The Romance of the Moon
Science Fiction Invades Art

Sheldon Statewide 2015–16
In 1865, Jules Verne wrote *From the Earth to the Moon*, a novel in which the technological advancements of the late Victorian era are used to send humans to Earth’s closest neighbor. Just over a century later, the subject of lunar landing shifted from fantasy to reality as astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped foot on the moon’s surface in 1969. Over the last century and a half, scientific and popular fascination with the moon has spurred numerous missions into outer space, inspired research in aeronautics and technology, inspired new cinematic techniques, and provided fodder for scores of writers and illustrators. The enhanced significance and centrality of science and technology in the everyday lives of people has led some cultural theorists to go so far as to say that contemporary culture itself has become “science fictional.”

In the wake of the recent explosion of science fiction in popular literature and cinema, and mounted on the 150th anniversary of Verne’s pioneering and prophetic novel, *From the Earth to the Moon*, *The Romance of the Moon: Science Fiction Invades Art* explores the rich visual history of an interdisciplinary genre that has captivated readers and viewers since the time of the Civil War. The artwork in this exhibition explores several themes commonly found in science fiction, including environmental crisis, the cosmic uncanny, and the fraught relationship between human and machine. The show also features several examples of how science fiction and real life scientific advancements have influenced or helped to shape popular culture. Some of the artists experiment with machines and materials to create artwork that occupies the intersection of art and science. Others attempt to depict the vast expanses of space using the language of abstraction. Finally, artists such as Nancy Graves and Lowell Nesbitt engage the overarching topics of time and space as they map celestial bodies and document an era in which the moon held the attention of the entire nation.

Environmental Crisis

Though environmental issues permeate much of twenty-first century culture, some scientists, authors, and artists have been articulating their concerns for the planet’s health for decades. For photographers like John Pfahl and Dana Fritz, examinations of landscape and nature reveal the growing influence of humans on the natural environment. Land formations and lush flora fill their frames, yet signs of human dominance over nature appear either overshadowed or in the background. The geodesic dome in *Humid Tropics* symbolizes control and containment, while the smoky shadows of the power plant in *Four Corners Power Plant* signify the consumption of natural resources.

More playfully, artists Dick Calkins and Rick Yager also participate in the visual discourse of environmental concern by illustrating the American comic strip hero Buck Rogers exploring a different planet. Though woven into a longer narrative involving evil henchmen and the dangers of space, the creators of Buck Rogers join countless science fiction authors and artists as they illustrate the potential future of humans forced to explore or inhabit other planets to find the resources that have disappeared from Earth.

Kenny Scharf reiterates the threat of planetary destruction by humans in his print *Judy on the Beach* from 1982. Made during the height of the Cold War, Scharf chose two commonly recognized symbols of the time: Judy Jetson and a mushroom cloud. Scharf chose these two symbols to evoke the American comic strip hero Buck Rogers exploring a different planet. Though woven into a longer narrative involving evil henchmen and the dangers of space, the creators of Buck Rogers join countless science fiction authors and artists as they illustrate the potential future of humans forced to explore or inhabit other planets to find the resources that have disappeared from Earth.

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The Cosmic Uncanny

Moving away from concerns for the environment, artists such as Moebius (Jean Giraud) and Salvador Dalí explore the intangible questions of the cosmos. In each of their works, the artists enter dream worlds, or realms of pure imagination on a cosmic scale. Moebius shows us a figure wreathed in light, engaged in the perpetual act of observation. Languid thoughts lie behind the half-lidded eyes of the watcher, while an unknown tableau unfurls off of the right hand side of the frame. In Dalí’s lithographic print, the uncanny is probed through the pairing of recognizable religious figures with unrecognizable contexts. Biblical figures and symbols overlay a vast unknowable expanse, fragmentarily exposed between the spidery stone web of what looks to be ribs from a groin vault in a gothic cathedral.

The immeasurability of the universe is echoed yet again in the lithographic print of the night sky by Vija Celmins. Part of her Untitled Portfolio, Celmins first created this image as a graphite drawing. It is meticulously drawn, and though recognizable as a reproduction of celestial objects, its darkness is unfathomable and begins to border on the abstract. More fully conversant in the language of abstraction, Wassily Kandinsky’s Small Worlds III explores the known universe on the cellular level. Circumscribed in a cell-like form filled with colors, lines, and shapes, this image may suggest organelles and nuclei in motion, or reflect the artist’s view of the world as an unknowable yet self-contained cosmic body.
Humans and Machines

HAL, Bishop 341-B, Data, Rosie, Johnny Five, Wall-E, C-3PO, and R2-D2. Whether adversaries or assistants, robots and artificial intelligence have long occupied a central role in the history of science fiction. Now with Jibo, the world’s first social robot for the home, born out of the social robotics movement at MIT, what was once considered fiction has crossed the threshold into reality. Though given form and sometimes personality in literature, film, and now in real life, less tangible is the exact nature of the relationship between humans and machines.

