

Chris Hawtin: Other-Worlds, Alienation and Ambiguity in The New Age of Anxiety.

Perhaps it has always been, for one reason or another, an age of anxiety.

As human knowledge and understanding has evolved and expanded, so too has the scope and reach of our anxieties. Where once we feared the forest and the beast, where once anxiety manifested itself in outsiders, invaders, plunderers from across the sea, it is now projected in all directions, inward and outward; insurgent threats, drones, home-grown terrorism, Frankenfoods, carbon footprints, stealth marketing, economic unsustainability, infectious social instability.

Anxiety pervades every corner of our lives: ecology, society, economy, our homes, relationships, desires and bodies. And beyond its sheer scale and reach, what sets the New Age psyche apart is the underpinning anxiety that for the first time in history, it is probably all our own fault.

Hawtin's epic landscape paintings seem to reflect this sense of deeply penetrating social and personal vexation. One might read these images as visionary revelations, portents of our Post-Carbon Age prospects, representations of an inevitable juncture along our current path. The viewer might play the part of Russell Hoban's Riddley Walker, scouring this deserted country, piecing together the back story, in search of "connexions".¹ Hoban's book is narrated by Walker, a 14-year-old boy and relative innocent, so we discover as much through his observations as is conveyed by what is not told to us. Hawtin employs the same tool in his storytelling, revealing only snippets of his future world in paintings, drawings, sculptures and now models. Our advantage over Walker, or Hawtin's Jerome, et al, is that we perhaps know at least the first part of the back-story.

But possibly these are not visions of the future at all. They might read like the history paintings they gently echo, images of a distant past. Maybe there is a tongue in the cheek of an alternative history book here, a critique of anti-scientific dogma, such as Creationism as demonstrated in Cincinnati's Creation Museum. This attraction presents a literal depiction of the Genesis story as history, complete with animatronic displays demonstrating

dinosaurs and humans walking side-by-side some 6,000 years ago, even down to a saddled Triceratops.² Is Hawtin's world a parodying alternative creation story, a barbed critique of some Scientologist or Raëlian-like belief system, where life on earth was created by an advanced alien race, and these are the holy paintings that speak of the ultimate rescue of the chosen few.³ We might imagine a repositioning of these images in the past or in another galaxy, science fiction scenes played out in cycles; "all this has happened before, and will happen again."⁴

Therein lies one of the great many ambiguities which stretch across this body of work, pushing and pulling between past and future, concealment and disclosure, emergence and collapse, attraction and repulsion, belonging and alienation, pulp fiction and fine art, expertise and amateurism, collapse and convergence, beginning and end, life and death. These may be symptoms of The New Age, disquiet in not knowing what one is seeing, unease in uncertainty.

This is achieved through Hawtin's diverse techniques and painterly mastery. Akin to Hoban's rendering of Riddley Walker, whose society's Stone-Age level of technology and understanding is contrasted with the found remnants of the "sophisticated" people who preceded them, Hawtin cuts and pastes painterly styles, overlaying techniques from different times and places. In *The Mechanism* in particular we see kitschy marbling techniques beneath a continental decorator's dry-brush work, spatters of flicked and sprayed expressionistic paint veiling areas of landscape techniques that could have been lifted from Dutch tourist paintings of the 17th century, serrated scraper marks stolen from a Francis Bacon portrait against graphic, 1980s, metallic rendering. The results are images that seem to span many genres and times, a collapse of heritage into one ambiguous past-present-future space, untethered from rational lineage.

Despite the absence of the figure, the body is present in the forms that dominate these landscapes. And the body, once more, is riddled with anxiety. They are technological, formed in a way that could not possibly hold together were they made three dimensional. In fact, Hawtin explains, these forms are computer generated, a digital intervention into painting using architectural design software, but in such a way that they are all surface;

they would collapse in the physical world. Hollow and empty, they reflect the landscapes around them like broken mirrors.

Hawtin reveals that many reflected elements of the landscapes are recycled from older paintings; landscapes borrowed, fragments panel-beaten into new forms. This might be a kind of schizo-painting, shards pieced together to form new mythology, like the Punch and Judy show of Riddly Walker, misremembered and yet heartbreakingly accurate. Here is also an anxiety about painting itself; it is at once evocative and illusionary, luscious and sensual, fleshy and organic, dirty and drab, lacerated and scabby, stolen and broken.

