Kahn & Selesnick: The Apollo Prophecies and Mars Adrift on the Hourglass Sea

January 14 — April 3, 2011

1. Art Critical, Feb. 18, 2011
Unitard Fabulists Adrift: Kahn & Selesnick on the Hourglass Sea

by Eileen Boroan

Kahn & Selesnick: Unitard Fabulists Adrift on the Hourglass Sea at Yancey Richardson Gallery

January 6 – February 19, 2011
535 West 23rd Street 3rd floor, between 10th and 11th avenues
New York City, 212-279-9393

Kahn & Selesnick fabulist at the intersection of historical fact, apocalyptic future, nature mysticism and steam-punk. Melding childlike playfulness with adult obfuscations, they make false-historical narratives realized as photography, sculpture, and installation.

Marc Adriff on the Hourglass Sea, currently on view at Yancey Richardson Gallery, depicts the adventures of two unadorned women as they explore an unwelcoming landscape studded with the defunct remains of antiquated circus, abandoned oil derricks and gigantic moons. Most of the works are photographs, including a few of the detailed pencil scenes that the team is known for. Five mid-size dry-erasing hens and a concrete sculpture are positioned on the gallery floor, as though the exploring team had managed to send back a few heavy artifacts from the prehistoric civilization they investigate.

The environment was digitally constructed from actual photograph-mosaic of Martian landscapes taken by NASA, combined with drawings in Nevada and Utah. The female protagonist’s clothing is completely impractical—many outfits lack arms or eye-holes, though concessions to the necessity of breathing are plentiful—every body suit comes equipped with a face mask, and snake-like tubes coil around an “Abandoned Oxygen Farm” and are tangled in shallow waters. This film has water, and hence, the ability to sustain life—though judging by the occasional space-suit dressed corpse, not forever.

With Marc Adriff on the Hourglass Sea, Kahn & Selesnick have departed from previous more “academic” displays—where androgynous figures were carefully presented in display cases, and copious documentation of the expedition was presented in the form of a diary or log, or elaborately forged newspaper articles. Their new deliberate ambiguity liberates the earthbound preoccupations of artist and viewer alike, allowing suspension of disbelief. Oddly this suspension both strengthens the impact of the show, and allows it to be perceived more intuitively. When rules of space and time are no longer obvious, as in Oracle, 2010, where a blue-dial figure repairs a half-sphere upon which stands a blue-dial figure regarding a half sphere, and so on the self-consistency meta—Russian nesting doll’s it’s hard not to be jolted by the impossibility—a sign of prior credence.

Kahn & Selesnick’s ongoing interest in inefficient transportation extends beyond the recurring motifs of balloons and dirigibles to grilles and “sandbags.” Humankind has made it to Mars, but with technology from the turn of the 20th century. This is the second series where the team has combined scifi fiction and space travel with artistic means—in The Apotheoses, man lands on the moon, only to discover that it has already been colonized by an expedition from the Edwardian era.

If, as the artists propose, humankind has truly come a’cupcake in time and space, as the hourglass of the title is endlessly flipped and endless, we must address the unsettling question: Is Man’s past a present? If so, is Man’s present, Earth’s future?

One might conjecture that the team’s recurring choice of explorers as protagonists reveals something of their psyches—the artist as6penetrate in a strange land—and but Kahn & Selesnick to separate reality from art in “real life” (to the point, McDermott & McGough). It is only in their art that there is no division between fact and fabrication. The distinction is irrelevant—to behavior it would be missing the point. In art, unlike life, there is no physical or temporal limitation.

Two concurrent exhibitions of Kahn & Selesnick:

The Apotheoses and Marc Adriff on the Hourglass Sea
Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago
600 S. Michigan Ave, Chicago, through April 3. 312-855-5554

Marc Adriff on the Hourglass Sea
Crosby Gallery
140 North Wells Street, Chicago, through February 19. 312-296-8812
Mythographers: Kahn & Selesnick Recall the Future, Foretell the Past

By Kila Laia

Cave, 2010, Marc Adlirft on the Hourglass Sea © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

I found Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick at their New York gallery Yancey Richardson, looking over their human-length book of the Circular River project. The book Kahn bound is a beautifully aged tome containing the account of a fictional Odyssey through Siberia with panoramic shots of a desolate landscape punctuated with tales of remote viewing, shamanism and mystical adventures woven into fables with accompanying faux-artifacts.


"The R.E.C. Siberian Expedition of 1945-46" continued the story of the R.E.C. in its post-war conclusion. A seven-foot wide leather bound book held the 65 long sepia panoramas and 100 pages of text."

