

MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS

DON'T BE SURPRISED BY THE ODD UFO IN TONY LLOYD'S WORK, WRITES **ASHLEY CRAWFORD**. HOVERING ABOVE IMPENETRABLE MOUNTAINS, THESE SCI-FI SYMBOLS ARE STAND-INS FOR THE UNKNOWABLE, THE VAST INFINITY OF THINGS HUMANS CAN NEVER COMPREHEND. PORTRAIT BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**.

There are more things. The very title of **Tony Lloyd's** 2008 show sets the imagination riot. What is out there? It sparks that morbidly curious side of the brain that is seduced by conspiracy theories, alternate universes and UFOs. And indeed, that is what you get with Tony Lloyd. To be sure, there, barely visible above majestic snow-capped mountains, is a craft from another planet or at the very least from Area 51. And there, a darkened van sits deserted, its driver abducted by aliens or perhaps evidence of the disappearance of all human kind.

Lloyd has taken the title of his show from a deeply creepy story by Argentinian writer **Jorge Luis Borges**, who in turn had taken it from **Shakespeare**. In a further literary twist Borges's story was an homage to the infamous American horror writer **HP Lovecraft**, who at one stage wrote that: "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents."

But a conversation with Tony Lloyd often seems like such an attempt at encyclopedic correlation. He drops cultural and scientific references like confetti. Literary references collide with conspiracy theories. Comics and philosophy are equal fodder. This cocktail is vented in portrayals of UFOs hovering over the gnarled visage of the Sphinx or traversing the skies of Patagonia. There are gutted post-apocalyptic cities and film noir-style highways. Indeed, his 2009 survey show is titled *Lost Highways* in clear homage to filmmaker **David Lynch**.

"The UFOs are fun but I use them quite seriously as well," Lloyd says. "I have never seen one, and I have difficulties believing in things I haven't seen, but I like to imagine things that I don't understand and I use the UFOs in my work as signifiers of that leap of imagination into things we cannot comprehend – immensity, infinity."

Lloyd began dabbling in UFO-ology in 2008 while on a residency in Rome. "I was doing some research in the Vatican library on the 16th century heretic **Giordano Bruno**. I was principally interested in his ideas on light and shadows and imagination but I found that he was

also interested in the idea of an infinite universe containing other worlds." Indeed, Bruno was eventually burnt at the stake for suggesting that there are an infinite number of earths with an infinite number of Adams and Eves.

As is hinted by the title of his 2008 show at Nellie Castan Gallery in Melbourne, *There Are More Things*, Lloyd is unsurprisingly a huge fan of the labyrinthine writings of Borges. "I find Borges so incredibly profound that a line from a story is often the starting point for my work," he says. "This story was particularly interesting to me because of the Lovecraft connection. Lovecraft often wrote about things that were unimaginably old, such as ruins in Antarctica (*At the Mountains of Madness*), and he's the master of invoking awe and dread without ever actually describing what his characters see. Borges takes this further in *There Are More Things* and suggests that unless you understand something you cannot truly see it. In this case I wanted to paint a number of incompatible things and have them coexist in the same universe by using the same monochromatic colour scheme, and play with images that were evocative without being fully comprehensible."

Lloyd's work has always dabbled with a dark palette. Even when referencing schlock, sci-fi B-movies such as *The Day The Earth Stood Still* from 1951, Lloyd manages to strike a chord of contemporaneous dread. "I tend to think that all artists, writers and filmmakers channel the times they live in," he says. "My paintings are usually on the darker side of the tonal scale, but more recently, without exactly intending to, I have created a body of work that does have apocalyptic undercurrents. For example I painted the jet vapour trail and mountain to depict a contrast between the fleeting and the eternal, but I realise it's difficult not to think of carbon emissions and global warming when presented with exhaust and ice."

One particularly ominous painting is titled *Black Sun*. It is, clearly, the end of the world. "I agree it is ominous and I am not completely sure what my attraction to this image is," he admits. "It is such a strange form. I based it on a photograph taken of a nuclear explosion





three milliseconds after detonation. It is a misshapen spherical form with weird tentacles of light coming out of it. It could be an amoeba or a deep sea creature but it has an ominous presence. Often I paint something to attempt to work out why I am attracted to them. I take the image apart and put it back together to try to understand it. I painted it hovering over a deliberately ambiguous field of what could be city lights, or stars, or atoms."

