

The Romance of the Moon

Science Fiction Invades Art

Sheldon Statewide 2015–16

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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, invigorated research in aeronautics 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."¹

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, *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.



Cover image
Lowell Nesbitt
Baltimore, MD 1933—New York, NY 1993
Untitled (Moon) (from the *Moon Shot* series)
Color lithograph, 1969
22 x 29 7/8 inches
University of Nebraska—Lincoln, gift of
Reese Palley and Marilyn Arnold Palley
U-4460.2.1992
Art ©Estate of Lowell Nesbitt/Licensed by
VAGA, New York, NY



Back image
Lowell Nesbitt
Baltimore, MD 1933—New York, NY 1993
Untitled (Imprint of Footstep on Lunar Surface) (from the *Moon Shot* series)
Color lithograph, 1969
22 x 29 7/8 inches
University of Nebraska—Lincoln, gift of
Reese Palley and Marilyn Arnold Palley
U-4460.8.1992
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VAGA, New York, NY

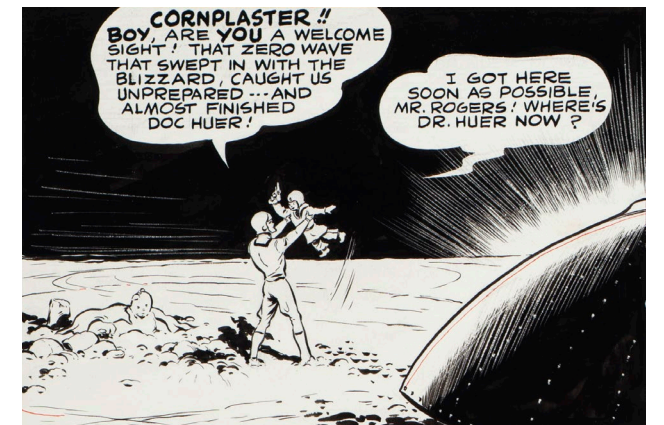
¹ Brooks Landon. *Science Fiction After 1900: From the Steam Man to the Stars*. New York: Routledge, 2002. xiii.

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 overhead 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.

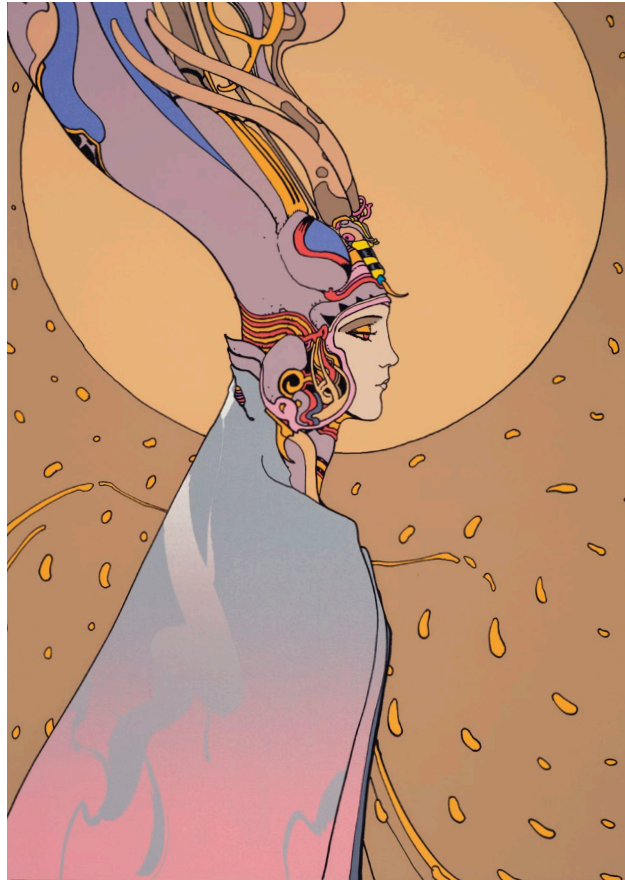
Kenny Scharf reiterates the threat of planetary destruction by humans in his print *Judy on the Beach* from 1982. Made during the height of the Cold War, Scharf chose two commonly recognized symbols of the time: Judy Jetson and a mushroom cloud. Juxtaposed in garishly bright colors, Scharf criticizes the blissful ignorance of American society while the nuclear holocaust looms just beyond the horizon.



Dana Fritz
born Kansas City, MO 1970
Humid Tropics, Eden Project
(from the *Terraria Gigantica* series)
Archival pigment print, 2009
16 x 24 inches
University of Nebraska—Lincoln,
gift of the artist
U-5619.2011



Dick Calkins
Grand Rapids, MI 1895—Tuscon, AZ 1962
Rick Yager
Alton, IL 1909—Wilmette, IL 1995
Buck Rogers, #240 (detail)
Brush and ink on board, 1946
27 x 18 inches
University of Nebraska—Lincoln, gift of
Dan F. and Barbara J. Howard through the
University of Nebraska Foundation
U-5126.2000



▲
Moebius (Jean Giraud)
Nogent-sur-Marne, France 1938–Paris, France 2012
Starwatcher VIII
Color silkscreen, 1998
27 x 19 inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of Dan F.
and Barbara J. Howard through the University of
Nebraska Foundation
U-5430.2000

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 tableaux unfolds 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.



▲
Vija Celmins
born Riga, Latvia 1938
Untitled Portfolio: Galaxy
Lithograph, 1975
12 7/16 x 16 7/16 inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R.
and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust
H-2939.1990



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.

▲
Phil Hale
born Boston, MA 1963
Contemplation/Machine
Oil on wood laminate board, 1996
17 x 25 inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of Dan F.
and Barbara J. Howard through the University of
Nebraska Foundation
U-5179.2000

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 photograph and Dr. Harold Edgerton's flash-lit 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.



