

R E T R O V I S I O N :  
P O S T H U M A N P H O T O F I C T I O N S

AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS, PHOTOMONTAGE AND DIGITAL IMAGES BY PETER GUDYNAS



With written contributions by

SADIE PLANT

STEPHEN POCHIN

SIMON REDGRAVE

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6th September 1999 - 17th September 1999

The Coningsby Gallery, 30 Tottenham Street, London W1 9PN

With written contributions by

Sadie Plant

Philosopher, Cultural Theorist and Author

'There are Spaghetti Junctions on the Infobahn'

Stephen Pochin

Artist, Writer, Curator and Publisher

'Imaging the Layers of the Human Metabolism'

Simon Redgrave

Writer and Curator

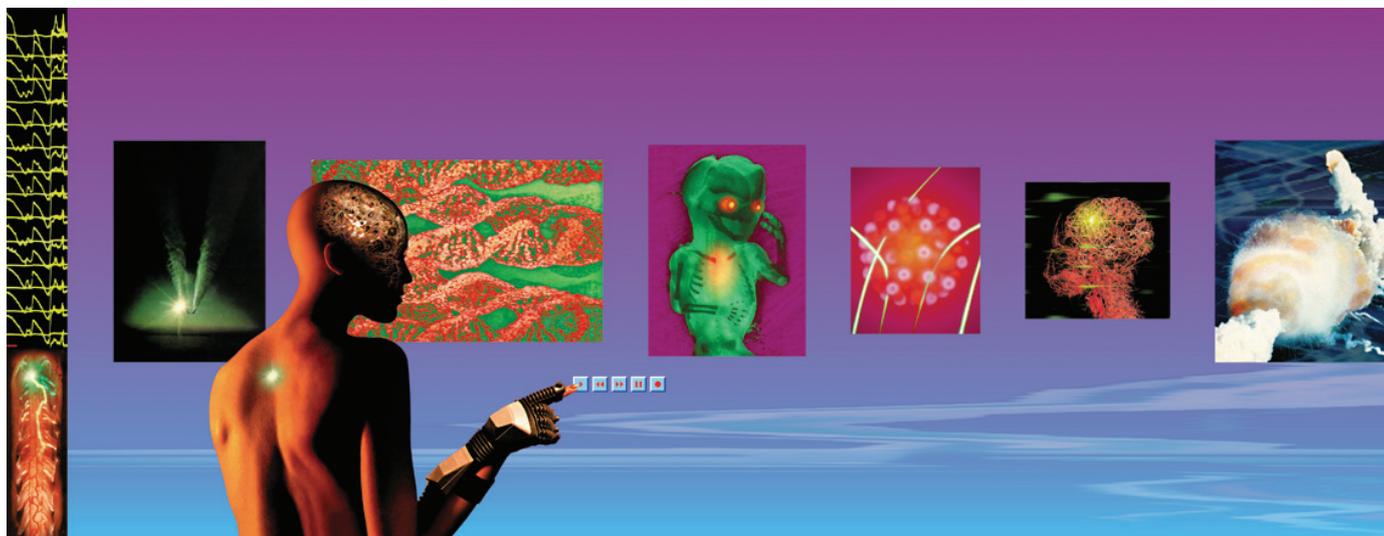
'Introduction to the Works'

A retrospective exhibition of selected paintings, photomontage and digital images by Peter Gudynas. Posthuman Photofictions presents a speculative vision of the human image transformed by some of the more far reaching applications of scientific and technological modernity. A 'techno surrealist' visual commentary, referencing science fiction and science fact and the sometimes decreasing imaginative distinction between these two areas, the exhibition refers to humanity's reliance on accelerated technological development and the notion of post human evolution. The work on show presents photomontage and traditional media work dating back to the 1970's, and since 1987 charts a development into an exploration of the creative potential of electronic media and computer image manipulation, which to a great extent has complemented the 'techno' aesthetic of his post photographic imagery.