"I am fascinated by what science can show us, and I read and listen to a lot of science news programs. One thing science and art have in common is that they are both constantly revealing to us new ways of looking at things. In this painting I was especially interested in the form things have in time. We can never see the shape of an explosion at three milliseconds with our eyes. Likewise, if we could look at a mountain range over millions of years it would appear as fluid as an ocean."

Lloyd says he chooses images that have "some type of archetypal resonance".

"The woman opening a box and screaming is obviously a reference to Pandora and combined with the paintings of a burning house they do convey a sense of imminent catastrophe, but I also find beauty in these singular moments."

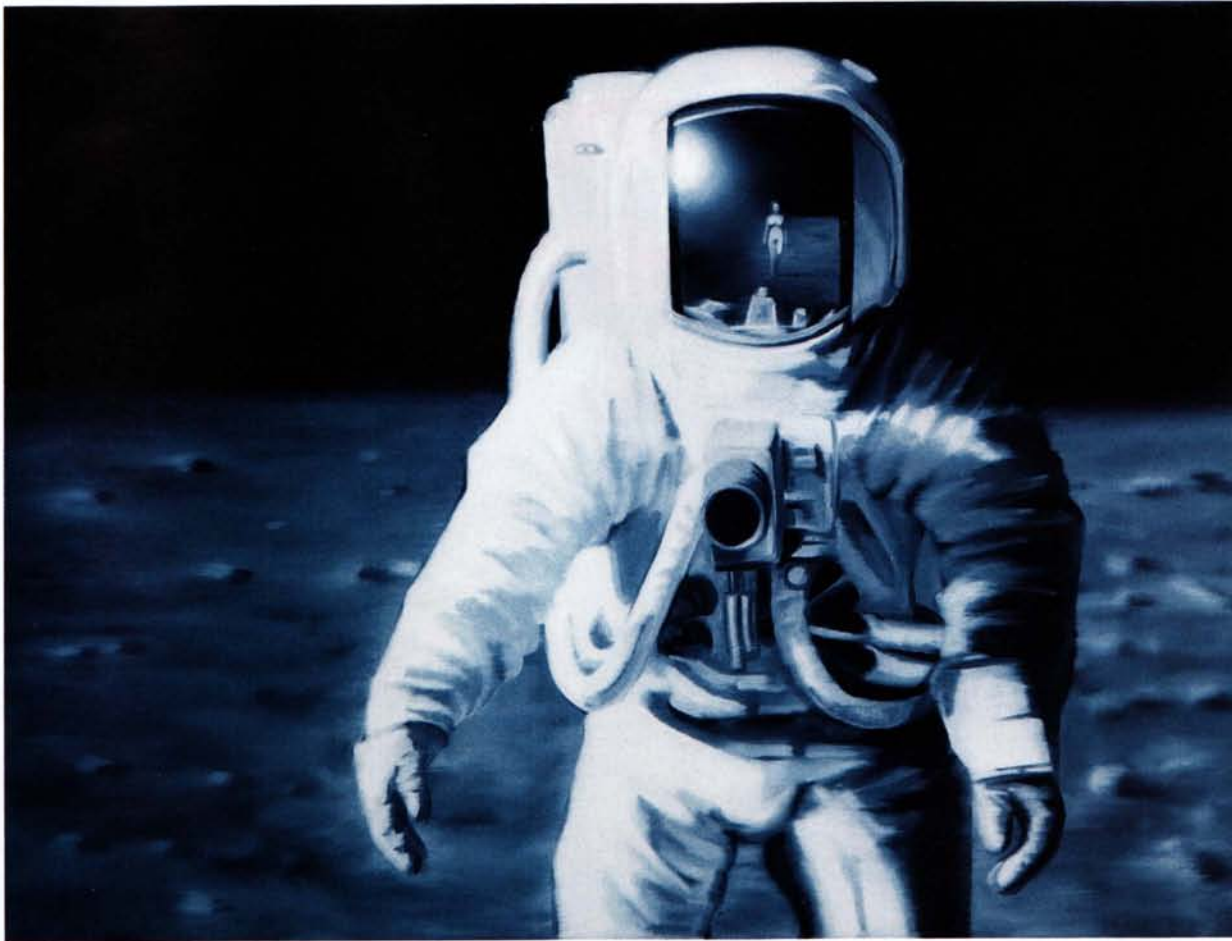
As with many of his contemporaries, cinema has long been an influence on Lloyd. "I have played with images from various films and I like the format of the film story board (which is the same thing as a comic book). I have grabbed pictures of UFOs from various films and combined them with other images I've found. One film in particular

that has fascinated me for a while now is *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). It begins as a **Mickey Spillane** detective film noir but somewhere around the middle it turns sci-fi and ends apocalyptically. I took the Pandora's box image from the film and also the burning houses."