Ian Davis and Phil Hale take up these issues in their paintings. In Davis’s work on paper, rows of anonymous, nearly identical men in suits stand in mysterious commune with equally ambiguous machines. Similarly opaque, though markedly more intimate, is Hale’s painting entitled Contemplation/Machine. In it, a man with unusual skin features stares into the light of an unrecognizable machine. Commissioned by the creators of a collectible card game called Netrunner in the mid-1990s, this painting eerily mimics the body posture and relationship between people of the twenty-first century and their personal computers.

Where Science and Art Collide

In Gladys Lux’s 1935 canvas, a spectral form wafts in a forest clearing, ringed by trees, lights, and shadows. Though this sight looks unfamiliar to most viewers, the scene depicted by the Nebraska artist is of an actual historic event. While teaching in western Nebraska, Lux witnessed the launching of a stratospheric balloon in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Her painting, like several other artworks in the exhibition, occupy the intersection where art and science collide.

Theodore Roszak’s abstract photogram and Dr. Harold Edgerton’s flash-light photograph of a bullet’s shadow cutting turbulently through space also occupy that intersection. Made without a camera, Roszak explored the photo-chemical mechanics of lens-less photography in his small scale photograms. Influenced by the highly experimental nature of the German design school known as the Bauhaus, he sought to create art using the technology of the time.

Similarly invested in technology, Dr. Harold Edgerton, a scientist of electrical engineering from Nebraska, is credited with the invention of the short duration electronic flash. Edgerton produced hundreds of photographs over the course of his career, yet insisted that he was not an artist.

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The phrase “The Romance of the Moon” is taken from Jules Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon*. It is the title of the 5th chapter, in which a desire to use the most advanced technology of the day to send humans to the moon is first explored at length. The year was 1865, when such romantic quests were devised as remedies or critiques of the massive violence, perpetrated by killing machines, experienced by Americans during the Civil War. In 1863, President John F. Kennedy announced his intention to put an American on the moon within the decade. To him, it was imperative to stake a claim on the moon for peace, in the face of the Soviet threat and the possibility of outer space becoming “another terrifying theater of war.”

Both declarations, in 1865 and 1962, are important moments in an era when the moon was a dream born out of times of war. When the dream was realized in 1969, NASA saw the importance of visual proof, not just through documentary photographs or video footage (showing liftoff and touch down), but through art. The NASA Art Program, started in 1962, commissioned dozens of artists to create their own personal renderings of what was considered one of the most important events in the history of humanity. Lowell Nesbit was one of those artists, and he chose to make lithograph prints of photographs taken from the moon missions. In the exhibition are two images: one of the moon, hanging in black space; the other of a human footprint on the lunar surface. Both images represent important moments in the history of humans and their evolving relationship with space.

Erin Poor
assistant curator of education
2015–16 Exhibition Schedule

**Gallery 92 West, Fremont**
September 2–27, 2015
Sponsored by the Fremont Area Art Association

**McKinley Education Center, North Platte**
September 29–October 27, 2015
Sponsored by NebraskaLand National Bank, Mike Jacobson, president and CEO, and the Art Study League of North Platte

**Museum of the High Plains, McCook**
October 29–November 29, 2015
Sponsored by the McCook Arts Council

**Hastings Museum, Hastings**
January 5–February 2, 2016
Sponsored by Hastings College, Hastings Community Arts Council, and Hastings Museum

**Cornerstone Bank, York**
February 4–29, 2016
Sponsored by Cornerstone Bank

**Chadron State College, Chadron**
March 3–29, 2016
Sponsored by Chadron State College Galaxy Series

**Stalder Gallery, Falls City Library and Arts Center**
April 1–May 8, 2016
Sponsored by Richardson County Arts and Humanities Council

**Morton James Public Library, Nebraska City**
May 10–June 1, 2016
Sponsored by Harry and Grace Moller Library Endowment Fund

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