

This exhibition began with a playful engagement with science fiction (SF) in Artex's collection. This curiosity grew exponentially as I peeled back the layers of the collection and reflected on the sometimes murky territory between SF and "speculative fiction." *SPECULATIONS* seeks to engage with this murkiness and unpack the finer details that make the genre of speculative fiction attractive to contemporary visual artists who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC). As the differences and similarities between the two areas continue to be explored, one thing is clear: speculation in contemporary art has become very, very sexy over time. The exhibition draws inspiration from the wealth of literature and popular media in the genre. Drawing from Daniel D. Shade's definition of the term, *SPECULATIONS* presents the work of artists in Artex's collection that engage with a simple question: what if? What if colonization and trans-Atlantic slavery had never occurred? What if victims of horrific violence came back to haunt us? What if humans make it another 3000 years?

Following Shade's understanding of the genre, *SPECULATIONS* includes works by artists exploring the Historical past, alternative histories, post-Apocalypse or post-Holocaust, fantasy, unrecorded and contradictory histories, hauntings, warped laws of nature (time travel, invisibility, superpowers, etc.), as well as stories that take place in worlds that have never existed or are not yet known and, of course, the future and science fiction.² *SPECULATIONS* also takes into account works falling under the umbrella of "visionary fiction." Visionary fiction, as termed by the editors of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements* (2015), marks the difference between socially engaged speculative fiction and more mainstream SF which often reproduces portrayals of dominant power structures.³ More specifically, the exhibition deals with the various ways in which BIPOC visual artists consider their position in the world and in society through speculative means. Much in the way that artists like Kara Walker and Kent Monkman employ strategies of allegory and satire in their work to open discussions on devastating topics, the artists presented in *SPECULATIONS* carve out space and time for those of us existing on the margins to flirt with alternate ways of being in the world. Their work allows for crucial paradigm shifts to occur in viewers' minds.

The exhibition seeks to engage in a reflection around the visual culture of speculative fiction in Artex's collection and considers how contemporary BIPOC visual artists have mobilized it. They have shown that speculation is a tool to achieve far more than simple fabulation or a mere aesthetic choice. Many authors and scholars have affirmed that not only is speculation a valid and important means to reflect on socio-political realities, but that "... all organizing is science fiction. Trying to create a world that we've never experienced and never seen is a science-fictional activity."⁴ Similarly, conceiving of a past which never was or using speculation to articulate otherwise ineffable truths is a form of resistance of importance which cannot be overstated. As illustrated by Camille Turner's ongoing *Afronautic Research Lab* series, artists working within Afrofuturism, Indigenous futurism, Chicanxfuturism, Arabfuturism/Gulf futurism, Asiafuturism, supernatural fantasy, Ethno-gothicism, hauntings, revisionist histories, etc., engage directly with processes of collective healing, survival and ongoing resistance. *SPECULATIONS* aims to foreground these concerns and engage meaningfully with the work of artists who use their practice for this very purpose.

The process of collective truth-saying and world-making is rendered explicit through the use of manifestos. These manifestos, printed in very large scale and draping the walls of the exhibition space, point to a certain desire among BIPOC artists to formalize their engagement with futurism and, by extension, with speculation. There seems to be a desire for clarity in this rapidly evolving area of artistic production. Kapwani Kiwanga's discussion on her work with galactic anthropology in the *Deep Space Scrolls* series and Martine Syms' *Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* both warn us of the dangers of simplistic and "slipperily defined" views of Afrofuturisms.⁵ Writer Eva Díaz notes that these limited views tend to overlook crucial sociopolitical issues like "imperialism, capitalism, racism and male domination [...] [which will] haunt any future human culture in outer space" unless effectively eradicated.⁶ Similarly, Sulaïman Majali, in *Towards a possible manifesto; proposing Arabfuturism/s (Conversation A)* underlines how futuristic engagements can be a generative tool for dealing with the complex realities of living in, or after collective catastrophes.

These manifestos drive home the reality that for many communities who fall outside of the white/Christian/male/heterosexual/cisgender frame, the apocalypse is an ongoing and ever-present calamity.⁷ Ongoing catastrophes encompass everything from continued settler colonialism in a place like Tio'Tia: Ke (Montreal) to trans-Atlantic slavery to the persistent violent murders of Black trans women and women of colour. Survival depends upon an ability to continually reimagine and reinvent what it means to exist in contemporary society.

