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Dreaming of Another World

Andrew Frost

There is something addictive about imagining perfect spaces. Social media such as Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram offer users the option of creating image feeds that depict real places but which are, for most of us, unattainable. Images of pristine architectural interiors or manicured gardens - or conversely those natural scenes untouched by humans [except for the presence of the invisible photographer] – allow us to project our imaginations into those utopian places and to find a release from the clutter of the real world for something immeasurably better.

Utopia is an idea that has taken on a number of forms, from literary works such as Thomas More's island republic of *Utopia* [1516] and Voltaire's flying cities of *Micromegas* [1752] to paintings such as Thomas Cole's fantasy cityscape in *The Architect's Dream* [1840] to classic sci-fi illustration by artists such as Frank R. Paul and Ed Emshwiller in the 1940s and '50s. But while the concept of utopia is familiar, and its representation in art a tradition transformed into new media, it's worth considering how the utopian ideal manifests itself in fiction and in reality, and why it refuses to fade.

In his essay *Utopia and Science Fiction* critic and theorist Raymond Williams posits four types of utopia. The first is the paradise "…in which a happier life is described as simply existing elsewhere." The second is the externally altered world where "…a new kind of life has been made possible by an unlooked-for natural event" while the third is "…the willed transformation in which a new kind of life has been achieved by human effort". The fourth utopian state is created by a technological transformation [1].

Kylie Banyard's recent paintings present us with visions of the past, places where that *willed transformation* has given way to an ambiguous present. It's not so much that the philosophies and ideologies of these pasts are invisible or defunct – many of them persist in plain sight – but the iconography of those movements remain with us as a nostalgic and tantalising reminder of what could have been.

In one major work, Banyard has painted the pottery workshop of Paolo Soleri, the radical architect, ecologist and founder of Arcosanti, an experimental community located in central Arizona desert that continues to seek a reconciliation between architecture and environmentalism. "A city should function as a living system," wrote Soleri. "Arcology, architecture and ecology as one integral process, is capable of demonstrating positive response to the many problems of urban civilization, population, pollution, energy and natural resource depletion, food scarcity and quality of life" [2]. Soleri's vision has manifested in the form of a slowly growing ideal community, albeit with few permanent residents and now mostly a tourist destination, but still a persistent vision of a better way of doing things that owes as much to Thomas More as it does the radical 1960s.

Like many of Banyard's other recent paintings depicting ideal communities, her image of Soleri's studio has the same effect as one of those images of utopian spaces found on social media. Sourced online and from books, Banyard's images have a photographic flatness to their perspectives, an effect enhanced by the artist's choice of delicate detailing and line work that renders the shapes and surfaces of the image as graphic features of the canvas itself. The images present recognisable if idealised spaces obfuscated by technique that enhances colour and contrast to create a psychedelic dreamscape.

Also featured in Banyard's new works are images of some of the bells that are made at Arcosanti, designed by Soleri and sold to raise money for the community's various programs. They are, perhaps inevitably, meant to be both beautiful in their artisanal crafting and in their delicate sounds, but they also symbolic of a need for change, the sounding of the bell a warning. In Banyard's paintings the bells are silenced, as they become an image, an intriguing confluence of line and shape, suggestions of an idea of change without ever becoming so.

In constructing his taxonomy, Raymond Williams notes that the *dystopian* state – the opposite of the utopian ideal - grows from an inversion of precisely the same conditions that bring about utopia: where the first state of our imagination is heaven in utopia, in a dystopia it's a living hell, and so on through the transformations of an altered world, one set of conditions leading to perfection, the other to a permanent state of near disaster. [3].

While our imaginations naturally drift toward a dystopian vision simply because it feels more plausible given the state of the contemporary world, we still hold the possibility of utopia in our minds to make sense not just of where we've been, but also where we'd ultimately like to go. Banyard's paintings present an ambiguous moment of fantasy, a seductive experience of colour and form that draws on a shared memory, which refuses to die.

[1] Williams, R. *Utopia and Science Fiction*, Science Fiction Studies, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Nov., 1978), p. 203.
[2] Soleri, P. *Introduction to Arcology*, Arcosanti.org, https://arcosanti.org/Arcology Accessed September 5, 2014.
[3] [1] Williams, R.