These bio-morphic bodies are hybrids of parts of other forms, each poetically beginning from (and still containing) the form of an egg, a splicing of technology and organic matter. Fiction here channels fact: recently, during FutureFest 2013, social psychologist Bertolt Meyer gave his phone to a fellow speaker, who was then able to control Meyer's bionic hand. "My hand comes with an iPhone app ... This gives the word hacking an entirely new dimension because if someone hacked my phone they could hack my hand."⁵

Couple this with President Obama's question as to whether "... technology is moving so quick that ... at some point, does the technology outpace the laws that are in place and the protections that are in place?"⁶ At what point does the technology develop more rapidly than our ability to prepare for its consequences?

The paintings play both ways as always. These technological bodies are also beautiful objects, magnificent floating creations, monuments to the power of imagination and invention. There is the science fiction fan's obsession and detail in each form. Hawtin himself describes imagination as "... a floating, disembodied assemblage of seemingly irrational elements with many potential directions ..." and could be talking about the painting itself as a representation of pure imagination, a celebration of its power. Is it not this human imagination that binds us together, that creates us as societal beings and provides hope amidst anxiety? Imagination is the place where worlds are made.

There are other more familiar bodies just out of frame, their presence indicated by rudely written signposts marking territories, or broken makeshift residences, sometimes apparently constructed from debris like Jerome's hut in *The Mechanism*. But in *Ennio's Spire* there is again the ambiguous suggestion that this could be either a new kind of semi-organic structure, a future bio-architecture, or the ruins of a previous, tower-like structure, possibly a sky-scraper.

Belief systems and ideologies are always bubbling away beneath the surface. In conversation, Hawtin describes these humanoid characters in great depth, each part of a complexly allegorical story that is still unfolding in the work. Their alienation from this world, their relationships with each other and with the ominous bio-technological forms that co-habit the landscapes point to the work's relationships with politics and technology. Each character, Hawtin explains, has a carefully chosen name, for example Marco (after the explorer Marco Polo), Seth (Brundle, the scientist from *The Fly*), Jerome (after St Jerome, the hermit); their significances and relationships with each other are developing into some kind of parable of 20th century political history.

These characters have been revealed to us before in Hawtin's previous theatrical sculptural works. Here they have become miniaturised, have moved away from theatre, perhaps towards the hobbyist's workshop. The language of model-making (in this case butchered and bastardised Warhammer figures, rather than matchstick architecture, WWII aeroplanes, or model railways) brings with it an outsider quality. There is a harmlessness, an innocent boyhood preoccupation, or a hobbyist's retirement project, but also a sincerity and an authenticity that one attributes to the model-maker; a truth that can only be spoken by the outsider.

Of course, for Hawtin this ambiguity is ripe; the models negotiate the spaces between the paintings and the sculptures:

"For me the unique quality of painting is that one can simultaneously invest in the object and the space. With film we are entirely invested in the space, and with sculpture the object. It seemed to me that a model is an object that is similarly invested with the fictional space of a painting"

Other-Worlds seem to be inevitable side-effects of our New Age; dystopian settings which pick and mix from the available palette of anxieties. These are not places of escape, these are not decorative diversions, these are not proposed alternatives. Hawtin describes fiction as "... a place; a vehicle for channelling and filtering back elements of life." Like Hawtin's characters, we are all experiencing alienation; from the landscape, from the technology we can no longer understand, from each other, a kind of enforced nomadism.

But there are no lessons here, this is not some confessional, this is no lecture. These are the playing out of scenarios revealed only in brief flickers, fragments of a fiction, channels of imagination, windows on a hidden world with all its ambiguities.

Recent news from The New Age has seen the reported inclusion of geo-engineering in the UN Climate Report by Russia,⁷ reflecting the money that has already been invested in the development of these technologies. At the end of September the first cargo ship navigated the North East passage, once an impenetrable sheet of ice.⁸ This is framed by territorial scraps, a race for the undiscovered oil reserves beneath the Arctic ice sheets and debates over new and potentially lucrative tourism opportunities.

And so, in this New Age reading of Hawtin's Other-World, the ambiguity is rich and true, with pessimism perhaps, that this is the land to which our current track leads, our current economic and political destination. Perhaps the money has been spent, the deals have been made, perhaps the future has already been bought. But it is also a metaphorical world, one which we already inhabit, alone in these hybrid landscapes, each of us a nomad, but retaining the enormous potential of imagination. Unlike in the pick and mix spirituality of the New Age that came before, each of us now assembles our Other-Worlds from the palette of anxieties laid before us.

Welcome to The New Age of Anxiety.

By Duncan McAfee

References:

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