

Art In Review: *A Lost Future* maps intersections of time, space, and cultures at the Rubin Museum, New York City

“Today we live in a space of friends” – Otolith III (film), Otolith Group, 2009

As an American child of the 1980's, it's hard to overstate the impact of *E.T.*, Stephen Spielberg's beloved sci-fi classic. The film narrates a strange and tender friendship between a young boy and a wide-eyed, non-scary alien stranded on Earth. While *E.T.* was not the first sci-fi film to speculate on alien encounters, it was different from other high-budget intergalactic romps of its era. Unlike prevailing narratives of invasion, conquest and destruction, *E.T.*'s theme was one of friendship and connection; its story was infused with a sense of wonder, casting the inter-species encounter as one of mutual awe and admiration rather than of fear and mistrust.

Rumor has it that the script for *E.T.* was not based, as Spielberg has claimed, on an imaginary friend from his childhood, but on an early script written by celebrated Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray titled *The Alien*. Ray's script was never produced, but it made the rounds in Hollywood during the 1970's. Those who have compared Ray's script with Spielberg's *E.T.* insist that too many similarities exist for there not to have been influence. The script, and the sinister mythology of appropriation surrounding it, is featured in work by three artists included in the exhibition *A Lost Future*, currently on view at the Rubin Museum in New York.

Since opening in 2004, the Rubin Museum has showcased historic and contemporary works from the Himalayan and nearby regions. *A Lost Future* is part of the Rubin's current programming theme “The Future is Fluid,” which brings together art practices engaged with concepts of time, history, and speculative futures. *A Lost Future* features the work of Shezad Dawood, the Otolith Group, and Matti Braun. With Bengali culture and history serving as a common thread among the works, each artist takes up questions of modernity, virtual reality, and cross-cultural encounters. Each artist has been influenced by sci-fi, and Ray's script for *The Alien* makes appearances throughout the exhibition as a sort of phantom text for an imagined ‘lost future.’

Shezad Dawood's contributions to the show include paintings, sculptures, and an interactive virtual reality piece. Long concerned with inter-textual systems of image, language, site, and narrative, Dawood uses both physical and virtual layering to explore intersections of time and space; in this exhibition, the mythological history of the Himalayan hill station Kalimpong serves as site and subject for Dawood's futuristic explorations. Of note in the exhibition are his assemblage-style paintings made from brightly colored vintage Indian textiles stitched onto canvas and over-printed with silkscreened fragments of Kalimpong and the West Bengal landscape. Mapping echoes of an imagined future onto relics of the deep past, Dawood's works create a feeling of past and future colliding and occupying shared points in time and space.

The **Otolith Group**, a London-based collective founded and curated by Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, create film, video, and multimedia works that draw on modes such as storytelling and historical archive. Included in their works for *A Lost Future* is the Group's 2009 film *Otolith III*, based on Ray's *Alien* script. A “premake” of sorts, the haunting film imagines Ray's script through an “alternative trajectory”, in which the characters contemplate their own construction as filmic images, as if from the inside out.

Matti Braun uses objects and craft techniques to explore the dynamics of cultural intersections, and his work provides the most compelling response to the exhibition's themes of futurity and ‘alien’ encounters. Braun's works incorporate regionally specific textile traditions such as Balinese-style batik dyeing and Gujarati *Patola*. In contrast, his subject matter takes up issues of modernity and cross-cultural encounters. His research-based practice includes a long-standing engagement with Satyajit Ray's science fiction work.

A Lost Future features three distinct subsets of Braun's oeuvre: a set of dyed silk monochromes and geometric compositions created with an extremely precise batik method; a series of marbled monochrome slabs made of cast concrete; and a forthcoming installation that will transform the Rubin's central gallery into an indoor lake. A centerpiece of the exhibition, Braun's lake installation is based on the opening scene of Satyajit Ray's script for *The Alien*. Ray's scene pictures a shimmering lotus pond into which has fallen an alien spaceship, its golden antenna rising above the surface. In Braun's interpretation, a gallery is converted into a shallow pool of dark, reflective water dotted with sections of wooden logs that rise above the surface like lily pads. Intrepid visitors are invited to use the wooden pads to traverse the mirror-like surface.

Each of Braun's works represents a calibrated blending of contrasting cultural references. This is most poignantly explored in his monochromatic batik works, which on first glance appear to be simple geometric abstractions. Two works feature vertical rectangles of deep dyed black, surrounded by a border of narrow black-on-white or black-on-black triangles. The black-on-black compositions conjure the mystical black monochromes of American Minimalist painter Ad Reinhardt. Another vertical composition is made up of tiny, evenly spaced parallel lines, and is reminiscent of Agnes Martin's reductive grid compositions. In Braun's larger silk monochromes, sensuous veils of dye layer to produce color fields whose exact hues are difficult to perceive and seem to fluctuate. The large monochrome *Untitled 2017* delivers a fever pitch of hot pink color, shifting to a warmer red-pink in the corners; a connection to Mark Rothko's effusive color fields is hard to resist.

The geometric simplicity and precise execution of Braun's silk works convey a kinship with Euro-American Modernism and Minimalism. But this connection contrasts sharply with the centuries-old Asian batik process employed to create the works. It's strange to see the delicate batik-dyeing process used to create such reductive, severe images; here, the exotic and decorative qualities typically associated with South Asian batik textiles are conspicuously absent. At the same time, the severity of the works' minimal geometry is tempered and softened by the fine silk surface and delicate dyes used to create it.

The Minimalist painters famously tried to empty their works of external references, but Braun has loaded his constructions with allusions to culture, craft, and context. In this seemingly intentional misinterpretation of Western and Eastern traditions, Braun has created new hybrid objects that are nonetheless poetic and beautiful. His objects neither idealize nor over-simplify cross-cultural encounter; instead, a case is made for a certain non-linear crosspollination of dissimilar traditions. Braun's works assert their own internal complexity; their greatest strength is their refusal to resolve into anything familiar or easily understood.

I haven't had the heart to re-watch *E.T.* since learning of Ray's original script. I'm worried that the optimistic, open-hearted qualities that first made me fall in love with the film will be tainted by my new knowledge of the sinister co-option of the film's script by greedy Hollywood moguls. But if there is a take-home message in *A Lost Future*, it is that of the complexity and untidiness of objects and the stories they tell, sci-fi films included. In each artist's work, complexity and contradiction is nurtured rather than flattened out. And as with the best of our imagined alien encounters, difference is negotiated endlessly and without conclusion, but with engagement and care.



MATTI BRAUN, *S.R.*, 2003-2005

Foil, water, tree discs

(An early version of Braun's *Alien* lake installation at Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz)

Photo © Stefan Altenburger



MATTI BRAUN, *Untitled 2017*, 2017; *Atol 9*, 2008; *Atol 19*

Each work silk, dye, and powder-coated aluminum



SHEZAD DAWOOD, *House 1*, 2017

Acrylic, screenprint and textile on canvas