City of salt; ON THE EDGE OF THE MARSHES © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

Kahn and Selesnick have been collaborating since the age of 18 when they met at university and bonded over their shared interest in English literature and the art of rural England, stone circles and mysticism. "It was odd because in St. Louis no one really cared about British artists one bit. There was no one to talk to about that elsewhere in America, which was a cross ugly place - to some extent - in suburbia," says Nicholas Kahn, recalling how they would build imaginary stone-circles in parks in Washington and St. Louis, and how even now, in their 40s, Kahn confesses laughing, "We are repeating the same formula from when we started...sad but true." And yet, their growing series of chronicles have culminated in an elaborate alternate history - a testament to their obsessive dedication as mythomongers.

Their current show, Marc: Adrift on the Hourglass Sea, is the story of travelers moored in a fossilized ocean on the red planet. The narrative begins with two women trying to reorient the ice after arriving in a pod symbolic of a male seedpod. There is a birth and a baby, and exotic references to creation myths, of Shiva floating in a pond on a bed of snakes, the double-headed Janus, the Roman god of gateways, which are woven together in an incoercible narrative. As mythmakers they play with the idea of rewriting history, constructing artifacts - specimens from antiquity, or from a fantastic future - that become corroborative evidence to a fictional history of their own making. The projects are tied together by the greater theme of landscape. Says Selesnick, "it is about the story of man's interaction with the landscape, and each project is another chapter in that story."

"smpfinzel/vulmioch/marshlandwormhole, from 'Scotland Future Blog' © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery"

In Circular River, their second photographic collaboration, the pages of the book appear as though out of someone’s diaries, a record of the past or the future, referencing its own closed system of logic.

NN: Circular River was set in Siberia 1945-46 - two Englishmen who go in search of a lost German glider pilot who goes native, and he becomes a shaman himself. We were studying shamanism to get into the real characters here. That word comes from the [Siberian] Tungus word for shaman. There's still tribal shamanism in Russia. It got squashed by the communist regime, but it's making a revival. It's the inscriptions on these that tell the story.

RB: It's record keeping and inventory. We didn't go to Siberia, but shot it in England, Northern Scotland, Switzerland, Cape Cod and upstate NY.

KL: You have an obsession with bleak landscapes?

NN: That's why Marx is the ultimate bleak place to go to. We used a 35 mm film camera for Circular River, and then had snapshots made. We would paste together the snapshots to make the panoramas and then do it bit by bit on the Xerox machine. There is text that goes with each image.

KL: How did you begin your collaborative process? What roles do you each play?

NN: Initially we were painters, and we painted on each others' pictures. I would do a group of paintings and give them to him, or he would me, and he would do a separate one in similar style - it was good because if you weren't solving the problem yourself, someone else would finish it off."

RB: It varies. We brain storm images. We both come up with things we wanted to do.

NN: I tend to be the man who finds the costumes and often builds the props. I bound this book and Richard bound the previous book.

"Mummy Fields, Circular River 1998-99 © Kahn & Selesnick"

KL: These look like mummified gliders.

NN: There is actually one mummy, and I changed costumes in the field to make it look like many. That's our cheap and easy technique for most of this. It's me and Richard three different times. We were the main characters. We had three tents in the field [in Cape Cod] and we made up all the other tents. The tide came up and ruined the shoot. We have a lot of things like that happen to us...[laughs]

KL: How did you become interested in shamanism?

NN: My wife had more of an interest; she was a healer and I am more of a sham shaman.

A lot of our work does come from visions - they go into the drawings, which then work their way into the photographs eventually. Some of the ideas for the photographs come from when we are in that state.
Mythographers: Kahn & Selesnick Recall the Future, Foretell the Past

By Kika Loia

For the Mars project one of the concepts was that the two women, are somewhat like Tibetan monks, in that they are traveling in a trance to Mars to bring back this information through advance meditation techniques. This is in a lot of our work, this magical element that grows into these other worlds through various states of mind-body traveling experiences. And as a child, I was traveling out of body a lot and flying in dreams, and that’s the reason for me to want to fly in these stories. It’s an escape from the mundane to the more exotic. But actually what you find [in reality] is sometimes quite hideous: I was in Nepal hang-gliding and strapped to someone operating it. It was the most gorgeous place; you could see Everest in the background. We circled up and up -- and I get overwhelmingly nauseous, because to stay up there, you have to keep circling, and the motion makes everyone want to throw up; I had to close my eyes. You see everything spinning around you, and it feels like being spun on a top. So there’s this dream to get to this place, but there’s no ecstasy when you’re finally up there -- or it’s mixed with horror.