▲
Gladys Marie Lux
Chapman, NE 1899—Lincoln, NE 2003
Inflation
Oil on canvas, 1934–35
28 ¾ x 36 ¼ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Olga N.
Sheldon Acquisition Trust
U-4007.1985

▲
Harold Eugene Edgerton
Fremont, NE 1903—Cambridge, MA 1990
Bullet and Shock Waves (detail)
Gelatin silver print, undated
8 ½ x 10 ¼ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of
The Harold and Esther Edgerton Family
Foundation
U-4883.1996



▲
 Ian Davis
 born Indianapolis, IN 1972
Files
 Acrylic on paper, 2007
 22 ¼ x 30 ½ inches
 Sheldon Art Association, gift of
 Robert and Victoria Northrup
 S-879.2012

Time and Space

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 1962, 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 Nesbitt 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

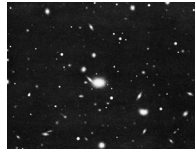


▲
 Nancy Graves
 Pittsfield, MA 1939—New York, NY 1995
Sabine DM Region of the Moon
 (from *Moonscape Series IX*)
 Color lithograph, 1972
 22 ¼ x 29 ¾ inches
 University of Nebraska—Lincoln, Anna R.
 and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust
 H-2979.1991
 Art ©Nancy Graves Foundation, Inc./
 Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

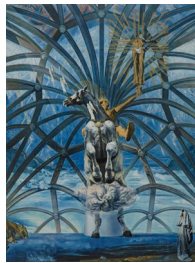
Checklist



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Grand Rapids, MI 1895—Tuscon, AZ 1962
Rick Yager
Alton, IL 1909—Wilmette, IL 1995
Buck Rogers, #240
Brush and ink on board, 1946
27 x 18 inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of Dan F. and Barbara J. Howard through the University of Nebraska Foundation, U-5126.2000



Vija Celmins
born Riga, Latvia 1938
Untitled Portfolio: Galaxy
Lithograph, 1975
12⁷/₁₆ x 16⁷/₁₆ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, H-2939.1990



Salvador Dalí
Figueres, Spain 1904—Figueres, Spain 1989
Dream of the Cosmic Unity
Color lithograph, c. 1958
22¹³/₁₆ x 17³/₁₆ inches
Nebraska Art Association, Jean Rathburn Faulkner Memorial, N-734.1992



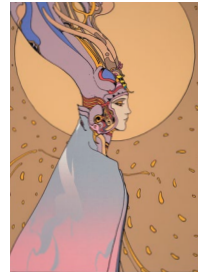
Ian Davis
born Indianapolis, IN 1972
Files
Acrylic on paper, 2007
22¹/₄ x 30¹/₈ inches
Sheldon Art Association, gift of Robert and Victoria Northrup, S-879.2012



Harold Eugene Edgerton
Fremont, NE 1903—Cambridge, MA 1990
Bullet and Shock Waves
Gelatin silver print, undated
8¹/₄ x 10¹/₈ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of The Harold and Esther Edgerton Family Foundation, U-4883.1996



Dana Fritz
born Kansas City, MO 1970
Humid Tropics, Eden Project (from the *Terraria Gigantica* series)
Archival pigment print, 2009
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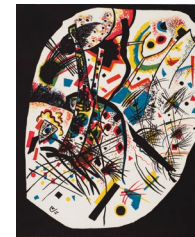
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Art ©Nancy Graves Foundation, Inc./ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



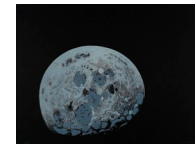
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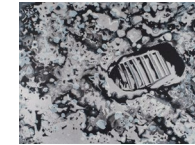
Wassily Kandinsky
Moscow, Russia 1866—Neuilly-sur-Seine, France 1944
Small Worlds III (Kleine Welten III), (from *Small Worlds (Kleine Welten)*)
Color lithograph, 1922
10¹⁵/₁₆ x 9¹/₁₆ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, H-494.1958



Gladys Marie Lux
Chapman, NE 1899—Lincoln, NE 2003
Inflation
Oil on canvas, 1934–35
28³/₈ x 36¹/₄ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust, U-4007.1985



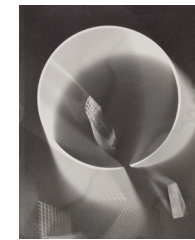
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Untitled (Moon) (from the *Moon Shot* series)
Color lithograph, 1969
22 x 29⁷/₈ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of Reese Palley and Marilyn Arnold Palley, U-4460.2.1992
Art ©Estate of Lowell Nesbitt/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



Lowell Nesbitt
Baltimore, MD 1933—New York, NY 1993
Untitled (Imprint of Footstep on Lunar Surface) (from the *Moon Shot* series)
Color lithograph, 1969
22 x 29⁷/₈ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of Reese Palley and Marilyn Arnold Palley, U-4460.8.1992
Art ©Estate of Lowell Nesbitt/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



John Pfahl
born New York, NY 1939
Four Corners Power Plant (morning), *Farmington, New Mexico*
Digital print, 1982; printed 2011
13¹/₈ x 17⁷/₈ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, H-3114.2011



Theodore Roszak
Poznan, Poland 1907—New York, NY 1981
Untitled (Photogram)
Gelatin silver print, c. 1939
4¹⁵/₁₆ x 3¹⁵/₁₆ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, gift of Don Brock, Phillip C. Johnson, and anonymous donor by exchange, U-5082.2001
Art ©Estate of Theodore Roszak/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



Kenny Scharf
born Los Angeles, CA 1958
Judy on the Beach
Color screenprint, 1987
25¹⁵/₁₆ x 39³/₁₆ inches
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, H-2851.1987



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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