Mundos Alternos – Praising Alterity Through Science Fiction
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"MORE than mere escapism, science fiction can prompt us to recognize and rethink the status quo by depicting an alternative world, be it a parallel universe, distant future, or revised past." Catherine Ramirez’s words set the stage for Mundos Alternos, Art and Science Fiction in the Americas, an eclectic exhibition that features Latin American and Latino contemporary artists who chose science fiction to imagine new realities, often starting from an exploration of the colonial past in order to envision a better future.

The exhibition, on display at UCR’s ARTSblock from September 16, 2017 to February 4, 2018, made up part of the Getty’s initiative, "Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA," which enlivened Southern California with over 70 exhibitions on Latin American and Latino art. Mundos Alternos is an ambitious 11,000-square foot project that gathers a wide range of objects including photographs, video installations, performances, costumes, sculptures, paintings, and drawings. It spans across three floors, and takes up the entire California Museum of Photography and the Barbara and Art Culver Center for the Arts. The three curators, Robb Hernández, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinska-Myers, used the Eaton Collection of Science Fiction & Fantasy at UC Riverside, one of the world’s richest collections of these genres, as a point of departure to look at the production of Latin American, Latino, and Chicano artists who use science fiction as a tool for self-determination.

Indeed, Latin Americans and Latinos have been developing practices of resistance to create a Mundo al Revés since Columbus set foot on the island of Hispaniola. Literally translatable as upside-down world, the Mundo al Revés is a place where the colonizer becomes powerless, and the subaltern reigns and self-represents. In Carnival, for example, social rules and everyday roles are inverted every year for a few days. The syncretic Cuban Santería and the Brazilian Candomblé fused African religions with Catholic imagery to
survive Catholicism’s rule; and the Indigenous miners in Potosí, Bolivia, worship the Tío, the god-devil who rules the bowels of the earth from inside the Cerro Rico (rich mountain) while painters commissioned by the colonial elites depicted the mountain as the Virgin Mary.

The curators of Mundos Alternos explain that they organized the exhibition around broad themes, or constellations: a curatorial strategy promoted by Mari Carmen Ramírez (though it was art critic Frederico Morais who first proposed it when in the first Mercosul Biennial in 1997 he organized the works around three encompassing themes, rather than by nationality). This curatorial model identifies “luminous points,” key examples that stand for the whole. In this way, the unrepresentable totality is grasped by way of singular works, which gain new meanings when put in dialogue with other luminous points that are part of the constellation.¹ In Mundos Alternos, some of the constellations appear disconnected, as if they belonged to different galaxies. It is up to the viewer to embark on a space trip and connect the points. The connection between the works and science fiction would also at times seem tenuous, were it not for Catherine S. Ramirez’s opening quote, which tethers all of them together in her encompassing definition of the genre.

Alien Skins makes up one of the constellations, where the trope of the alien unites several works in the exhibition. The short-lived Chicano collective based in Texas, MeChicano Alliance of Space Artisans, or MASA, embraced the alien as a symbol, and embraced science fiction as a language of liberation. Their name is a portmanteau of the words NASA and masa de maíz (corn dough), which served as the principal element of subsistence in pre-Columbian civilizations. In Amor Alien (2004), Laura Molina (b. 1957, Los Angeles, California) of MASA depicts a green-skinned alien goddess dozing in the arms of a human astronaut, a muscled white man wearing little more than an oxygen helmet. As curator Robb Hernández remarks in the richly illustrated catalog that accompanies the exhibition, the painting subverts the science fiction trope in which the discovery and control of the space, science, and technology is accomplished by “an agent from the First World — someone who is masculine, heterosexual, and white.”² In Molina’s painting, in fact, the alien’s passivity and submission is only surface deep, and the real alien is the space-colonizer, vulnerable in an extraterrestrial environment where he is unable to survive without his mask.

Fig. 3: Laura Molina, Amor Alien, 2004, Collection of the National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago. CCBY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)
In the United States, foreigners are called “aliens”: humans that belong to a foreign country, and therefore do not belong here. “Alien” is often used with negative connotations, indicating someone who is disturbing, distasteful, unfamiliar, and disruptive of the order, and who therefore needs to be eliminated. This follows from a legacy of colonialism, which expressed itself by denying the humanity of the other. For this reason, scholar Silvia Rivera Cuisicanqui argues that we should speak of anti-colonialism rather than post-colonialism, because the fight is not over.