Cover Image: Alien Eyes, Optical Distance, 2001, Photomontage, 1986

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IMAGING THE LAYERS OF THE HUMAN METABOLISM  
INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKS



Unmanned Virtual Re-entry, photomontage, digitally generated and electronically painted, 1994

## EXHIBITION SPACE GUIDE

At first impression these works appear to operate out of the straight ahead context of Science-Fiction. It is a rich tradition which is now well over a hundred years old. A vivid history which reflects humanity's engagement with speculating upon and picturing other worlds. Many of its examples are often telling reflections of our own cultural aspirations, expectations and indeed our lack of imagination. Sci-fi's celebration of space exploration may be considered as an extension of the colonial urge and its determinist fixation for technological advancement as endeavours for post-religious transcendence. Penetrating and dominating other worlds and physical mutation and hybridising are familiar tropes across written and cinematic Science-Fiction. Examples often betray our insecurities and fear of the unknown (of monsters, co-option and evil empires), as well as pursuing the collusion of Man with machine to become a man-machine.

Gudynas's work sits well within this heritage and takes it a lot further. It also contains the troubling glare of the cautionary tale. The visual language betrays at once an intoxication with the standard

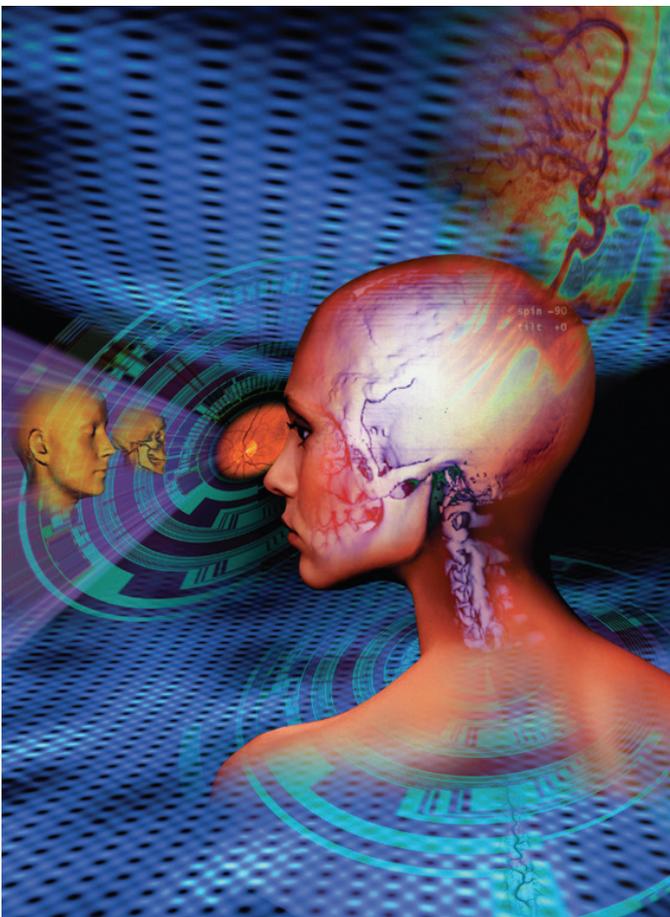
elements of Sci-fi; the console or computer interface, the body suit, the space walk, the claustrophobia of the controlled environment (whether outside or in a capsule) But there is also a deeper feeling of unease and a persistent notion of queasy psychological and neurological imbalance. A perceptive consequence of the implications that such speculation invokes.

I find the work deeply sensitive and at the same time unsettling in respect to the fragility of humanity as it collides with technology and scientific advancement. I am made aware of the artists acute perception of his own biological state as he sits at his computer, creating and manipulating this material. This may be a result of the frustrated will to transform and transgress the bodily realm; to live purely in the head and even further. A new permutation of the spiritual notion of becoming - in this instance through digital means; to interface the mind's eye with the hard disk. Or it may be an expression of the concern, the need for a glance upon the flipside of the blind determinism wrapped up with our notions of progress and the proximity it has to our imagination and yearning for utopias and other, better worlds. This is reflected in the numerous

examples of imaging the layers of the human metabolism. An over-exposure of an interiorised world of psycho-technical manipulation.

