

## The Utopian Conspiracy

For *The Signs are Good*, Adam Norton, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

30 November 2024 – 5 February 2025

The title of Adam Norton's survey exhibition at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, *The Signs are Good*, references the myriad text and sign works that front the gallery's entry and fill the first room of the exhibition. At first, these signs are bright and alluring, but unclear – where does *Things* point us? Is *Red Shift* a title, a label, or a direction?

These poppy intrusions seem pulled from the title cards of golden-age science fiction, and many are – but separated from their context, their purpose becomes unclear. Does Norton mean us to think of the exhibition as a work of science fiction? Indeed, as this signage bleeds out into the gallery's exterior, the line between science fiction and reality becomes unclear. Does *Deep Space*, at the gallery's facade, demarcate the whole exhibition as a momentary intrusion of outer space into Bathurst?

Coming to the centre of the exhibition, this may seem to be the case. Norton's works here seem to follow the pattern of science fiction. Otherwise normal realities are disrupted by alien intrusions – a mysterious, meteoric orb hovering before a mid-century model community; an amorphous blob consuming some television infrastructure; or, in an inversion, human tourists exploring geysers on the surface of Titan. One painting is simply a meteor, an actual intruder from outer space. Two other works – some of Norton's most recent – compile recollections and images of other times and places into storyboard-like series, and we begin to concoct stories for why these things meet with each other.

Here, too, there are signs – or rather, collections of signs, floating in kind of unreal backgrounds. In *Giant Rock*, signage for destinations in the American West is brought together, and we see how the histories of UFO contacts, American Westerns, and Hollywood have all occurred in close proximity. *Navajo Nation* places this in the context of America's colonial history, with First Nations reservations surrounded by sheriff badges. The myth of the American West – of Hollywood's image of the desert, whether it be the Lone Ranger, or Star Trek using the desert to represent an alien world – begins to cross-contaminate and infect itself with the reality of these narratives.

It is the reality of science fiction that comes through in the gallery's back left corner, where we see the twentieth century fruit of the optimistic sentiment produced by the golden age of science fiction. Glorious images, like that of the Eagle Lander on the moon, or rovers on mars, compete with the horrors of bombs falling, millisecond snapshots of explosions and crashing cars. The innocuous *Hill II*, taken from an electron-microscope image of an atom, bookmarks the works in here as all descending from the singular, seemingly neutral principle of scientific research. The one sign-like work in here – *Toolboard* – is a wordless shadow of a set of tools forever burnt into a toolboard. This is perhaps the clearest sign so far – a sign that whatever our neutral intentions with science, we have left scars and burns on this Earth which will forever signpost how we ended up using it.

So, how can the signs be good? What are the signs at all? It would seem – since the golden years of the Space Age and the science fiction hopes that soured into reality – that the signs are far more pessimistic.

As we search for answers in the neighbouring room, we're finally greeted by artworks

which are clearly signs. But while they may be more self-evident, they are quite clearly dislocated, removed from a false context, as with the expanded-foam chunks of concrete clinging to the bottom of *Extraterrestrial Highway*. Their position nearby the preceding room is intentional, but whether or not you see them before or after that room, the effect is the same: The tongue-in-cheek imitation of industrial practicality of government signage, done through painstaking handicraft, turns these signs into strange oddities that misdirect as much as help us navigate. In this way they make clear the true purpose of many of these signs, such as *Prohibited Area* or *Area 51*: not to direct us towards something, but to warn us away from, hide, or conceal the future.

Those things that places like Area 51 are supposed to conceal – the ‘true’ nature of space, including the enigmatic UFO – have long formed a part of Norton’s interests, and are collated in the next room. Once again, the painstaking recreation of something else in paint – this time, grainy UFO photography – and the *Crop Circle*, seen from a viewpoint which hovers above the Earth. All of this floats as on *UFO noticeboard*, except in the gallery space, there is no conspiratorial red string to connect everything for us.

Instead, Norton invites us to do that ourselves. UFO-logy is a pseudo-scientific discipline, practised by amateurs and the hopeful many. (As conspiracy theories go, these days, UFO-hunting has become quite innocuous by comparison). While many thought it might dwindle as cameras grew in strength and prevalence, our age of ubiquitous camera technology, which has followed that of the Space Age, has done nothing to dispel stories of extraterrestrial encounters. If anything, they’ve increased. These stories are widely varied, but all point to the same hope: that there is life out there, and that it is able to reach another world – our own. This is the existential question that humanity must constantly face when presented with our own atomic horrors and misuse of our precious planet’s resources. Can we escape? Can we make it out of our cradle? Or are we on a path to destroy our home – or each other – before we can get off of our doorstep?

Norton’s work is as much about science, the future, and space as it is about the cultural dialogue that surrounds them. Over the course of his practice, attitudes towards space, the future, and science have grown increasingly dystopian. However, for Norton, the signs remain good: not because they point in a clear direction, but because everywhere (including in his own studio) there is hope for the future.