The Three Travellers, City of Salt © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

THE EMPTY MIRROR, © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

Kahn and Selesnick’s Scotland Future Bag project is structured by a Borgesian-like narration describing the survival of a post-apocalyptic tribe of bug-dwellers, with supporting iconography and artifacts. In City of Salt, stories are told in the style of Calvino that conjure a magical and hallucinatory Arabian nights quest. The narratives, whose characters sometimes interconnect across different series, step through deeper visionary projections like a literary Moby Dick or an Escherian universe where meaning is relative to itself. It was Bertrand Russell who said that every definition or meaning must necessarily lead to something yet undefined. With Kahn and Selesnick we begin and end in infinite loops that branch from the tree of history. The edges are purposefully vague; the window is left a little tarnished; the mental accuracy of the narrator is in doubt.

THE FLYER, City of Salt © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

KL: I see that you use many styles of narrative structures. What are your writing influences?

NK: [Originally] I came from post-modern literature. Influenced by William Blake, Stanley Spencer, Samuel Palmer... We also pull in others to help us in the writing. We like collaborating with other writers and working off their styles, but they have to enter our worlds.

KL: There’s no reference to scale, like in the desert?

NK: Exacty, the scale of rocks can be very confusing.

KL: Something on the moon could be incredibly far distance away or very high up but the sharpness is equal to something that is very close. There is no atmosphere. So in our minds we can’t tell what is where.

KL: There is no text with the current project?

RK: We oscillate between doing narratives that are very linear, and that often traps you in a certain way, so often times, we make a story that you have to read more...

Concrete Car 3, 2010, Mars: Aridfr on the Haurgels Sea © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

KL: So, are you both armchair travelers?

RK: Half of it is having the chance to recreate it in your mind. For example, in Lübeck, Germany, [Lübeck, 1982], we didn’t go to the place till two thirds of the project was completed. We shot all sorts of miniatures and versions of Lübeck in Brooklyn. Our director wanted to just photograph it. The whole point was to create a world... Going to the landscape is less interesting. Once our mythology gets added in, it gets much more interesting.

KL: So, are you both armchair travelers?

RK: Half of it is having the chance to recreate it in your mind. For example, in Lübeck, Germany, [Lübeck, 1982], we didn’t go to the place till two thirds of the project was completed. We shot all sorts of miniatures and versions of Lübeck in Brooklyn. Our director wanted to just photograph it. The whole point was to create a world... Going to the landscape is less interesting. Once our mythology gets added in, it gets much more interesting.

KL: So, are you both armchair travelers?

RK: Half of it is having the chance to recreate it in your mind. For example, in Lübeck, Germany, [Lübeck, 1982], we didn’t go to the place till two thirds of the project was completed. We shot all sorts of miniatures and versions of Lübeck in Brooklyn. Our director wanted to just photograph it. The whole point was to create a world... Going to the landscape is less interesting. Once our mythology gets added in, it gets much more interesting.

Concrete Car 3, 2010, Mars: Aridfr on the Haurgels Sea © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

KL: Half of it is having the chance to recreate it in your mind. For example, in Lübeck, Germany, [Lübeck, 1982], we didn’t go to the place till two thirds of the project was completed. We shot all sorts of miniatures and versions of Lübeck in Brooklyn. Our director wanted to just photograph it. The whole point was to create a world... Going to the landscape is less interesting. Once our mythology gets added in, it gets much more interesting.
Mythographers: Kahn & Selesnick Recall the Future, Foretell the Past

By Kira Lalal

ClTEMN, 2010, Mars: Adrift on the Hourglass Sea © Kahn & Selesnick, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

RS: The sculptures are of cement imitating sandstone that is actually on Mars, which has a lot of iron in it. The round rocks are actually found on Mars - called blueberries - haematite boles - formed by water running through sandstone.

NK: The birthing, the eggs, the symbols are of becoming a double, of eggs separating in mitosis. It is a womb or a travel device.

RS: We went to certain places in Utah where they had petrified rock from some kind of volcanic event.

NK: Petrified sand dunes. Ancient seabed - but tidal.

RS: The background here is actual Mars from NASA shots. They do false colour projections to try and differentiate rocks. It was actually a blue colour. All the photos the Rover sends back is online in super high resolution for people to download.

KL: That’s how the sky looks like from Mars?

NK: There should be stars in the Martian sky. A well-known cloud used to be called the blue scorpion. The clouds are probably frozen methane or carbon dioxide.

KL: Shamanism is about time travel...

NK: We are constantly studying and there’s a lot of research behind this, and hopefully that will be in the service of making it timeless.

RS: We have desire to travel in time or space out of wherever we happen to be.

NK: Hence the use of inebrants or flight. [With] trying Salvia, I don’t race to go back to do it. It was amazing but frightening as anything...

Richard Selesnick and Nicholas Kahn - photo: Kira Lalal 2011

For more information visit Kahnselesnick.com

Mars: Adrift on the Hourglass Sea January 6 - February 19, 2011
YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY 535 West 22nd Street 3rd floor, New York NY 10011