Fellow Travelers

A musician from Saturn. A Syrian Cosmonaut. A Romanian refugee who experienced the supernatural and spent the rest of his life diagramming the event. These are some of the real-life characters in Fellow Travelers, an exhibition that initiates an encounter between people displaced by the deterioration of neo-liberal policies around the world. At their most optimistic, these policies generated a vision of scientific progress symbolized by the race for space. While both NASA and the Soviet Space Program considered space a terrain ripe for ideological expansion, artists such as musician-prophet Sun Ra reimagined these paradigms to create utopian solutions for oppressed communities.

Sun Ra developed his free-wheeling philosophy (later associated with Afrofuturism) traveling from Louisiana to Chicago during the Great Migration in 1947. Adopting the persona of an alien sent from Saturn to resettle black earthlings on a better planet, Sun Ra crafted a mythology that was as deeply engaged with black liberation as it was with galactic travel. This vision took the form of prose, poetry, film, and, of course, pioneering free jazz compositions performed with his band, The Arkestra. Sun Ra believed that music could heal through spiritual vibrations tuned to extraterrestrial frequencies. Impossible to contain and futile to summarize, Sun Ra beams into Fellow Travelers organized by Katherine Rochester September 7 - October 21, 2017 Halil Altindere Lou Cantor Amen Feizabadi Azin Feizabadi apexart nyc Soda_Jerk Sun Ra Ionel Talpazan

Sun Ra, Saturn Research, 1957, Paper, 6 1/4 x 9 inches, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Halil Altindere, Muhammed Ahmed Faris with Friends #1, 2016, Oil and acrylic on canvas with LED frame, 15 15/16 x 21 7/16 x 2 3/8 inches
Azin Feizabadi, *UCHRONIA*, 2017, film, approx. 90 minutes (still)

through a set of virtual reality goggles that transport viewers to a refugee colony on Mars. As in Sun Ra’s equations, the act of imaging space as an outsider’s utopia betrays bitter skepticism about ever finding a sense of belonging on earth. Conversely, German-Iranian filmmaker Azin Feizabadi explores just such a possibility. Re-envisioning an ancient Saudi Arabian poem of love and exile as a space odyssey, his feature film, *UCHRONIA* (2017), tells the story of two dark matter aliens who transmute themselves into human-sized athletes printed on mirrored glass dissects the act of imagining space as an outsider’s utopia betrays bitter skepticism about ever finding a sense of belonging on earth.

But journeys to freedom are rarely accompanied by special equipment. When Romanian-born, New York-based artist Ionel Talpazan fled Nicolae Ceausescu’s Romania in 1987, he swam across the Danube river to the Ukraine with only the memory of a childhood UFO encounter that had become the source of a vital creative practice. Sandwiched between the trauma of an abusive childhood in a totalitarian state and an eventual internment in a Ukrainian refugee camp, the encounter stood out as an extraordinary moment of peace amid unusual hardship. With no formal training, Talpazan began creating diagrams of flying saucers. The two included here are brightly colored and thickly traced. A legend, handwritten in Romanian, offers a high-tech annotation. Indeed, the further away Talpazan’s UFO encounter receded, the richer his understanding of the experience became. What he had described as a diffuse light encounter receded, the richer his understanding of the experience became. What he had described as a diffuse light came back to him later in sharply focused dreams. Every new drawing seemed to clarify information disseminated long ago in a time-bending feat of creative displacement. In his own way, Ionel Talpazan seems to have shared a revelation that Sun Ra preached in the opening minutes of his film, *Space is the Place* (1974): “The first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We work on the other side of time.”

The other side of time is precisely where Australian collective Soda_Jerk drops us. Shown here in four parts, their video cycle, *Astro Black*, pays tribute to Sun Ra’s radical impact on music while modelling sampling as a form of time travel. It all begins normally enough (if you’ve seen *Space is the Place*): it’s Chicago, 1945. Sun Ra plays the piano in a smoky club. Defying convention (and audience requests), Sun Ra rips open the space-time continuum with a thundering barrage of finger work. From here, he coasts around time with Spock, making consciousness-altering appearances at important moments in history: the moon landing in 1968; a Kraftwerk concert in Düsseldorf in 1977; a protest march with Public Enemy at the end of the world (in 1988). This is revisionist history at its finest, putting the major players in place with a spice of the film strip (or a clip of the digital scissors) and inserting the presence of radical instigators into a riot of sci-fi civil rights. The resulting anthem is a blend of jazz, funk, electro, and hip hop. As in *UCHRONIA*, music is narratively, thematically, and structurally crucial to *Astro Black*. The cycle plays on a two-channel feed arranged to resemble a pair of turntables, with one monitor spinning the image of a record while the other channel plays. The floating, drifting, and swishing on the soundtrack unrolls the mixing and sampling in the videos. Together, they spin a speculative history that, in Sun Ra’s words, “is all part of another tomorrow.”

As rivals that have lain dormant since the Cold War enter a proxy battle in Syria and climate change accelerates, mass migration has become the humanitarian crisis of our times. The allure of other galaxies when our own planet seems stretched to capacity is undeniable. But outer space may be more viable as a metaphor than an exit plan. As these artists attest, it can provide us with just enough alienation to view our actions on earth from a critical distance. From Afronauts to Cosmonauts, Fellow Travelers affirms that art is a tool for testing limits, crossing boundaries, and providing a platform for voices of dissent.