

Desirée Holman: Sophont in Action

May 10–July 20, 2014

Desirée Holman's work takes root in the space between fantasy and reality. Through a range of media, she questions what games of make believe can tell us about our behaviors in the "real" world. Technology, the Internet, and various social media platforms have infiltrated almost every aspect of our daily lives, radically altering the ways in which we relate to the world and to each other. On many levels these outlets have become a playground for acting out aspects of our personas we might otherwise leave veiled, and in the process underscore our human need for connection. As such, imaginary play features prominently in Holman's cur-

rent body of work, *Sophont in Action*, which explores how technology, fantasy, and belief are often used to achieve creative, spiritual, and social fulfillment. More specifically, the exhibition highlights the utopian ideals shared between the tech world and hippie culture—the ironic bedfellows that characterize this region—and the potential that exists in this overlap for positive change.

As a project-based artist, Holman undertakes multiyear anthropological investigations into various cultural niches, often gravitating toward intrinsic elements of humanity such as collective identity, family constructs, emotional attachment, and the role of fantasy in our lives. For example, Holman has examined human behavior and emotion through the eyes of a group of chimpanzees in *Troglodyte* (2005); media representations of family, class, and race through an approximation of the popular TV shows *Roseanne* and *The Cosby Show* in *The Magic Window* (2007); the curious realm of "reborner" culture through individuals who adopt hyperrealistic baby dolls and nurture them as "real" children in *Reborn* (2009); and the world of role-playing through the deconstruction of a virtual landscape in *Heterotopias* (2011).

Sophont in Action takes an otherworldly turn. Inspired by the overlapping terrain of technology, sci-fi pop culture, and New Age practices popularized by the 1960s countercultural movement, Holman explores "otherness" and the shaping of identity within an evolving world. Through an immersive, multimedia installation, Holman unpacks the iconography and aesthetics associated with these realms—including aliens, auras, and time travelers—to investigate their common ideals. Her research for the project spans from nineteenth century scholarship to her own engaged observation of New Age enthusiasts such as E.T. cultists, crystal therapists, and expressive dancers, among others. The project's title draws from science fiction author Poul Anderson's use of the term



Channeling Aura 1, 2012. Gouache on paper, 30 x 22 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Psionics 10, 2013. Mixed media, 16 x 16 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.



sophont to describe an intelligent being capable of extraordinary reasoning and introspection. *Sophont* is also associated with the Buddhist term “sentient being”—those with the ability to feel or perceive. Similarly, *Sophont in Action* prompts viewers to consider possibilities beyond one’s sensory limits.

Comprised of painting, sculpture, drawing, video, and a site-specific performance, the exhibition presents a fantasyscape for viewers to carefully examine the visual elements testing their perception. Holman’s vivid color-field works are painted from photographs taken with chakra biofeedback imaging technology to capture the auras of human subjects dressed in store-bought alien masks. Her *Outer Space* series depicts starscapes derived from digital hybrids of real and fabricated astronomy maps. Additionally, a multi-channel video installation dispersed throughout the gallery animates several of these works in a gradual, nearly imperceptible movement with a haunting soundscape composed by former Dirty Projectors member Angel Deradoorian.

Holman’s *Psionics* series of time-traveler helmets, originating from a 2013 performance at SFMOMA, offer a retro spin on present-day wearable technologies such as Google Glass. Made from broken remote controls, well-worn kitchen utensils, and other recycled materials sourced from thrift stores and junk shops, the sculptures are intentionally constructed in an ad hoc, homemade manner—much

like the tin foil hats associated with paranoia and conspiracy theories. At the same time, Holman uses hi-tech microprocessors to animate the works with programmed movements and glowing neon lights. Holman’s work wryly insinuates that as technology continues to evolve, and wearable devices become more commonplace, the distinctions between science fiction and contemporary life are ever more blurred. In this way the project recalls the work of game designer Jane McGonigal, whose book *Reality is Broken* examines the power of alternate reality games and digital technologies to tackle real life dilemmas, from depression and obesity to climate change and poverty.

