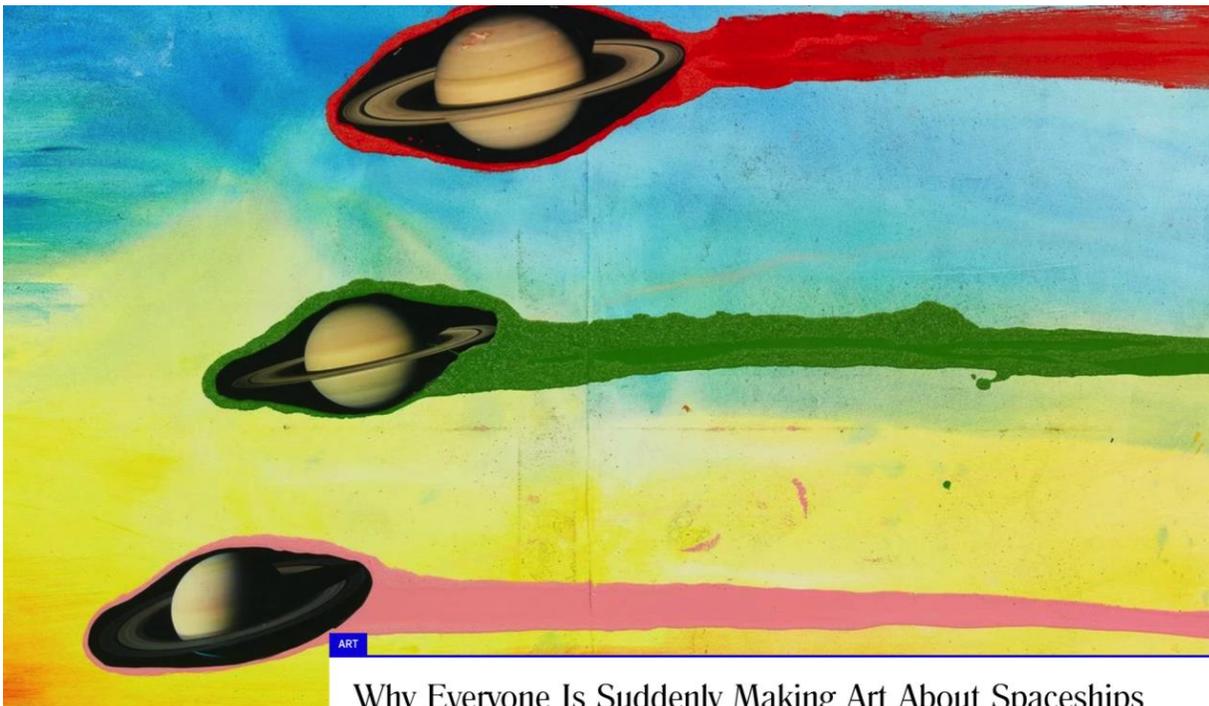


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GARAGE



Why Everyone Is Suddenly Making Art About Spaceships

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A groundswell of interest in cosmic transportation seems to ask the question: Can we please skip this current moment in history?

In the mid-1990s, the obsession with outer space reached new heights; the *Star Trek* franchise was at its peak, *The X-Files* had just dropped, another trio of *Star Wars* movies was in the works, and search engine Netscape Navigator unveiled [a spacey logo](#) that remains an icon of the early internet. The New York art world of the time, however, remained aloof from the trend; the community was still reeling from the impact of the AIDS crisis, and art about the politics of bodies and identities dominated.

A quarter-century later, art's suddenly bringing back the space age. A quick look at this month's New York shows reveals a common preoccupation with the subject of outer space in general, and spaceship imagery in particular. There are paintings of flying saucers ([Oliver Wassow at Theodore:Art](#) through April 22); paintings and photographs of distant planets ([Chris Martin's Saturn Pictures at Anton Kern](#) through April, [John Torreano's Dark Matters without Time at Lesley Heller](#), and [David Bowie Is at The Brooklyn Museum](#) through July 5); and sculptures of alternate universes (Mariko Mori's [Invisible Dimension at Sean Kelly](#) through April 28).