Like the manifestos, many of the documents in the exhibition open the door for viewers to sit with the harsh realities faced by various communities. These documents hold space to simultaneously consider the futures lost through the aforementioned catastrophes as well as those which could become reality in time. Texts from *Descendants of Freedom: A Futuristic Queer Hip Hop Odyssey* and *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* underline the overlap between trans and queer everyday experiences and the ways in which “organizing is [indeed] science-fictional.”⁸ Other documents present some of the ways that trans and queer artists grapple with what it means to move through spaces and societies wherein they are deemed always already “other.” Syrus Marcus Ware’s retrospective look at the contemporary moment through future storytelling and Martine Syms’ *Borrowed Lady* are but two examples of speculative strategies and fabricated scenarios used to question common gender norms.

Speculative fiction is often primarily understood as a musing about the future, however, artists like Sonny Assu, Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen and Toyin Ojih Odutola propose crucial reframings of the historical past. Through his interventions on popular Canadian artworks, Sonny Assu calls upon familiar forms and images to tease out the complexities of Native and Canadian art histories. Collapsing these two visual references with a humorous Indigenous futurist twist in his exhibition, *We Come to Witness: Sonny Assu in Dialogue with Emily Carr*, Assu underlines the ways in which ongoing settler colonialism on this land attempts to undercut Indigenous futures.⁹ In her research-based practice Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen challenges popular national narratives around utopian politics and multiculturalism. Her work “Space Fiction and the Archives” collapses fact and fiction, underscoring the contradictory nature of Canadian discourse around reconciliation, immigration and belonging.¹⁰ Through the series *The Firmament* and *A Matter of Fact*, Toyin Ojih Odutola, for her part, produces large scale drawings illustrating fleeting moments in the lives of two fictional old-line royal Nigerian families, united through the marriage of their sons. Through this pictorial storytelling, Ojih Odutola presents the viewers with her speculations about what might have been if the disaster of colonization on the African continent had never occurred. *La Fantaisie Ibeji* speaks to dualities, expanding on D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem’s ongoing performative practice. Here, she performs alongside footage of Akire Mothers shrine painters mirroring their movements, entering in a “ghostly, cross-temporal gesture,” at times overlapping, connecting across time and space. Through *La Fantaisie Ibeji*, Duyst-Akpem further abstracts these crossovers with performance footage from *Wan Chuku and the Mystical Yam Farm* and *Alter-Destiny 888*, underlining through ritual the complexities of gender, sexuality, and re-presentation. In ways that are sometimes subtle, other times explicit, these artists engage in much needed exercises of world-building. By probing the limits of what is known and what might have been, speculative art contests accepted social norms and critiques the status quo.

In the powerful words of Walidah Imarisha, “... for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us.”¹¹ Speculation fosters a rekindling of BIPOC artists’ relationships with their ancestors to honour the pain and power woven into complex histories and beautiful cultural traditions, to bring forth critical reflections towards a better tomorrow.

Curator: Joana Joachim

Notes:

1. Jackson, Sandra and Julie Moody-Freeman “The genre of science fiction and the black imagination” *African Identities* vol. 7 no. 2 (May 2009, 127).
2. Ibid.
3. Imarisha, Walidah, adrienne m. brown, and Sheree R. Thomas. *Octavia’s brood: science fiction stories from social justice movements*. (2015, 4).
4. Sands, D. “All Organizing is Science Fiction: An interview with adrienne maree brown” *Fifth Estate* No. 394, Summer 2015. <http://news.infoshop.org/culture/all-organizing-is-science-fiction-an-interview-with-adrienne-maree-brown/>. Maynard, Robyn. “Reading Black Resistance Through Afrofuturism: Notes on Post-Apocalyptic Blackness and Black Rebel Cyborgs in Canada” *Topia* 39 (2018, 34).
5. Díaz, Eva. “Is Space the Place?” *Texte Zur Kunst* Vol. 28 (September 2018). Steingo, Gavin. “Kapwani Kiwanga’s Alien Speculations” *Images re-vues: Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l’art* Vol. 14 Extraterrestre (2017, para. 41).
6. Díaz. (September 2018).
7. Maynard. (2018) p. 30-31. Nixon, Lindsay. “Visual Cultures of Indigenous Futurisms” *GUTS* No. 6: Futures (May 2016).
8. Munkatchy, Jamie. “Descendents of Freedom: A Futuristic Queer Hip Hop Odyssey” *BOOKMOBILE Project Collection 2003*. Brooklyn: New York, 2002. Adsit, Lexi et. al. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.
9. Willard, Tania. *We Come To Witness*. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2016.
10. Park, Liz. *Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen: Space Fiction and The Archives*. (November 2012, 39).
11. Imarisha. (2015, 4).

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