In Debora Kuetzpal Vasquez (b. 1960, San Antonio, Texas)'s painting Citlali: Cortando Nopalitos y Hechando Tortillas en Outer Space (2015), space becomes the environment where heteronormativity is happily renounced. In her queer futurist painting, her Chicana superhero Citlali is cutting nopales (edible cactus) at the kitchen table, while her compañera (partner) heats tortillas on the comal (flat griddle) at the stove. In this lesbian domestic space, the partners are coequal and collaboration, hard work, and respect characterize their relationship. The lunar homemaking gladly does without patriarchy. Science fiction, thus, is used not just to question a contested colonial past and comment on a present where immigrants are labeled as dangerous, but also to envision a better, freer future where subjects can shape their lives with their own hands. MASA artists used outer space to point to the futility of geopolitical borders and the notion of citizenship, and created works that react to the official xenophobic discourses. As Luis Valderas (b. 1966, McAllen, Texas), founder of the project, argued: “In space, we are all alien.”3

The exhibition also explores themes of time travel and travel in the outer space, which make us aware of the fragility of concepts like the geopolitical borders. Artist Chico MacMurtrie (b. 1961, Deming, New Mexico) and his interdisciplinary collective Amorphic Robot Works/ARW criticize these borders and, with their art, propose to metaphorically suspend them. They built moving sculptures activated by air pressure, which create an impressive, choreographed, inflatable architecture. Inflatable Bodies: Organic Arches (2017) occupies the entire hall of the Culver Center for the Arts. When expanded, the installation resembles an arcade, or the rib cage of a whale or extinct prehistoric animal. The viewer must be careful when walking beneath this undulating architecture, because the ribs shrink and could catch her in a tight grip. The artist has produced other moving sculptures of this kind along the U.S.-Mexican border; a video of the performance Border Crosser is available in the gallery wherein a mechanical arch inflates over the wall, infringing the separation between the two countries, a bridge against a wall, to then retract in an endless provocation of love and hate.

Mundos Alternos also addresses the mutual fascination of North and South America, and the fantasies that derived from it. Transplanted (VW Brasilia) (2011) by Clarissa Tossin (b.1973, Porto Alegre, Brazil) presents the rubber shell of a Volkswagen Brasilia like a molted skin. Notably, Volkswagen manufactured the Brasilia entirely in Brazil for the local market starting in 1973. The work, one of the show’s highlights, points to the exploitation of rubber in the 19th century Amazon Rubber Boom, which contributed to the devastation of indigenous societies and the natural environment. It also alludes subtly to the failed experiment by Henry Ford, Fordlândia: a prefabricated town built in the heart of the Amazon rainforest meant to be inhabited by workers in order to facilitate the cultivation of rubber and boost the supply of materials to Ford Motor Company. Built in 1928, the city was abandoned a few years later.
Finally, the title mentions another city built from scratch: Brazil's new capital Brasília, built in 5 years and inaugurated in 1960 for the will of President Juscelino Kubitschek, who won election with his motto “fifty years of progress in five.” This modernist city's urban plan was designed for cars rather than pedestrians, and, following the utopian vision of its architect Oscar Niemeyer, everyone in it from ministers to labor workers would live in standardized apartments of equal footage, with equal services. Brasilia's vision was immediately frustrated by the marginalization of the lower classes in the slums rapidly forming at the outskirts of the city. Transplanted (VW Brasília) indeed looks like a deflated balloon, the blow-out of the capitalist dream of profit and Brazil's dream of modernity.

The works in the thrilling constellation of Indigenous Futurism reflect on how ancient indigenous knowledge points the way of the future. The work of Chilean-born Guillermo Bert (b.1959, Santiago, Chile), for instance, aims to recuperate indigenous knowledge and make it available to a broader public. He collaborated with Mapuche weavers to create textiles woven with traditional techniques where the central element is a QR code. By scanning with their...
smartphones, visitors access the Mapuche world through videos and oral histories uploaded to a website. "We have the same needs of a tree — We can’t live without our land" is, for example, the quote linked to The Visionary (2012). Bert played with the similarity of QR codes and the geometric patterns and iconography of indigenous textiles, and provided a door to indigenous stories of struggle, wisdom, and resistance.

The Los Angeles-based Rigo 23 (b. 1966, Madeira Island, Portugal) merges indigenous wisdom with science fiction to envision better futures. He collaborated with the Zapatista community in Chiapas, Mexico to create the labyrinthic installation Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program (2009-present).

In it, a narrow corridor opens up in a central room that hosts a corn-shaped spaceship. The walls are lined with embroidered paintings depicting members of the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) wearing iconic pasamontañas (balaclavas) and engaged in agricultural work, set against quotes of indigenous wisdom and messages of resistance, such as "La tierra no se compra y no se vende, se defiende" (land is not for sale, it is to be defended). These slogans are not utopic ideas; rather, they represent a philosophy that everyone should make her own: a collective effort in support of social justice and in protest against human-caused global warming. They represent a philosophy which demonstrates that indigenous peoples are not just ancestors and symbols of pride — rather, they lead the way to the only possible future of this world.

**Notes**

2. Exhibition Catalog, p.111
3. Ibid.