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‘Mundos Alternos,’ Where Other Worlds Come to Life

Science fiction illuminates reality by imagining the unreal in a mind-bending show at the Queens Museum.



Chico MacMurtrie’s “Organic Arches (Time Traveler),” 2014/2017, at the Queens Museum. Credit Credit Chico MacMurtrie and Amorphic Robot Works; Hai Zhang

By Will Heinrich

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The cast of the original “Star Trek” television series is the classic example of science fiction’s myopia. A mostly male, mostly white crew on an interstellar exploration vessel seems to assume that American society as it was in the 1960s could go on forever. But as an insight into the time that produced it, the vision was pretty sharp — and the same is true of the Queens Museum’s sprawling, consistently mind-bending “Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas.”

A somewhat remixed version of an exhibition originally presented as part of the transcultural initiative Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, the

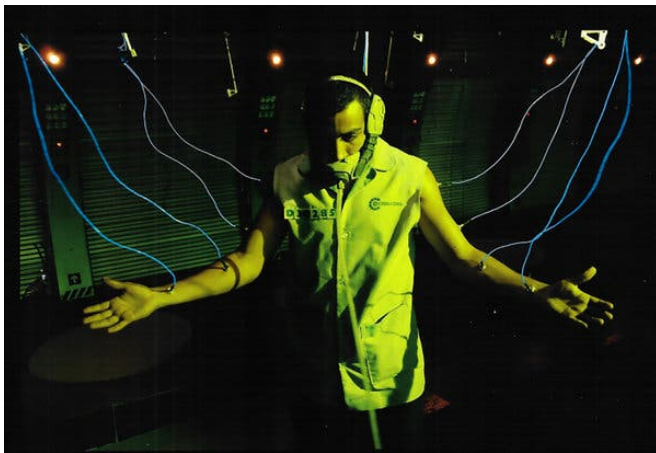
show is an impressively broad sample of styles and sensibilities from every corner of the United States and Latin America. And its focus on science fiction amplifies and exemplifies the way art can illuminate reality by imagining the unreal.

Space travel is especially incisive for Adál (Adal Maldonado), one of the standout artists. In his black and white video “La Coconauts Interrogation,” the artist’s native Puerto Rico has literally sunk and disappeared under the weight of the mainland’s domination. It’s a heavy-handed metaphor, but that’s what makes it so effective: On the one hand, it’s an expressionist *cri de coeur* about what really has happened, and continues to happen, to the island under United States control. On the other hand, because it’s obviously a fantasy calling for suspension of disbelief, its subtler points catch you unaware and cut more deeply. An actor playing a survivor of the disappearance stares

into the camera, his thoughts subtitled but his mouth unmoving: In the United States, his voice just doesn't register.



“La Coconauts Interrogation” (2017) by Adál (Adal Maldonado); video with sound. Credit Adál Maldonado; Hai Zhang



Alex Rivera's “Sleep Dealer,” a single-channel video from 2008. Credit Alex Rivera and Futuro Films

Alex Rivera's 2008 feature film, “Sleep Dealer,” is a migrant-worker “Blade Runner” in which people in Mexico operate robots in the United States by remote control. Glexis Novoa draws dreamy cities on marble panels with graphite, also adorning the museum's walls with site-specific doodles worth

looking out for, and Chico MacMurtrie's “Organic Arches (Time Traveler),” a row of pneumatic white forms evoking guts, bones and modernist architecture, skips over utopia and dystopia alike to get right into the gritty, morally confusing weirdness that confronts us as technology invades the human body.

Beatriz Cortez's “The Cosmos (Spaceship),” a sleek, mysterious hut with a domed roof, covered in mirrors, suggests a time machine from some distant epoch when humankind will have overcome problems we're not yet even aware of. Inside, though, the hut is untreated wood, and a recorded voice plays — it belongs to [Ishi, the last surviving member](#) of California's Yahi Indians, speaking the language that would die with him in 1916.

It's a jarring reminder of how thoroughly culture conditions our picture of the world. Here in New York, we're imagining the future and hoping to ward off apocalypse; a century ago in California, Ishi's people had already had theirs. In a way, the organization

of the exhibition's bilingual signage has a similar effect. Spanish-language labels, mounted at full size alongside the English ones, remind an Anglophone reader again and again that he's only getting half the picture.

Beatriz Cortez's "The Cosmos (Spaceship)," from 2015; wood, acrylic mirror and found sound installation. Credit Beatriz Cortez and Commonwealth and Council; Hai Zhang



Rigo 23's "Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program," 2009-present (ongoing), whose central object is a wooden spaceship about the size of a canoe. Credit Rigo 23; Hai Zhang



The show's other great standout, all exuberance and determination to Adál's melancholy resignation, is "Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program," by the [Portuguese-born artist Rigo 23](#). The central object, made in collaboration with artists and artisans in Chiapas, Mexico, is a wooden spaceship about the size of a canoe. But it's surrounded by murals, and reached by a hallway lined with placards, filled with the bold palette and distinctive motifs of the 25-year-old indigenous Zapatista movement: ears of corn for Mexico's ancient staple, snails for self-determination, world-devouring dragons to represent the rapacity of unchecked capitalism, defiant faces in black balaclavas, and mottos like "Queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos." ("We want a world where many worlds fit.")

Individual artists are credited, but only with first names. A few of the paintings, particularly those that depict small agricultural communes hurtling through space, are genuinely unforgettable, while most are merely workmanlike. All of them are agitprop. But all of it was made by people who, for good or ill, have consciously upended the way their society is organized, and that comes through. The work's earnestly imagined evangelism is a powerful demonstration of the exhilarating fact that, as another Zapatista motto puts it, "Otro mundo es posible": Another world is possible.