



# POST POSTMODERN

SCIENCE-FICTIVE PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS FITZPATRICK





With war on Earth and the discovery of water on Mars, there has recently been no shortage of cultural production regarding outer space. Visitors to Boxberg, Germany, will find Jaroslaw Kozakiewicz's *Mars Project*—an enormous earthwork shaped like a left human ear installed in 2008—while a search on YouTube.com reveals thousands of hours of video footage documenting UFOs (with varying degrees of seriousness). Tavares Strachan's 2008 work *Where do we go from here* (from *The Orthostatic Tolerance*), consisting of a mobile station and rover, explores a built environment inspired by the star Polaris and is in a sense a training exercise, as Strachan hopes to eventually use it to explore space. In 2007 Gareth Spor reproduced a newspaper headline announcing the discovery of "WATER ON MARS" with red cellophane stencil letters, which he posted within a string of brightly lit empty light-rail kiosks in San Francisco, California. *Space Program*, Tom Sachs's 2007 exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, California, included a scale replica of the Apollo 11 lunar module. In 2005, Sylvie Fleury created *Vittaux*, a partially buried, sixteen-foot stainless-steel flying saucer that looked as if it had just crashed into the lawn at city hall in Anyang, South Korea. There has also been a spate of Mars-inspired exhibitions including *Life on Mars, the 55th Carnegie International* (May 3, 2008–January 11, 2009) and the *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art* at London's Barbican Art Gallery (March 6–May 18, 2008).

Meanwhile, astrophotography, long the purview of amateurs and hobbyists, has become more prevalent in contemporary art—Robert Gendler, Trevor Paglen, Mat Collishaw, and Aaron Sandnes being just a few of the artists who have made use of its more accessible techniques in very different ways—at the same time as it continues to develop in the realm of science.<sup>1</sup> On its 489th sol (or Martian day) in 2005, NASA's Mars Exploration Rover (MER) *Spirit* photographed a particularly haunting sunset, a sublime vision of an uninhabitable world. The sun appears white as it sets just above Gusev Crater's rim some eighty kilometers in the distance beyond Jibsheet, a rock outcrop visible in the foreground. The twilight sky reflects soft cyan light into the otherwise gray haze, and the foreground is tinged red by the dust that permeates the atmosphere. The now famous photograph—romantically titled *Sunset over Gusev*—is a panoramic camera (Pancam) mosaic attributed to NASA/JPL/Texas A&M/Cornell. Producing such an image requires the MER's digital stereoscopic Pancam to take the photograph remotely and

send it to an orbiting satellite, which sends it to Earth as an array of grayscale image slices that are then mosaicked, calibrated, and color-rendered by humans. This involved process benefits scientists working in a wide range of fields, and every image broadcast from Mars to Earth provides answers to a long history of speculation regarding the red planet.

Although each of the aforementioned projects could in effect be considered a work of science fiction, the fact that a NASA photograph of Mars itself qualifies as such does not require a denial of its scientific merit, or authenticity, or any absurd conspiracy. Any photograph—whether taken on Earth, the moon, or Mars, in true color or false color—is simply a semblance, an interpretive version, and depends greatly on contextualization.<sup>2</sup>

Since its earliest known incarnation in a fixed form by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826 (*View from the Window at Le Gras*), photography has been a form of speculation; it is both an allusion and an illusion. The process itself is fraught with vulnerability; every step contributes to the meaning of the photographic image—from what is included in the frame to how it is processed in the darkroom or altered on the computer, as well as the printing process, the form of dissemination or display, and the way it is interpreted and observed. Photographs cannot tell the objective "truth," because there is no escaping subjectivity at either end of the lens. As Marshall McLuhan has written, "To say that 'the camera cannot lie' is merely to underline the multiple deceptions that are now practiced in its name."<sup>3</sup>

While constructed for scientific purposes, *Sunset over Gusev* has been widely disseminated on the Internet, where it can be appreciated outside specialized scientific contexts. In that sense it functions rather similarly to the photographic work of contemporary artists, affording a view of something we would never otherwise see. Yet while artistic and scientific imagery increasingly overlap aesthetically, a fundamental difference remains in the intent of each: art generally raises questions and eschews answers, while the questions raised by scientific images are the product of a continuing search for answers. This difference affords the artist a greater license and more expansive set of possibilities, and the same is also true for science fiction, a genre grounded in, but ultimately free from, the trappings of science.

Exploiting photography's contested relationship to truth, many contemporary artists working with photography are making a conscious move away from the illusion of objective representation toward a more visceral low-budget formalism aligned with





the outmoded aesthetics of early science fiction. In addition to exploring literary works, they also look back to so many past futures and alternate pasts when papier-mâché landscapes, tinfoil and cardboard cockpits, absurd costumes and monsters, and miniature model spaceships adorned the science fiction film set with an earnestness that may never be matched again. And they do so from a present marked by the advent of (or just the unimaginative implementation of) green screen technology and CGI graphics that have radically changed the science-fiction aesthetic and its spirit.

