

Desirée Holman: 'Sophont in Action' - Desirée Holman's Other Worlds

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May 18, 2014



Desirée Holman's solo exhibition at di Rosa's Gatehouse Gallery prompts, among other things, a deep tumble down that rabbit hole known as the internet. Citing figures from the history of spiritual mysticism while displaying pseudo-technological sculptures, her work makes an argument for the intersection of New Age and tech culture. The Bay Area is ground zero for both movements, and yet they exist at a remove from each other, approximately the distance of a ten foot pole. In works on paper, sculpture, video, and performance, Holman creates a world of weird harmony between science, science fiction, the past, and the future.

The night of the opening reception, five ethereal figures stood at the lip of the di Rosa's lake. Evenly dispersed, they enacted a repeated set of movements, described in the exhibition brochure as "choreography inspired by science fiction films, spiritual dance forms and yoga asanas." This teaser of a large-scale performance scheduled for June 28 was mesmerizing. Their gestures were equally welcoming, equally alien.

The figures represented just some of the characters who will roam the di Rosa landscape come June. The Ecstatic Dancer uses improvisational moves to express spiritual belief and looks like a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. The Time Traveler wears a psionic helmet (often made of discarded kitchenware) and represents a bridge between the classic tinfoil-wearing loony and our contemporary cadre of Google Glass enthusiasts. The Indigo Child, with her bright blue aura, is extremely empathetic and intelligent; she is a precursor to the next level of humanity and a true *sophont* (a term borrowed from science fiction).

As in her previous research-based projects, Holman gives physical shape to lesser-known communities and their unique forms of expression, utilizing role-playing, costume, and dance to enact alternative and often empowering identities. The ideas represented within **Sophont in Action** are abstract and spacey, but once combined, make perfect sense. Each drawing, painting, sculpture and video shows evidence of the hand, paying homage to ideas of self-actualization and individual innovation, cornerstones (respectively) of New Age culture and technological entrepreneurship.

The exhibition traces the lineage of contemporary movements to the occult investigations of the past. A series of aura works feature the familiar rainbow cloud sans subject, triggering the start of the aforementioned internet search. Names like Annie Besant, Aleister Crowley, Edgar Cayce, Franz Mesmer, Helena Blavatskyn, and Norbert Wiener cover subjects from theosophy to magic and futurism to mathematics, from the 18th century to the 20th. Holman indulges in a little creative license, fashioning her own versions of these historical figures' multi-hued "frequencies."

Her *Channelling Auras* series places a masked figure in the midst of the aura, questioning the veracity of the imaging. Does the aura represent the hidden human identity or the costume-shop extraterrestrial? Alien faces bridge the gap between individual aura and an expanded view of the universe. In ten acrylic works, Holman depicts a variety of dazzling spacescapes made from a combination of real and fictionalized views of the cosmos, full of glittering stars and dusty nebulas. *Outer Space 2* features a brain-like formation of orange clouds, a fitting companion to the aura set. *Outer Space 5* is more violent, with large airbrushed starbursts punctuating the panel surface.

Dispersed throughout the Gatehouse Gallery, mixed media sculptures on custom pedestals show a combination of identifiable objects (hearing aids, a chandelier), cast and painted hands, electronics, and smooth, abstract head forms. The *Psionics* are humorous props for the figures in Holman's performances and drawings, tools to aid time travel, prevent mind-reading, or do whatever future inventors might dream of doing. Sporadically, the sculptures light up, move ever so slightly, and encourage sustained viewing.

A multi-channel video piece appears on monitors scattered around the show, previewing the three-channel video installation that has its own room: *Close Contact 2*. In subtle shifts of color and shape, the video creates an otherworldly atmosphere akin to Jeremy Blake's more abstract works. At one moment, an alien face appeared in the mist, but disappeared just fast enough for me to question the accuracy of my vision.

In repetition (of titles, subject matter, and form), Holman hints at the many interpretations natural phenomena engender. Whether we choose to gaze at the night sky as an invitation to explore beyond our physical limitations, or peer inside for spiritual guidance, both impulses are rooted in curiosity. Holman's investigations into the weird, unrooted, and most fantastical of subject matter imbue her chosen communities with gravitas and agency. Bridging the gap between techno futurism and New Age culture, *Sophont in Action* provides a utopian meeting ground for two opposing parties in the current discourse on the Bay Area's future. Perhaps a live performance by members of the di Rosa's local community will help pave the way towards visualizing (and enacting) a shared harmonious future, unitards and kitchenware headgear included.

Sophont in Action is on view at di Rosa's Gatehouse Gallery through July 20, 2014. A live performance will take place Saturday, June 28, 7-9:30pm, and an artist talk with cultural critic Erik Davis is scheduled for Thursday, July 10, 7pm.