This Island Earth

From idyllic Eden to environment in peril, landscape has been a continual source of inspiration to Kelly Richardson grounding her explorations in photography and video. Starting with her earliest appropriations of horror movie landscapes in the *Supernatural Series* (2001–2004), Richardson’s subsequent productions have developed into an increasingly ambitious cycle of single- and multi-channel video installations. Rendered using state-of-the-art software that allows the artist to create seamless montages of still images and animated graphics, her embrace of digital media allows her to effectively combine cinema and landscape.

Her recent works *Mariner 9*, *Orion Tide* and *The Last Frontier* form an uneasy trilogy. Influenced as much by her affection for Romantic painting as by the computer-generated imagery (CGI) used in contemporary cinema and video games, Richardson’s latest work demonstrates a peculiar fascination with the future. Where earlier video installations such as *Exiles of the Shattered Star* (2006) were more evocative of the Romantic sublime embodied by the paintings of John Martin (1789-1854) her recent works suggest a greater affinity with contemporary genre films such as *The Day After Tomorrow*. Rather than depicting the end of the world however she succeeds in evoking troubling futuristic environments.

Richardson uses cinema as a framing device. Rather than cut away from a location to show dialogue or an action sequence, she focuses almost exclusively on the location itself. She elevates the landscape to centre stage while collapsing our experience of time as a linear progression. Her approach to cinema brings to mind the Möbius loop. We are invited to immerse ourselves in each successive landscape but there is no defined beginning, middle or end. No inciting incident. No conclusion.

*Mariner 9*, her most complex project to date is represented by a panoramic C-print depicting an extraordinarily detailed rendering of a Martian landscape based on topographical data culled from NASA and HiRISE, the High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment at the University of...
Arizona. The richly observed details in this extraterrestrial topography are uncanny but the landscape itself is littered with the remains of various Mars missions, including Mariner 9 and Curiosity among others. The image captures an unsettling discrepancy between our sense of wonder and the comedown of realizing that we are staring at a cosmic junkyard.

*Orion Tide* depicts wave after wave of rockets launching into the night sky, their vapour trails blooming over the remote desert landscape. The title connects the dramatic events unfolding to the Orion Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle (MPVC) a new class of spacecraft being developed by NASA that is slated to begin operations in 2014. The Orion MPVC is an ambitious replacement for the Apollo space exploration program with the long-term goal of leaving low Earth orbit and reaching Mars. In the scene, the multi-rocket take-off suggests some form of mass evacuation, a terrestrial exodus into space. Are the rockets being launched in response to a man-made or natural catastrophe? The enigmatic circumstances are never explained.

*The Last Frontier* is just as ominous, depicting a single enormous dome set in a remote mountainous terrain that could easily double as an alien world. Is the dome protecting an unseen population from a hostile environment or containing some catastrophic nuclear or cosmic force? Whether the dome represents a utopian habitat or a dangerous event horizon remains unclear but we can readily imagine that the inhabitants within might well be the same ones escaping in *Orion Tide*. We are left pondering this remote and mysterious environment.

Richardson excels at creating these densely layered environments. She spends an inordinate amount of time rendering individual effects in different software platforms to get the atmosphere and components just right. For instance, the landscape in *Orion Tide* is composed of a series of nine still images shot in West Texas that have been stitched together and colour graded to appear as if the landscape was shot during the last light of day. The sky was composed entirely in Photoshop. The rockets were rendered using a combination of Lightwave and Turbulence FD before everything was composited and colour graded in After Effects. Unlike *Orion Tide*,
the landscapes in Mariner 9 and The Last Frontier are entirely digitally produced using Terragen a photorealistic scenery generating software. Multi-channel audio further enhances and completes the illusion by providing a soundtrack for the explosive displacement of air and the dull roar of rocket engines.\[^{3}\]

While deploying many of the same effects used in cinema and gaming environments, Richardson purposefully eschews story and plot, limiting narrative in favour of an immersive and meditative flow. Despite this evacuation of narrative her futuristic trilogy evokes a deep sense of ecological ruin: from the rockets abandoning the planet to the Martian scrap yard and finally the desolate bio-dome. In this regard her themes parallel those prevalent in the speculative science-fiction cinema of the early 1970s. Films such as Silent Running, Soylent Green and Z.P.G. (for Zero Population Growth) were influenced by the nascent ecological movement and openly hypothesized a bleak future based on fears of overpopulation and pollution. Silent Running for instance centres on the fate of a space age Noah’s Ark preserving the last remnants of the world’s forests after an ecological disaster.\[^{4}\]

Richardson’s concerns parallel these prescient eco-minded motion pictures, but she achieves her goals without the hindrance of unwieldy sets or a large cast and crew. She shrewdly translates cinematic effects from black box to white cube, illuminating a haunting yet not quite hopeless future.

— Ivan Jurakic

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3. Software and rendering details from e-mail correspondence with the artist.