images and identities that come from elsewhere.

By ZAN DUBIN, Times Staff Writer

HUNTINGTON BEACH--Yogi and Barnacle Bill won't be dropping by, but Marty the Man From Mars will.

Likewise, although NASA's Alpha Proton X-ray Spectrometer is analyzing subatomic particles on Mars, sensitive detection devices will be on the lookout for signs of life as we might not know it right here on the third gaseous ball from the sun.

Indeed, nobody'll need a Titan booster to locate the array of gallactica in "Are We Touched: Identities From Outer Space," an ambitious exhibition opening Sunday at the Huntington Beach Art Center.

From humanoid pods to glowing starships to abduction accounts, the timely show's artworks, artifacts and photographs reveal what formally trained and self-taught artists, visionaries, inventors and others have been thinking about saucerama, even as the land rover Sojourner transmits its rocky shots.

"I'm interested in how certain ideas, like the UFO phenomenon, cross various borders," said the show's curator, Tyler Stallings, "and how they are manifest through creative energy, whether it's [that of] a visionary artist or a fine artist or a motel designer."

The first single exhibition to fill all three galleries at the 2-year-old center, "Are We Touched" intentionally coincides with the Independence Day Mars landing, said Stallings, the venue's programming director. He also had in mind the recent 50th anniversary of the alleged UFO crash near Roswell, N.M., when he began scouring galleries, artists' studios and Web sites a year ago for examples of high and low art.

"The show also came out of my interest as an artist," Stallings said in a recent interview at the center. "I'd been making a series of customized astronaut suits."

* * * The 80-piece exhibit contains such artifacts of popular culture as Marty the Man From Mars (a Spock-eared, cutout face mask from a '50s Wheaties box) and a photo of Arizona's aptly named Space Age Lodge.

Pamphlets on display explain beliefs of UFO groups, such as El Cajon's Unarius Academy of Science, which claims that Atlantis will resurface in 2001 as a landing pad for 33 spacecraft, each carrying 1,000 higher life forms. And 35 minutes of taped news footage recounts the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, from the moment the UFO-believing cult members' bodies were discovered earlier this year to a "60 Minutes" interview with the relatives.

>From the contemporary-art world, via established Southland galleries, comes an eerily futuristic spaceship by Jason Rogenes, a pearlescent, brain-like pod by Eric Johnson and a heavy-duty space dress created by Jacqueline Dreager, whose father designed the Martians' distinctive one-eyed spaceships for the 1953 movie "The War of the Worlds."

New York graphic artist David Huggins, who asserts that he's had sex with numerous pointy-chinned alien women and fathered their almond-eyed alien babies, supplies the figurative canvases he painted to document the encounters initiated by an "insect being," he said by phone recently.

"The insect being, which resembles a praying mantis, would bring [alien] women to my apartment, and we'd have intercourse," Huggins, 53, said from his desk at Merryll Lynch & Co. "He put me in a paralyzed state, and I'd lay in my bed not being able to move. Then the woman would melt me, I'd reach my climax, and, well, then they would get up and leave."

Huggins asked to see his offspring when one of the alien women informed him on a subsequent trip of their existence. "I laid on my bed," he said, "and passed out, and the next thing I know is that I'm there, wherever they are, with the babies."

* * * Not all "Are We Touched" participants believe in E.T.s with such an "unsettling sense of conviction," as a New York Times critic wrote of a group show that included Huggins' work. Some don't believe at all, and Stallings isn't out to pose the question.

Rather, his interest lies in the link between what he sees as ufology's quest for spiritual transcendence and art's transformative capacity to open new vistas.

"UFOs, because of their unknown origin, act as these popular ambiguous objects, upon which to project ideas, that can open us up to higher levels of consciousness," Stallings said. A work of art, "unknowable" in the sense that it may have many different or ambiguous interpretations, "can remind us to continue to look at the unknowable and to search for the meaning of life."

Psychologist Carl Jung linked visual imagery, ufology and a spiritual search, Stallings added, in theorizing that the archetypal flying saucer shape represents a psychic need for wholeness and order. "Weltering confusion," Jung wrote in 1958, "is held together by the protective circle."

An obsessive need drove artist Eric Johnson to build a 10-foot-diameter flying saucer in his Laguna Beach backyard, although, unlike Huggins, he doesn't know whether that need was artistically, psychologically or otherworldly inspired.

"I'm not one of those people who think they've been abducted," said Johnson, 48, "but it's still hard for me to figure what's out there and

what's not."

* * * Conversely, the UC Irvine alum, who now lives in Santa Monica, is sure that some who consider themselves eyewitnesses to extraordinary events have been misled. Years ago, Johnson said in an interview at his studio, he loaded his gleaming white UFO (now owned by a sci-fi shop) onto a UCI truck and drove north on the San Diego Freeway for fun.

"You'd be surprised how many people carry cameras with them," he said. "We could see the flashes. And I'm sure they told their friends, 'Flying saucers do exist! I'll tell you why.' "

Stallings has divided the show into three categories and put Johnson's work in "Between," for artists who have had some sort of alien or paranormal experience but can't define it. Also in that group are Davis & Davis, Van Nuys collaborators whose detection devices will sound an alarm should UFOs fly over the center.

The category "Distance," whose members are intrigued but don't believe, includes Perry Vasquez and Randall Evans, who have collaborated for years under the name Apollo 13. Their darkly humorous "Plan 9 From Aztlan" uses "aliens" as a synonym for illegal immigrants.

The piece looks like a poster for a cheesy '50s sci-fi film, when spacemen were often viewed as scary invaders, Vasquez said by phone from his San Diego studio. It was done "a couple years ago, when lots of Chicano artists were saying, 'Wow, illegal immigrants are being called aliens, and it's like the paranoia of the '50s, redux.' "

Those in the show's "Immersion" category are true believers, making works that are both art and artifact, Stallings said. Huggins' paintings qualify, the curator said, as do Ionel Talpazan's drawings, which are "aesthetically beautiful but also [are] diagrams of the UFOs" in which he was abducted.

Sound crazy? Stallings knows some visitors will think so, which he finds ironic.

"Artists are supposed to be pursuing crazy things, so to speak, yet when they do, it's often unacceptable."

BE THERE

"Are We Touched: Identities From Outer Space," opens Sunday at the Huntington Beach Art Center, 538 Main St. Gallery hours: Tue. and Wed., noon-6 p.m.; Thur.-Sat., noon-8 p.m.; Sun., noon-4 p.m. Through Sept. 21. \$2-\$3. (714) 374-1650.

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