Holman’s performance for the exhibition extends the project throughout the di Rosa landscape with an experience structured around three central character types: Ecstatic Dancers, who practice free-form movement to express spirituality; Indigo Children, a purported group of youth believed to possess supernatural powers; and Time Travelers, who have the ability to move backward and forward in time. The performers, cast from the local community, are outfitted with custom-made unisex costumes and helmets and engage in choreography inspired by science fiction films, spiritual dance forms, and yoga asanas to manifest a utopian future. Similar to the aliens in Holman’s aura paintings, these ambiguous characters call attention to the possibility of a future void of binary distinctions.

Oscillating between terrestrial and extraterrestrial, and new and old ages, *Sophont in Action* explores the myriad ways we grapple with our ongoing quest for truth, meaning, and finding our place in an ever-changing universe. Through fantasy and performance, Holman creates an aesthetic language for things we cannot see. Holman uses this approach to erode the boundaries between such forms as Ecstatic Dance and developments in the tech industry, noting that their shared visions for personal liberation—be they through physical movement or a wearable device—are perhaps not as different as they might seem. By exaggerating these concepts in visual form, Holman liberates us from the burden of reality to freely embrace and critically question how fantasy leads us to, or diverts us from, our utopian aspirations.

—Amy Owen, Curator

Exhibition Checklist:

In the listing of dimensions, height precedes width precedes depth.

Aura, Annie Besant, 2014

Acrylic on panel
12 x 9 in.

Aura, Buckminster Fuller, 2014

Acrylic on panel
12 x 9 in.

Aura Convergence, Crowley & Cayce, 2013

Gouache on paper
36 x 72 in.

Aura, Franz Mesmer, 2013

Gouache on paper
30 x 22 in.

Aura, Helena Blavatsky, 2013

Gouache on paper
30 x 22 in.

Aura, Norbert Wiener, 2014

Acrylic on panel
12 x 9 in.

Aura, Paracelsus, 2013

Gouache on paper
30 x 22 in.

Channeling Aura 1, 2012

Gouache on paper
30 x 22 in.

Channeling Aura 5, 2012

Gouache on paper
30 x 22 in.

Channeling Aura 7, 2013

Gouache on paper
30 x 22 in.

Close Contact, 2013

Multi-channel video installation
Looping

Close Contact 2, 2014

3-channel video installation
Looping

Magnetism, 2013

Gouache and pencil on paper
24 x 48 in.

Milky Way, 2012

Acrylic, watercolor, and color pencil on paper
22 x 30 in.

Outer Space 2, 2014

Acrylic on panel
22 x 40 in.

Outer Space 3, 2014

Acrylic on panel
22 x 40 in.

Outer Space 4, 2014

Acrylic on panel
22 x 40 in.

Outer Space 5, 2014

Acrylic on panel
22 x 40 in.

Outer Space 6, 2014

Acrylic on panel
22 x 40 in.

Outer Space 7, 2014

Acrylic on panel
22 x 40 in.

Outer Space 8, 2014

Acrylic on panel
26 x 48 in.

Outer Space 9, 2014

Acrylic on panel
12 x 9 in.

Outer Space 10, 2014

Acrylic on panel
12 x 9 in.

Outer Space 11, 2014

Acrylic on panel
12 x 9 in.

Psionics 14, 2013

Mixed media
42 x 24 x 12 in.

Psionics 15, 2013

Mixed media
39 x 12 x 12 in.

Psionics 16, 2013

Mixed media
39 x 12 x 12 in.

Psionics 17, 2013

Mixed media
39 x 12 x 12 in.

Psionics 18, 2013

Mixed media
70 x 12 x 12 in.

Psionics 19, 2013

Mixed media
58 x 12 x 12 in.

Sophont in Action, June 28, 2014

Live, site-specific performance at di Rosa, Napa
90 min.

Time Traveler, 2013

Gouache and pencil on paper
29 ¾ x 41 ¾ in.

Angel Deradoorian

Dance, 2013

Soundscape

11 min. 19 sec.

Courtesy of the artist

Unless otherwise noted, all works are courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

About the Artist:

Desirée Holman is a project-based artist investigating themes of identity, social transgression, and alternative realities across multiple mediums, often over a two- to three-year period. She was awarded the SFMOMA SECA award in 2008 and the Artadia: The Fund for Art and Dialogue award in 2007. Previous solo exhibitions of her work include the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, RMCAD's Philip J. Steele Gallery in Denver, and the Berkeley Art Museum's MATRIX program. Holman holds a master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and resides in Oakland. She is represented by Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco.

Acknowledgments:

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