

Something Surreal: The Far Away Worlds of Yesterday and Tomorrow

The surreal is but reality that has not been disconnected from its mystery'

Rene Magritte

DSC is delighted to present 'Something Surreal: The Far Away Worlds of Yesterday and Tomorrow', a two-person exhibition, curated by Jane Neal, that brings together the works of Josef Bolf and Michael Kunze.

From the very first moment of entering the exhibition, it is apparent that Josef Bolf and Michael Kunze communicate to the viewer in entirely different painterly languages. Bolf has a more graphic style moving between acrylic and oil that owes a debt to comic books and graphic novels as well as to the clear influences of high art, medieval painting and artist visionaries such as William Blake. Kunze is more recognisably painterly in terms of his technique which involves traditional oil painting often applied thickly and quite dryly to engender an aged, impastoed appearance. His work reveals influences of Biblical tales, stories and symbols from classical mythology - notably Ancient Greece - complex visions from the world of cinema and - in common with Bolf, narratives from science fiction.

There is though something surreal about the work of both artists. If we take Rene Magritte's statement that: 'The surreal is but reality that has not been disconnected from its mystery' we could apply this equally to Bolf and to Kunze, as each artist is adept at creating worlds - if not universes - that feel entirely convincing, absolutely plausible and yet completely mysterious. In the case of Bolf, the mythologies that seem to enthrall him are not finished, but neither are they unexplored. The artist enjoys reading science fiction stories by authors such as Isaac Asimov, Ted Chiang, Philip K. Dick and Robert A. Heinlein. These authors had (or still have), wonderful imaginations rooted in scientific accuracy and a strange seer-like ability to open a window into a future which we are now living in, complete with AI, voice activated appliances, space travel, genetic engineering, and surrogate pregnancies. Bolf's paintings are rooted in his childhood experience of growing up in one of the sleeping cities that surrounded major cities in communist Europe, a sídlišťe (housing estate), built as a single development and designed to reinforce the notions of uniformity, equality and functionality within a socialist state.

Surrounded by the same format on repeat when he visited his friends, Bolf could have been in a pod on some starship in the future. His childhood was just past the zenith of the Cold War and the Space Race but tensions still ran high and space travel and futuristic buildings dominated film and architecture on both sides of the ideological divide. Spoon a ladle-full of quiet afternoons into the proverbial pot when young Bolf was at home alone and slightly bored - and we find the perfect soup for creativity - with the then budding artist reading, dreaming and forced by circumstance (and communism), to make his own comics. This 'stream of consciousness' approach to his art work, coupled with an evolving knowledge of the Surrealist artists and said visionaries such as Blake has resulted in a practice that feels at once familiar and organic but also ethereal and dreamlike - much as we might recall a distant childhood memory that is now hazy rather than clear. Bolf's world is a twilight one comprised of half-remembered dreams, nostalgia and visions, as opposed to concrete visual records where mystery is absent. His palette reflects this, there is a nocturnal air reinforced by the dark, even black backgrounds of his new works. Rays of viridian green, magenta and violet light illuminate what appears to be a new Venus or genie rising from the sea or out of a simple vessel, and at times cones of light feel closer to sinister search lights than to cinematic projections. While Bolf has moved into new territories with his more recent works - they are increasingly

vibrant in colour, even jewel-like, compared to his darker, more somber paintings of the past decade, there is still evidence of the artist's familiar device of layering grounds upon grounds which he scratches through to reveal evidence of the existence of his previous ideas and a bright underbelly of colour. It's a form of archaeology, an ancient technique of sgraffito common to Islamic pottery, medieval painting and stained glass that lends focus and luminosity. Now though, Bolf has gone further, allowing what lies beneath to jump to the fore, coiling its way to the top layer of strata and bursting through in the form of pulsating, organic patterns created partly by brush and partly by stencil.

It is no great surprise to discover that Kunze hails from a family of archaeologists who spent much time, physically, in Greece and much time, mentally in its ancient past. Both past and present landscapes have clearly left their mark on Kunze's imagination, most notably in the architecture and part ruined nature of the buildings and Arcadian landscapes he depicts, but also in the geometry of his compositions which owes much to Thales of Miletus, the Father of Geometry, Euclidean geometry and the symbols of Sacred Geometry - otherwise known as the 'architecture of the Universe' - such as the tree of life and the merkaba.

This though is only one part of Kunze's practice, which, like Bolf's owes a certain debt to a nostalgia for the past - as - also in common with Bolf - Kunze looks to the future and to the realms of the imagination and surrealism to inspire his work. In Kunze's case, cinema is a powerful influence: in truth, cinema twinned with philosophical constructs. The great cinema director, Federico Fellini is particularly important for Kunze's most recent body of work. They belong to a series with the same title: 'Asa Nisi Masa', taken from Fellini's critically acclaimed work: 'Eight and a half'. The surrealist comedy drama has the meta fictional narrative that centres on a famous Italian film director suffering from 'director's block' as he attempts to direct an epic science fiction film. Kunze's paintings circle in one of the most enchanting sequences in the film (and perhaps in all cinema), the dream sequence when the main protagonist, Guido, is suddenly a child again in an old Italian villa. He and the other children are bathing in a big barrel used for treading and crushing grapes. Bath-time has therefore morphed into a kind of Dionysian rite of passage, as Guido is bundled into a towel and carried up to bed to join the other children, eagerly awaiting lights out. The children are excited because they believe that tonight the eyes in the portrait painting in the room will come alive and move - but only if Guido chants the spell: 'Asa Nisi Masa', and they all cross their arms in front of their chests and flap their hands.

It would be a shame to break the spell by decoding 'Asa Nisi Masa'. Better to come to see the exhibition and learn about how Kunze suggests it might also be a bastardisation of the phrase from Indian religious philosophy 'Tat Twam Asi' which means 'You are it', but perhaps it also means 'you' - or rather 'we' are enough - which is the eventual conclusion that Fellini seems to be pointing towards - that in childhood at least we were - if we were lucky - praised and encouraged for achieving the smallest successes, such as standing up or clapping our hands together. This was enough and no other praise has ever come close since to making us feel so satisfied.. but Kunze cannot leave us here and instead he combines this interesting notion with other motives of his continued interest, such as the orange tree.

So it is clear that Bolf and Kunze enjoy engaging with the surrealistic, mythical and narrative of their paintings. Looking at both of their practices, it is interesting to consider how current and close the work of the Surrealist thinkers and artists of the early 20th Century feel to these two artists and to our 21st Century eyes.

A hundred years ago the Surrealists re-appropriated the complex mechanisms and patterns of thought that shaped Greek mythology, for their own ends. They subverted epistemological boundaries as they looked to find new ways to shape our understanding of events and afford more

importance to the sub-conscious. They embraced free-association, stream-of consciousness and the abandonment of established conventions in art and in literature, such as perspective, chronological progression and conceivable order and structure.

Looking back on their work, we find an aesthetic of ruination - and a dreamscape which resembles a lost and dystopian version of Arcadia (surely in part a response to the devastations of war). We see an attempt to reconcile the role of the artist within the framework of a society that is breaking down, but still hopeful for a new utopia.

At this point in time, we too are trying to reconcile ourselves with a world that is under threat - from climate change, extreme politics, war - now again in Europe and global viruses. We seek refuge in fantasy and mythology and we are again allowing our sub-conscious to gain ground and find an escape route through a free-flowing visual context.

It is therefore timely to consider an exhibition of two artists who draw inspiration from the ancient lores of yesterday, from the realms of personal and collective memory, the technology of today and from the imaginings of tomorrow's world.

Jane Neal