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Hypnotic memories of the future

Cathedral, 2015

The ominous and ambiguous relevance of technology and science are put under scrutiny in the work of painter Adam Dix.

Dix is a visual artist working in a mode trail-blazed mainly by writers like H.G. Wells, Philip K. Dick and Kurt Vonnegut, where science fiction is used effectively to highlight prescient issues affecting our time.

The visual language of communications technology, consumer trends and obsessions—more than a nod to Apple mania is evoked by religious and secular gatherings—are conflated with the iconography of 1950s and '60s science fiction, giving the work a strangely nostalgic feel.

In a world where digital media, augmented reality and artificial intelligence are all on the cusp of a leap forward, it's unlikely that he will run out of pressing subject matter.

Dix studied a BA (Hons) in Graphics and Illustration in 1990 at Middlesex Polytechnic and in 2009 an MA in Fine Art at Wimbledon College of Art.

He lives and works in London and recently undertook a residency at the Griffin Gallery, where he reflected on process and painterly quality in his practice.

My aim whilst a resident at Griffin was to further the already inherent layering process within the work and extend its economic language by creating works that had an optical depth and visual 'pull and push' between figurative and abstract forms within the painting, through shallow layering of paint. - Adam Dix, 2017

Dix's practice is deceptively benign on first glance; the subtle paint washes, nostalgic imagery and muted, well-handled colour make seductive viewing. But there is a lingering sense of being caught among forces too great to control. Vaguely utopian, hypnotic memories of the future.

How do you define the body?

The figure within my work is used as a visual and narrative contrast to the objects of technology depicted: the organic and the synthesised.

It is as if the people have an over familiar sense of commitment to these sterile forms, a necessary relationship of connection.

Costume and characters are important to my work, emphasising the ritualistic and ceremonial qualities. There is an ambiguous hierarchy and sense of history, a play of past and present, with 'dress'

pointing to a time when technology was seen in futuristic terms rather than personal commodity. I see the figures as organic nodes relaying information via the machine, self-perpetuating and succumbing to their innate need to connect.

The shamanic character role within the narrative is a key character found in traditional forms of folkloric custom and spiritualism that would be there to mediate between the audience and the spirit world.

Here in my work I have made the shaman a composite of receptor and conduit. Adorned with a crown of satellitedish-type spheres, he is engaged with other characters. Sometimes with evangelical presence he lays hands upon the subjects to complete the circuit of communication.

The shaman in my work represents an individual that aligns himself with the devices of connectivity. Deciphering and acting as a conduit, his true identity is a masked screen; he is a custodian of communication who is there to symbolise the link between the individual and an all-encapsulating system of communication.





Procession, 2010

In what way do you feel you've pushed your conception and application of the body?

My figures' appearance and their performance within the paintings are exaggerated by appropriating the ritualistic and ceremonial traits and imagery often found in the genres of science fiction, national pageantry, folklore and religion. Referring to these constructed belief systems I see as fostering a group reaction, where comparisons between past and present systems of connectivity can be initiated.

Science fiction as a genre discusses the social psyche in relation to the wonders of technology. This is exemplified in my opinion through the literature, pulp fiction and film from mid-twentieth century onwards, and it is here that I refer to visually and metaphorically with regard to the reference imagery.

What potential do you see in bodies?

By appropriating sci-fi as a contemporary folklore—not unlike other areas that have ceremonial narratives that heavily rely on choreographed worship—the subjects' responses within my paintings are

exaggerated in their relationship to these contemporary icons of infotainment, conveying a sense of compliance.

As I mentioned before, my characters are human nodes completing the circuit so the synthesised current can continue. This is emphasised by compositionally placing the figures in a circle to show a sense of a continual flow; also, placing the figures within the paintings so they turn away from the audience implies that the viewers themselves are privy to something familiar that could be beneficial, encouraging them to take part.

Are you conscious of your own body in the same way as in your work?

Yes, in a way. I am conscious, like most people; I have a phone that I peck away at more than necessary, distracted by emails, social media platforms and other forms of infotainment, via a black screen that reflects my face and the real world around me.

What do you see as the greatest challenge to the body?

In my paintings there is a

quasi-religious appropriation with regard to the depicted landscape of figure and technology. I see the characters aligning themselves to these devices in a cult-like state of reverence, aware that these objects may have qualities that extend their immediate communication beyond themselves. The fiction being a sci-fi spirituality, where the user of this technology appropriates the device as an amulet or icon.

In other words using the vehicle of science fiction and faith to discuss our relationship to contemporary communication as an extension to the human body, the spirit and the soul.

Why and when did you choose the body as a medium for your work?

I have always worked with the figure. The figure is key compositionally within my work. I use it as a metaphorical platform, depicting narratively the figure's reaction and role through stance and dress, as a contrast to his or her surrounding environment within the painting. Through the mixing of genres there is an unsettling familiarity.

With physically opposing symbolic time frames, the figure can be used

to emphasise this, highlighting similarities between different eras and genres. I use this to direct and challenge the viewer's attention within the narrative of my paintings.

Whose work regarding the physical human body do you admire?

My interests in figurative painting tend to align with those artists who describe the figure in an economic way such as Honoré Daumier, Luc Tuymans, Jockum Nordström, Mamma Andersson, Marcel Dzama and Neo Rauch, to name a few. I am more interested in the figure as a receptacle to carry a narrative, rather than being representational.

Describe your technique?

My painting technique evolved from my keen interest in old print ephemera and the process of lithography. I wanted to originally reference a period in history where there had been a spike in the advance of communications, which would subsequently refer to the devices we use today. By looking at printed material of the 1950s onwards, such as National Geographic, pulp fiction, etc. I decided that the

qualities of this form of media could be incorporated sublimely as a directional tool within the painting. My concern was not to pastiche the printed image, but refer to its character translating the qualities that were inherent, such as ink saturation, mis-registration of colour blocks, strong contrast between light and dark and soft photographic imagery.

The paintings are subsequently made by methodically layering thin layers of oil colour glazes, repeating the process from the lightest tone to the darkest tone.

It is a watercolour process but done in oil and the majority of my paintings are painted on the flat rather than upright. Some works can have up to 30 glazes.

Where do you find inspiration?

Inspiration for my works can come from many places. My preference is to find references in flea markets, thrift stores and bookshops rather than the Internet, ranging from contemporary science and technology journals, science fiction novels and films, printed ephemera, old postcards and photos, folklore

and religious ephemera, as well as visiting independent local museum archives and county festivals.

Do you see the body as a place of permanence or change?

It's a vessel or conduit, with changing function.

If you could change one thing about how humans are constructed what would it be?

Fallibility is part of being human, so for that reason I see no reason to change.

With developments like Virtual Reality (VR) changing the way we view our bodies, do you think this will affect your work?

Virtual reality is an area that I am already starting to address within my work. I am concerned by the extension of the concept of an artificial world where the individual's senses are totally enveloped, interacting within that space while physically placed in the real world, as if straddling both, and how this may interrupt or desensitise.