What follows is a closer look at aspects of the work of four international artists, each of whom has directly drawn on aspects of science fiction to inform his or her photographic practice: Julieta Aranda, Cassander Eeftinck Schattenkerk, Jonah Freeman, and Ann Lislegaard. The work of three of these artists—Aranda, Freeman, and Lislegaard—was recently featured in the group exhibition *The Future as Disruption* at The Kitchen in New York City (June 18–August 1, 2008). The show explored the use of science fiction tropes in relation to envisioning alternative political and social outcomes to our current conditions.

Whether depicting abstracted alien environments or engaging science-fiction narratives, each of these four artists reveals fragmented glimpses into the unknown by distorting scale, removing or exaggerating referents, and honing in tightly on materials or models.

#### **There Has Been a Miscalculation...**

Julieta Aranda's photographs begin with her installations. *A Machine of Perpetual Possibility* (2008) consists of a lacquered wood pedestal supporting a clear hollow Plexiglas cube. Inside lie several inches of pulverized science fiction novels, museologically entombed and intermittently blasted by an unseen air compressor. Each jarring burst of air reanimates the tan-colored pulp and spreads the dust of literary relationships into new formations. Aranda's subject is the resulting worlds of metatextual dust, which she photographs through the Plexiglas. Her iris prints can be thought of as spatial and temporal intersections, dimensional windows to be cracked at which one's position within the sanitary space of the gallery is collided and conflated with worlds too extreme to support life. Her images are immersive but they are, at the same time, so soft, abstracted, and sublimated that we avoid choking. What could be the remains of an obliterated world could also be its swirling beginnings.

Aranda presents a disconnect between predictions made in science fiction about what life would be like today and what it is. In that sense, her installations can be thought of as urns containing lost futures, her photographs as museums of prophetic failures. This is not to marginalize them but to hold them for posterity; not to banish them but to reactivate them and to resituate them as part of a present their authors failed to imagine, and wonderfully so.

#### **"Evidence of What?"**

Cassander Eeftinck Schattenkerk's *The Andromeda Strain* takes its title from Michael Crichton's 1969 novel and the 1971 film adaptation of the same name. In both versions, the narrative is centered on a deadly extraterrestrial microorganism that returns to earth on a recovered U.S. satellite. Rapidly multiplying and mutating, the organism—named Andromeda by a secret group of government-sponsored scientists—causes fatal blood clotting and even suicide in humans.





Critically personifying clichés regarding the photographer as explorer and documenter of “exotic” spaces, Schattenkerk has created his own science-fiction travelogue. *The Andromeda Strain* series consists of thirteen large, untitled color lambda prints variously depicting anonymous landscapes and what seem to be close-ups of the molecular structure of the virus. Photographed using a combination of 4” x 5” film and some digital photography, but not subjected to subsequent manipulation, the images’ aesthetic mimics the low-budget lighting and special effects of early science fiction B movies. Some of the images were shot in public space, at times after altering the site, and others are what he calls “tabletop landscapes,” or still lifes constructed specifically to be photographed.<sup>4</sup>

While Schattenkerk’s photographs can be read as a series of vignettes, each making part of Crichton’s world visible, they are less revelatory illustration than obfuscatory extension. Schattenkerk was attracted to *The Andromeda Strain* because, although a work of science fiction, it also encompassed two elements of science simultaneously—astronomy and biology. In a gallery setting, wood racks hold his images to mimic the display strategies of the natural sciences, though his imagery is not meant to be edifying. Nonetheless, titles are powerful communicators and contextualizers, and Schattenkerk has thus created a fragmented parallel world within and without Crichton’s cosmography. Both works become more abstract, dislocated, strange, and alien in relation to our scientific reality.

Schattenkerk’s process is nearly as interesting as its results, incorporating as it does everything from spaghetti to burning rubber bands, flashlights to white powder, and using long exposures and an expert manipulation of light. His understanding of how to manipulate scale is perhaps most apparent in *Untitled* (2007), an image depicting a detail of a lattice of interwoven omnidirectional wires. Hovering just above a murky gray substance, this geometrical grid supports a large number of sporadic white forms that drip and warp into the liquid beneath. In the context of the series, these forms could be considered to be depicting part of Andromeda’s numerous adaptive transmutations, but they could as easily be melting marshmallows as snow-covered icebergs. They are in actuality sections of foam.

Schattenkerk is adept at finding “exotic” locations within familiar, banal landscapes. For example, his desert-like scenes—barren, sun-drenched, and highly saturated—are actually details of a construction site. They were shot at night, using long exposures and available lighting from buildings nearby. Despite their unorthodox source, they are strangely familiar—resembling an oversaturated Richard Misrach photograph or an overexposed film still from a Western’s mood shot.