The works are delicately and seamlessly crafted examples of the new digital art. They are astounding paintings and montages that are in part related to the surrealist lineage that stretches from Bosch through Dali, Ernst and Paolozzi. However they represent a new 'techno surrealist' practice which responds to our contemporary 'unreality'. They are compelling evocations of our capacity to dream and our capacity to produce terror; the uneasy contemporary marriage of fact and fiction; of technologically manufactured and mediated reality reinvented as an externalized projection of the unconscious. Consequently, the works go beyond a purely retinal appreciation and penetrate further into our subconscious and to the reaches of our being that affect us physically. What distinguishes Gudynas's observations from most contemporary digital art is their penetrative force and their unique character. It is a seductive and intense mixture that encourages our own inquiry into the consequences of our irresistible reach for the future.

Stephen Pochin, September, 1999



Diaspora, digitally generated and electronically painted, 1997



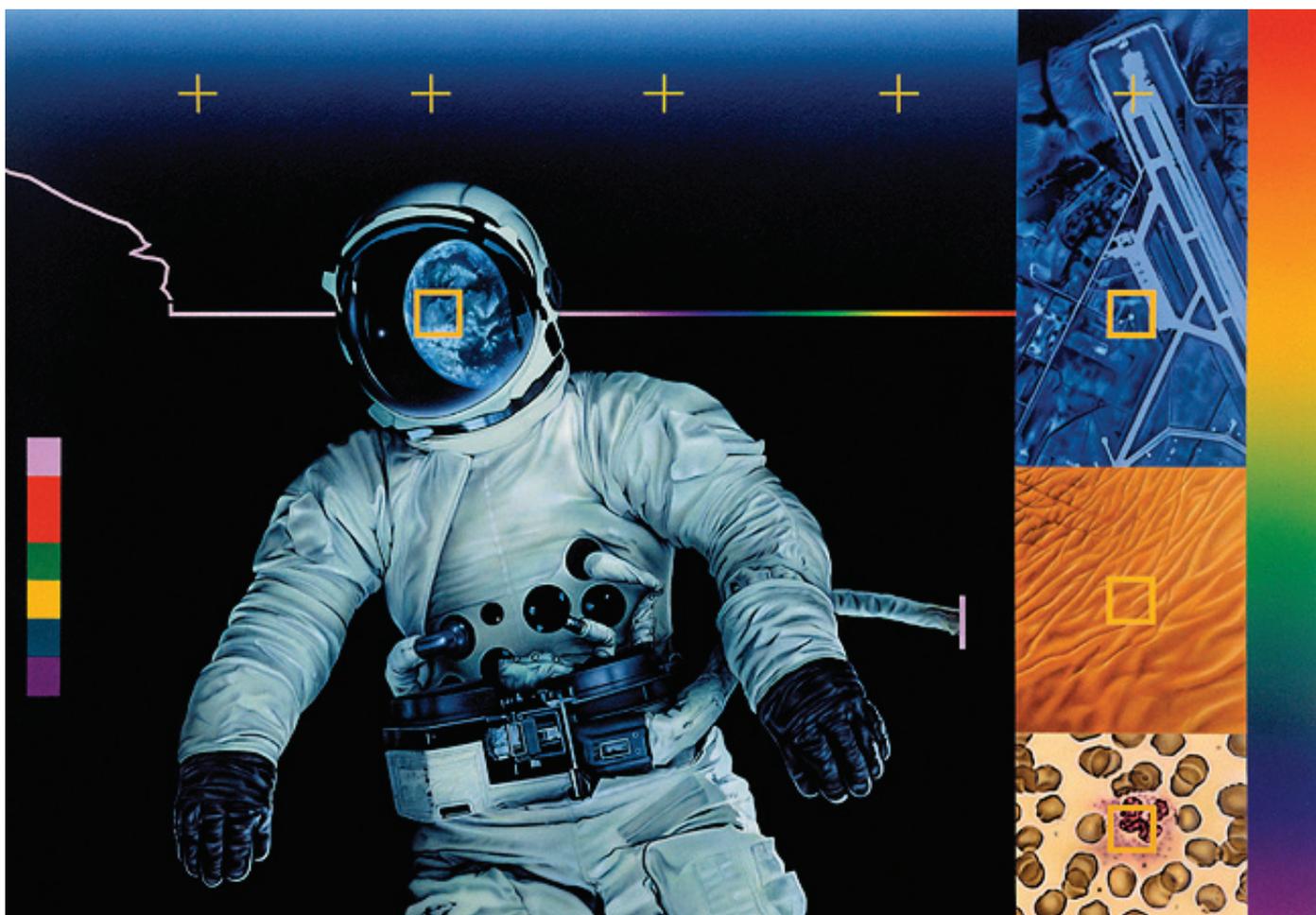
Return from the Stars, gouache painting and airbrush, 1981

## SPACE 2: INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKS

The work in this exhibition represents a fraction of the startling images of Peter Gudynas, a designer and artist who has achieved both popular and critical success. His work is striking not just for its technical proficiency, but for the clarity and audacity of the ideas which permeate each piece.