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Ryan Michael Ford, *Air Biscuit*, 2017. Courtesy of Asya Geisberg Gallery



Chris Martin, *Golden Age (for Harry Smith)*, 2018. Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery, New York

What accounts for the surge of interest? Arguably, the escapist tropes of the '90s were more influential than has been generally acknowledged, creating the [io9ification of art](#)—or as Mexico-based critic and artist Michael Anthony Farley dubbed it in a recent message, a “Future Sublime.” Unlike most movements, though, this one is driven by both new and vintage imagery; exhibitions inspired by explicitly retro space exploration are relevant too, in part because of the power of nostalgia, and in part because this is a history that’s now considered potential evidence by [the 56 per cent of Americans today who believe that UFOs are alien spacecraft](#).

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Unsurprisingly, most artists quizzed by GARAGE thought that an interest in space travel was bound to the current— toxic—political climate. “Anxiety about the individual’s lack of control over the late-capitalist habitat—from displacement and gentrification of one’s neighborhood to national politics to the planetary-scale environmental crisis—is driving people to imagine their own worlds, in which they have total authorship,” said Farley. “When both reality and mass media feed us the same cyberpunk dystopia image of the future, some want an optimistic, *Star Treksense* of adventure.”



Mariko Mori Photo: Kayzuyoshi Shimomura. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York. Mariko Mori, *Spirifer I*, 2017-18. © Mariko Mori. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

Certainly, the work of Mariko Mori fits this bill. The artist has been influenced by technology for years, and remains inspired by its possibilities. “The origins of my work lie in how we perceive things,” Mori said in a recent phone interview. “Scientists have been able to illustrate mathematically dimensions we cannot actually see. In my show, *Invisible Dimension*, I’m attempting to visualize those dimensions by creating those forms that are translated into energy which makes up the infinite circulation of the universe.”

Unsurprisingly, the dominant common influence on today’s spaceship artists is *media*—TV, film, and literature—as distinct from forms and interests more internal to art making. Of all the artists GARAGE spoke to, Oliver Leach may be the most thoroughly ensconced in that world; before we even began our interview proper, he cited a film, a book, and a band—the cult movie [Zardoz](#), a recent volume titled [UFO Drawings From the National Archive](#), and, uh, the Foo Fighters (whose name [has its origin in the first UFO sighting, in the 1940s](#)). He also named some films that scared the shit out of him as a kid. “My work is driven by what frightens me,” he explained, a sentiment consistent with the uncanny photographic images of UFOs he now makes by cutting holes in negatives. “People who grew up when *The X-Files* was a huge thing,” he explained, “are the backwash from the previous UFO craze.” In short, if you grew up with something, you’ll end up making art about it.

But the artistic appeal of UFOs turns out to be intergenerational. Oliver Wasow’s show at Theodore: Art, for

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example, reveals his own longstanding interest via a series of works based on the types of UFO shots that graced tabloid covers in the 1980s. “At the time, those photographs had a resonance and a place in the visual culture,” he said. “They spoke to a fascination with outer space and the future that distinguished the 1950s.” Per Wasow, the theme is clearly resurgent: “There are a lot of people out there interested in the uncanny, interested in virtuality, and interested in the way these things collapse into and intersect with kitsch, popular visual culture, special effects, and post-production. Collectively, that does add up to a zeitgeist that is born of advances in technology.”

Painter [Jean-Pierre Roy](#), however, dismisses the idea of space travel as a vehicle for utopian fantasy. “I’m less interested in the escapist tropes of the genre as I am in its unique ability to question the nature of reality and perception,” he explained. Roy replaces figures’ heads with metallic machine-rendered orbs or slices of steel. “It just so happens that spaceships are great metaphorical devices for getting the viewer over the ‘horizon’ of self-discovery.”



Ryan Michael Ford, *Sky Jam*, 2017. Courtesy of Asya Geisberg Gallery

Many artists, though, persist in a Mulderian belief that the truth is out there—and probably onboard a spaceship. Ryan Michael Ford, who shows at [Asya Geisberg Gallery](#) and is known for his paintings of surfing aliens, tripped-out puppies, and cloud-hopping monkeys, wasn’t shy about his influences. “I’m influenced by my own experience with a UFO” he admitted. “It was an anti-gravitational vehicle, and it confirmed with me what I already felt.” Ford, who is not crazy, spoke cautiously and intelligently about what he’d seen. In an artistic context, and in the wider world too, he deserves to be taken seriously. Whether we accept his account and its implications or not, he’s one of many.