

Student Handout: Why Life on Mars?

This is the first time in the history of the *Carnegie International* that the exhibition has been given a title: *Life on Mars*. Before the exhibition opened, *Frieze* magazine interviewed Douglas Fogle, curator of the 55th *Carnegie International*, and asked him about the title and main thematic idea for *Life on Mars*.

Frieze magazine editor James Trainor: Could you talk about your thesis for the show?

Curator Douglas Fogle: I've been kicking around ideas that have to do with the state of the world. I am very interested in questions of materiality and its relationship to the human condition. Basically, I mean to question what it is to be human today, and to include artists in the show who address that. . .

Actually, one of the starting-points for the idea for the show was the launch of the Pioneer 10 space probe in 1972. . . . The probe's mission was to photograph Jupiter. It took the images and then NASA sent it out of the solar system, and so Pioneer 10 became the first man-made object to enter interstellar space. It was still sending signals back in January 2003, after which it either got too far away or the batteries died, but on the spacecraft is a plaque that has a line-drawing of a 'typical' man and woman who look very European circa 1972. If it doesn't run into an asteroid, it will keep going well after our sun explodes and we're gone, so it is a sort of weird time machine.

This started me thinking about the notion of being together yet alone, in the 'intimate immensity' of the universe as Gaston Bachelard put it, and about Arte Povera artists like Mario Merz, and the so-called poor materials that they used, but also Merz deploying the Fibonacci numbers during the height of Conceptual art in America and Europe. When Merz was asked why he was interested in the sequence, he described how it is a mathematical formula embedded in nature that describes the way, say, bees replicate dispersion patterns of seeds and fruit, the shape of spirals and sunflowers - that it's expressed in the DNA of all living things. This idea made me wonder which artists are using materials in a similarly modest but interesting way today.

One who came to mind was Paul Thek, who began painting on copies of the International Herald Tribune in the late 1960s and early '70s. I liked the idea of these funny, intimate gestures in gouache being done on top of the world events. Thek has a wonderful work he did in 1974, which consists of four pieces of newspaper on which he painted an image of the Earth as seen from space. That first photograph of the Earth seen as a whole surrounded by blackness changed everything; it was a sort of paradigm shift in the way we imagine ourselves. . . .

I wrote an essay called 'Is There Life on Mars?' It's a reference, of course, to the song on David Bowie's 1971 album *Hunky Dory* about the world falling apart and the question of whether we can get away to Mars. I was big Bowie fan. When I was growing up in the 1970s, it was the post-Vietnam, post-oil crisis, pre-Iran hostage crisis, pre-Reagan era - one of strange malaise, internationally and certainly in the USA. For me that song became emblematic of some of the artists I was looking at. So we're going to call the show 'Life on Mars'.

Source: Trainor, James. "55th Carnegie International." *Frieze* Jan.-Feb. 2008.