Before 1987 Gudynas worked and taught in various media, although the main body of his work at this time was produced via photomontage and airbrush techniques. Throughout his career, whether in his airbrush, collage or digital work, he has produced images of the human organism on the brink of transformation. In his collage and photomontage work, he uses resonant images starkly juxtaposed, recalling the powerful mixed media work of Dada collage artists like John Heartfield. Like Heartfield, Gudynas's work is highly public, surfacing as graphic art; illustrations, book and CD covers, and even billboards.

By 1987, Gudynas's imagemaking had shifted into the digital domain, first with a Pluto graphics workstation, and later with a succession of increasingly high powered Apple Macintosh computers. Of his early work, it is his airbrush and collage pieces that require comment as they provide a key to his current preoccupations. The former allowed him to earn a living as a successful graphic designer, subverting conventional photorealistic techniques and stretching them to breaking point. The latter, collage, resurfaces in his



Interspace, gouache painting and airbrush, 1978

later work as ideas, images and symbols juxtaposed in time and space. Collage, with its links to Dada, provides a philosophy of diversity that weaves or fragments the past and present, and as arch postmodern writer William Burroughs has said, may allow hints of the future to seep through.

Gudynas has exhibited frequently, both on his own and with other members of Zap Art International, a network of artists, designers and writers interpreting shared experiences from diverse viewpoints. His use of a wide variety of media is reflected even in his purely digital exhibitions, which may take the form of laser prints, faxes, cibachromes, giclée [archival iris prints] or multimedia presentations involving duratran lightboxes, high beam slide projectors, full motion video and electronic music.

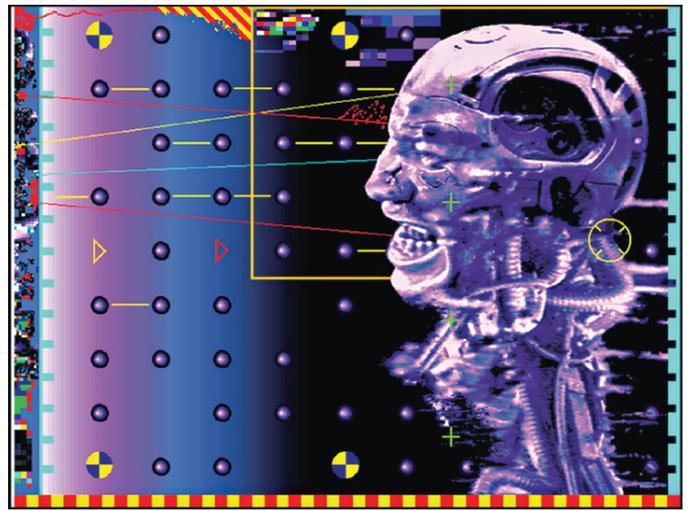
Gudynas's work comments on and is itself part of a revolution in communication. New media technologies such as desktop publishing and home video equipment have made high quality means of production and distribution available to those previously unable or unwilling to render

their artistic and expressive endeavours palatable for mass consumption. It is therefore ironic that during the same period mainstream practice and theory in the arts have become increasingly self-referential and detached from the concerns and experiences of most human beings. As popular media has exploded to fill a cultural vacuum, so the world of "high art" has become yet more elitist, representing a thin strand in the fabric of our accelerated media culture. It is this phenomenon and its effects that provides a message and a medium, for Gudynas's work, and was the theme of Zap Art's initial exhibition; "Whose Culture Is It Anyway?"