"The graphic imagery of comics is hugely important to me and the format of multiple images has influenced me, particularly in the suites of small works I've been doing for the past few years. At times I think I'd like to paint a comic book but I also think I would find the rigour of telling a narrative too constrictive. I think insinuating the narrative is more imaginatively engaging."

Lloyd's work is clearly encapsulates a strange crossover between popular and high culture – there are times when his work finds the meeting point between **Von Guerard** and **von Däniken**. "I see culture as a spectrum rather than a ladder, everything bleeds into the next thing," he says. "Take for example the high-minded Borges writing in the voice of the lowly horror writer Lovecraft, it's the ideas that are important and they can come from anywhere." ■

New work by Tony Lloyd will be exhibited at Hill Smith Gallery in Adelaide from 25 November to 17 December 2009. A solo exhibition of his work, *Lost Highways*, will be shown at Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale until 8 November 2009 and his work will also be included in *Extropian*, curated by Sam Leach, at Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art in Sydney from 26 November to 13 December 2009.



From far left:

Tony Lloyd, *lonesome highway*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 122 x 91cm.

Tony Lloyd, *the drift*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 122 x 91cm.

Tony Lloyd, *another eden*, 2009. Oil on linen, 23 x 30cm.

PHOTOS: ANDREW WUTTKE. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND HILL SMITH GALLERY, ADELAIDE

SAM HILL-SMITH DIRECTOR, HILL SMITH GALLERY

"Tony Lloyd is a very fine painter. I first saw his work in Sydney, during an exhibition with Michael Carr in 2003. Hill Smith Gallery's first exhibition of Tony Lloyd's paintings was in 2008 titled *World Without End*. It was amongst the better composed and metered exhibitions I have had the pleasure to present.

"Through his representational paintings, Lloyd manages to infuse meaning in a quiet, intelligent manner. For me, this is a major part of his appeal.

"Lloyd's subject matter is often very simple, though some are large heroic views. Each time he imbues the image with a Hitchcock-like sense of foreboding. There is a slightly subversive attitude in the work.

"Lloyd's paintings are not photographic in style. His attention drifts from fine detail to the subtle shifts of tone along edges, through foliage or light slipping across a surface. These facets are wonderfully observed and painted.

"The inference of movement through the blurring of lines gives rise to the perception that one is viewing a still from a film or perhaps the poor registration of an old magazine image – are they old, new or even a vision of a future world? – providing an ambiguity in their reading.

"Lloyd utilises minimal colour to convey feeling and this underwrites the sinister mood of his works. Lloyd's paintings always deliver a wonderful surface, rich in depth and even in continuity. He is an intelligent artist who is unreliant upon fads or shock tactics. He has

his own views of the world and articulates these beautifully in his paintings. The work has a timeless quality which is perhaps what his theme is after all."

Ashley Crawford

SAM LEACH ARTIST & CURATOR

In November, artist Sam Leach will be curating *Extropian*, a group exhibition at Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art in Sydney featuring Tony Lloyd's work. He says: "Along with the road, the aesthetics and history of cinema inform Tony Lloyd's work. Lloyd is an inveterate film buff and his work is rich in references to films. He takes extraordinary pains with the surface of his paintings and achieves an effect which is soft and luminous. As with the cinema, the screen, that is to say the surface of the painting, seems to disappear and we are left with nothing between us and the image.

"However Lloyd is not content to simply quote from films, nor is he hinting at any sort of narrative. In his work he is continually searching for the universal metaphor – the scenes which stick in the mind because they recur in multiple settings with multiple meanings. In Lloyd's paintings language becomes irrelevant. What is being hinted at is some kind of meta-truth that encompasses many possible meanings ... The images thereby make available an insight which cannot be understood completely using language."

Ashley Crawford