Science fiction has received a heightened interest as of late because many of the themes common to the genre are extremely resonant with the times. After all, whether political, satiric, proselytistic, fantastic, or absurdist, what differentiates science fiction from other forms of speculative fiction is its plausibility. Schattenkerk, by focusing on *The Andromeda Strain*, reminds us that the exploration of space and development of such technologies for nefarious purposes can backfire—with catastrophic results. And by focusing on low-fidelity and material familiarity, and making little attempt to hide his props, whether tape or foam, one may consider what is being depicted rather than how it is being depicted. It is a positive symptom of an economy of means aligned with that of pre-CGI science fiction films and their superiorly imaginative tinfoil and cardboard aesthetics.





### Parallel History

Jonah Freeman's ongoing series of photographs, videos, and installations centered on the development of the Franklin Abraham explores the bloated, labyrinthine metropolis within this monumental building. Originally designed by the industrial horticulturist Maxwell Blum, the Franklin Abraham has become a hybrid of structures so large it encompasses all aspects of civic life—entertainment, residential, retail, manufacturing, even government. After two centuries of development, the building now houses over two million people, is a mile-and-a-half wide by two miles long, and reaches heights of 150 stories.<sup>5</sup>

The entire story of the Franklin Abraham is, of course, entirely fictional. Based on a novel by Zachary Shamban (who could also be fictional), Freeman has conjured a real estate undertaking that spans several generations, and reflects the obsessive spirit of William Randolph Hearst's Big Sur castle, the absurdity of the Winchester Mystery House, and late capitalism. His series of digital photographic

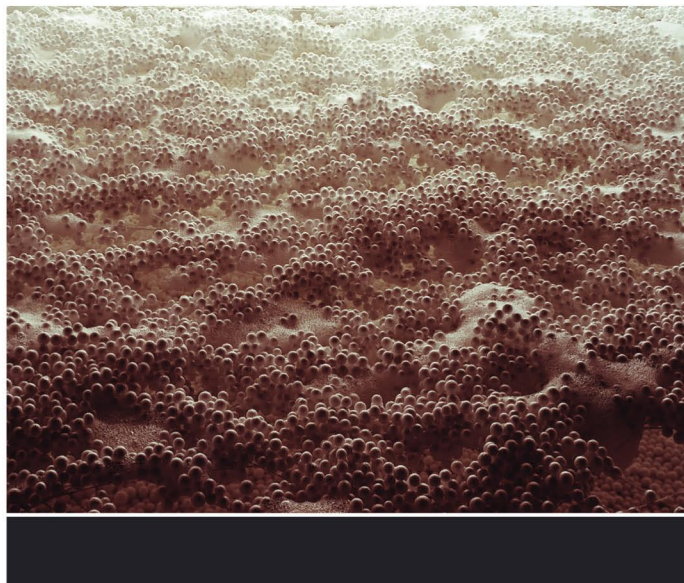
composite prints charts the development of the structure. The accompanying film, *The Franklin Abraham* (2004), presents a fragmented narrative about life within the Franklin Abraham, depicting the family that runs the corporation owning the building, as well as its anarchists, Octaplatz Girls, youth gangs, security, and other inhabitants.<sup>6</sup>

Freeman's installations present products, ephemera, and other pieces of the Franklin Abraham, but his collages are perhaps the most informative about the endeavor. Each large-scale custom pigment print includes, as its title, one year in the development of the building it supposedly documents. In *1986* (2006), a series of angular skyways of varied sizes connect skyscraper pillars and blocks, forming a geometric maze of brightly lit windows and steel. This sea of lights and crisscrossing vectors appears never-ending; through a gap in the structure, a horizon is visible, but it is simply another part of the building. Aside from a small patch of street—likely part of the Franklin Abraham as well—1986 contains nothing but the building, because from within, nothing but the Franklin Abraham exists.

In terms of scale, the Franklin Abraham resembles the Tyrell Building from the 1982 Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner*, itself based on the 1968 Phillip K. Dick science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* It also recalls the 1927 Fritz Lang film *Metropolis*. Yet while those buildings stem from a science-fiction futurism, the Franklin Abraham is architecturally rooted in Modernism but has grown into what Lisi Raskin describes as a "Postmodern hodge-podge lacking any overarching rhyme or reason."<sup>7</sup> If Freeman's building appears futuristic, it is because its height, immensity, and absurdity still remain foreign to our conceptions of urban planning today.

*The Franklin Abraham* enables Freeman to create a hypothetical time period, or a type of "Uchronia," positing an alternate history existing parallel to our own, and thereby forcing a reimagining of the future. As the world's population grows and the number of corporations that control it shrinks, the past Freeman extrapolates from our present actually predicates a rather plausible and frightening future.