The codes and the cultural protocols required by and resulting from increasing human/machine intercourse had been seeping into our collective consciousness since the end of the Second World War, but it was only in the early 1980s that, mainly through the experiences and activities of those labouring to create with emergent technologies, a new aesthetic evolved. Gudynas interprets this visually as a technodelic explosion of encapsulated image data, mind/body invasions,

anthropomorphic machines and surreal simulations. His work is part of a pressure wave that is set to shatter our beliefs about our own identities and destinies. The power of the microprocessor revolution has already occasioned industrial and social upheavals, and more will undoubtedly follow. Already we have created an unimaginably vast virtual space yoked by telephone lines, fibre optic cables and radio waves - what Gudynas calls the "mediacyberscape". Here, near-instantaneous news networking can alter "reality" as it happens, an effect analogous to phenomena in quantum mechanics, where the observer inadvertently influences the behaviour of subatomic particles.

Gudynas may output his digital images onto film, make colour prints or store them on compact disc or other media. Consequently there is no "real" image, no definitive "original". The code that makes up the "virtual" image may itself be duplicated as can any of its subsequent copies, with no loss of quality. However the technical means of outputting this virtual image into a "physical material artifact" can now vary between inexpensive ink jet and laser prints, to much more costly methods of reproduction using fine art printmaking processes such as giclée iris prints, which use inks which have an archival light fast colour permanence, and highly finished duratran lightbox displays. The creative endeavour in producing the image is equated with the technical means of its production and presentation. Many of the works in this exhibition have been produced as limited edition prints.



Hyper Cerebral Machine, digital, pluto graphics paintbox, 1989

While Gudynas's ideology is fuelled by the collision of technology and biology, each individual work may provoke highly subjective personal responses. Images from old sci fi and B movies, the Challenger shuttle disaster, and distorted television testcards jostle with ambulatory machines, fluorescent DNA double helices and topographical images of data flowing through neural networks. This forces us to receive encrypted symbols as diverse as film noir, science fiction and contemporary media obsessions with celebrity and disaster.

Increasingly we are sold the past as a commodity, as fashion, as simplicity, as reassurance. Correspondingly our future is frequently designated as dystopian, bleak, sterile and devoid of humanity, yet Gudynas's stance is ambivalent and insidiously optimistic. His images contain contemplative figures navigating enticing virtual terrains. Biotechnological rendezvous occur between our primeval DNA and information pulsing in binary code, altering us irrevocably and



Technovision X Space 5, digital photomontage and electronic painting, 1997

entirely. Amidst the welter of startling imagery and concepts Gudynas presents us, we meet our posthuman future, and see ourselves empowered rather than enveloped, reconfiguring ourselves to take advantage of our infinite potentiality.

The lens of Gudynas's camera roams our wider consensus "reality", raiding it for images, storing them digitally, and as with the Dadaists who used the technique of photo montage, now with computer photo manipulation this area of creative practice has been further extended, re-defining the technique with new possibilities. Manipulating images, using electronic painting and retouching techniques his palette also includes the ability to model 3D geometry, define light sources and create fractal effects that mimic those of nature. In his earlier Pluto pieces he quite frequently used low resolution and pixellation effects to leave a recognizable computer "signature" or "brushstroke" that highlighted the artificiality of the computer generated image.

Multimedia technology and virtual reality will allow the present generation of iconoclastic artists and writers to break down the few remaining barriers between the artist, the work and the viewer, creating interactive, open ended experiences. Gudynas is already working in these areas to create works for which this exhibition may only be the blueprint. Our posthuman future has already started.

Simon Redgrave, 1994

SPACE 3: THERE ARE SPAGHETTI JUNCTIONS ON THE INFOBAHN.

On the way through the soft system freezes the frame on the threshold of its own mutation, and outputs an image from the end of the world.

If it once seemed that everything was made in Birmingham, the future brings no such guarantees. Together with all the old centres and black countries of the old white world, the midlands are subsumed by migrations to the oceanic periphery; industry loses weight, hardware softens up, road systems melt into digital highways, and the city of routes and a thousand trades meets the virtual plateau. But the generations whose parents worked on the lathes and assembly lines of the past are now those turning the future on.

These images do not merely trace a decline, or even simply reflect a shift. In any case, representations of the future are nothing compared to the images and fictions which feed into its emergence. Riddled with hints of planetary intelligence, glimpses of unmanned futures, and sleights of posthuman hands, art is no longer simply to be seen: whenever it works, it engineers.

Sadie Plant, 1994

