

Nightflight to Venus

In 1974, the Arecibo radio telescope broadcast a message to the stars. A string of binary code, its 0s and 1s could be arranged to form a pictograph that gave – and will give – any extraterrestrial lifeforms who intercept it basic details about human beings and the Earth. 21 years later, *Muttnik*, Sriwhana Spong's second solo show at Anna Miles Gallery, featured this same pictograph, its digital information rendered in analogue format, as a strip of batik cloth. From this side of 2000, the work at first suggests the techno-fetishism of the space race appears and as kitschy as mass-produced sarongs.

However, if we consider the labour that has lovingly produced this homage, struggling against the organic curves of the batik to replicate the digital image, we can't write this artefact off as a trashy souvenir version of the precise and purposeful original. Considering this, the work exposes the extent to which last century's 'scientific' endeavours were already grand gestures at the time. The Arecibo message, for instance, wasn't simply an earnest plea for somebody – or something – somewhere in the universe to answer us. Its major purpose was actually to mark an upgrading of the telescope. It's easy to think that contemporary practices are pale imitations of past endeavours that reduce them to 'mere' aesthetics. Spong's works show that the question of how we relate to the past and its aspirations can never be this simple.

Unlike the politically vapid status to which Che's image, for example, has been reduced, Spong's works seem to remain interested – if not fully invested – in the progressivist narratives that inspired space travel as well as the civil rights movements. In the photograph *Kuta Beach* banners emblazoned with slogans reminiscent of 60s and 70s civil rights and anti-war movements spread out across a patch of grass like drying washing or abandoned clothes. The photograph, though, doesn't work as an archive: this is not a way of putting these ghosts of the past to rest. If anything, Spong's work resurrects them: in the video *Zoya* she wears a skeleton suit as she reads the Indonesian translation of a Danielle Steel novel, a way of inhabiting spatially and temporally distant narratives. The Steel novel, *Granny Dan*, is significantly itself narrated by the protagonist's granddaughter.

This necromancy, though, doesn't remove the past-ness of the past. There's still the question of what the space race or 60s radicalism mean today. This is particularly pertinent for those of us, like Spong and myself, who took our first breaths as the tensions and limitations of the idealism of these visions of progress were beginning to erupt. Having never lived through the often vicious arguments, it's all too

easy to look back nostalgically to a 'simpler' time, when political action was a 'straightforward' and 'effective' reaction to 'obvious' needs. Similarly, it's tempting to imagine the possibility of innocent enthusiasm for the wonder of space travel, free of such cynical thoughts as lunar real estate.

Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke have written a book called *Cosmodolphins*, a feminist cultural studies analysis of space travel, dolphins and astrology. In it, they call for modes of critique that, while recognising the extent to which both scientific and New Age discourses are immured in racist, sexist, and species-ist understandings, nevertheless makes room for the wonder and re-enchantment that these ways of viewing the world afford. It's this sort of appreciation of the strength of these past endeavours that Spong's work enacts.

The voodoo really kicks in with the strongest work in the show, *Muttnik*, a series of video stills depicting shrines to the planets of our solar system arranged in a verdant garden. The fecundity of these images is striking, particularly in contrast to the loneliness that infuses the other works – the melancholy of the slowly rotating space mission names, the discarded slogans, the Arecibo message's hopeful plea that we are not alone. Made from fruit, bananas and oranges, arranged with black and white chequered material against the lush green of grass and foliage, the shrines recall both Gauguinesque visions of the South Seas and the seminal Afro-futurism of Sun Ra's *Space is the Place*. Placed next to *Kuta Beach*'s protest slogans, they also connect to the sort of D.I.Y. rituals invented by women in the secondwave feminist movement seeking a spirituality outside of patriarchal religions.

To raise these numerous contexts is not to suggest that Spong's work fully investigates each and every nuance of the material she draws on. This show is less about a critical interrogation of these different political and scientific endeavours, and more about investigating how they inflect, inform and coalesce through our lived experiences.

The Shining, a strip of fabric batiked with a pattern taken from the carpet design of the hotel in the Kubrick film, is a good example. It's a work that didn't make sense to me at first – or rather, only made half sense. The pop modernist pattern fits more broadly with Spong's aesthetic, which often evokes the 60s and 70s in its investigations of tourist kitsch. And Kubrick of course directed *2001: A Space Odyssey*, an obvious reference point for Spong's ongoing investigation into space travel. Nothing quite added up, however, until I sat down and watched, for the first time, the film. In one scene, the child-hero, Danny, is riding his bike down the carpeted



Above: Sriwhana Spong, *Arecibo Message*, batik on cotton (2005)

Right: Sriwhana Spong, *Muttnik* production stills (2005)



hallway, and, crucially, sporting a home-knitted jumper featuring the Apollo 11 rocket. While the theme of space and space missions may stand out in this exhibition, these works are less an exploration of space travel as such and more an investigation of how our lives are infused by idiosyncratic appropriations of cultural texts. Danny's jumper, then, is an apt inspiration for these works: a homemade rendering of technologically sophisticated equipment, the sleek curves of the spaceship drawn in chunky wool, worn by a kid who wasn't even conceived when the mission was blasting off.

Charlotte Craw painted a spaceship on a t-shirt when she was six. It looks more like a Viking helmet than a Viking lander.