### The Built Landscape

Ann Lislegaard has long drawn from the work of science fiction writers to create video, sound, and photography referencing specific writers and films. In her installations space is animated through light, sound, or a combination of both. Likewise, in her trilogy of 3-D digital animation videos—*Crystal World* (after J. G. Ballard) (2006), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (after Ursula K. LeGuin) (2008), and *Bellona* (after Samuel R. Delany) (2005)—she reflects on “our present triangulation of space and knowledge and temporality,” simulating the architecture that defines or delimits our reality, deconstructing natural laws, morphing and warping both based on the imagery conjured in the pages of the science fiction novels her titles reference.<sup>8</sup>

Lislegaard’s installations create parallel worlds that seem entropic, in which the normative order of space and objects seems destabilized, well on its way to chaos. She takes a similar approach in her photographic series *Entropology*, *Crystal Forest* (2007), which consists of digitally modified photographs in black and white reinterpreting Ballard’s 1966 novel *The Crystal World*, in which a viral form of crystal petrifies all organic matter—people, plants, anything living—with which it comes into contact. Crystals—solid forms whose elements are ordered in patterns that repeat outward in three dimensions—have long been associated with magic, fascinated scientists, and influenced science fiction writers. But rather than abstractly envisage Ballard’s world, as Schattenkerk does Crichton’s, Lislegaard uses the author’s uncontrollable crystallization as a metaphor for how one’s experience of reality, time, and space is filtered through the “enduring fragments of memory and experience.”<sup>9</sup>

In the chapter “The Crystallized Forest,” Ballard writes that the viral crystal is “an actual proliferation of the sub-atomic identity of all matter. It’s as if a sequence of displaced but identical images of the same object were being produced by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light.”<sup>10</sup> In her c-print *Entropology, exterior, hotel #03* (2007), like the others in her series, a forest appears refracted and fragmented, as if sliced into flattened, receding layers that build upon themselves exponentially within three dimensions (re-calling Malevich’s flattened perspective, holography from all angles at once, and Lina Bo Bardi’s 1951 Glass House). Certain areas, as in the right side of the image, are entirely blacked out; these voids continue, framing out sections of the image, so that the image is broken apart into a series of layered frames that form an architectural structure delimited by absence.

In other photographs from the series, foliage multiplies in and around the uninhabitable fragmented architectural structures that exist without the usual structural support or logic. They hover above the plant life that overruns the structures in other places and monochrome spatial rifts in white or black disrupt perspective. What is presented and alluded to in the series is a modernist glass hotel—an allegory for the structuring of knowledge—being overrun and misaligned. In the context of Ballard’s description of a temporal refraction, Lislegaard’s photographs have petrified a number of pluralistic moments in the simultaneous multiplication and degradation of both time and space, creating a mnemonic landscape and alluding to the interdependence of perception, knowledge, time, and space.

### Making More Room

The shift that Aranda, Schattenkerk, Freeman, and Lislegaard are making together with many other artists working with photography, science, and science fiction—from Sean Higgins to Gerald Edwards III, Steve Schofield to Bettina Khano—is not a rebuttal to the advancement of the kinds of photographic technologies presented by NASA. Instead, their work seems to be the outcome of a freer sense of artistic license combined with an exploration of older photographic techniques and the possibilities presented by new economical digital

technologies. It is also the product of a willingness to allow the process to show, its mistakes to flourish, which makes more room for conceptualism, referentiality, and imagination. What compels artists to create miniature models and photograph them, to shoot endless photographs and collage them together digitally, to appropriate old footage anew, to envisage obscure scientific theories or anomalies, or to hybridize old and newer technologies is the same impulse that drives scientists to experiment with the absurd only to find the essential, and science fiction writers to dismantle what is considered real or true to replace it with what could be, which ultimately manifests.

*Chris Fitzpatrick is a curator, artist, experimental musician, and writer living in San Francisco.*

### NOTES

1. See also, for example, Harvard IIC’s work in “astronomical medicine.”
2. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 23–25.
3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT, 1999), 192.
4. From a conversation with the artist via e-mail.
5. According to a 2004 press release issued by Andrew Kreps Gallery to announce the opening of the Franklin Abraham.
6. According to a 2004 press release issued by Fine Arts Unternehmen to announce the screening of Jonah Freeman’s film *The Franklin Abraham*, as part of the video and film series.
7. Lisi Raskin, “Jonah Freeman,” *Frieze*, no. 86 (October 2004).
8. From a press release issued by Murray Guy announcing Ann Lislegaard’s exhibition *Ann Lislegaard* in 2008.
9. From a press release issued by Statens Museum for Kunst, announcing Ann Lislegaard’s exhibition *Crystal World* in 2007.
10. J. G. Ballard, *The Crystal World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 73.