

MYTHOLOGIES OF OUTER SPACE

Edited by Jim Ellis and Noreen Humble

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D. Hoffos, *You Will Remember When You Need to Know*, 1995, 3-channel 16 mm film, video, audio and mixed media installation, detail of miniature diorama, collection of Art Gallery of Alberta, Photo: D. Hoffos.

Next page: D. Hoffos, *Scenes from the House Dream: Circle Street*, 2003, 3-channel video, audio and mixed media installation, detail of miniature diorama, collection of the artist, Photo: David Miller & Petra Mala Miller.

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david hoffos: on outer & inner space

The imaginative exploration of outer space is an ancient quest. Is it possible that Earth is the only planet in the universe with life on board? Are we really alone? The more we know, it seems, the longer the reality of outer space remains a limitless screen upon which to project our humanness, curiosity, imaginings, anxieties, and fears. The existence of extraterrestrials remains unverified, but speculative fictions about them flourish in popular culture and appear in contemporary art as well. What is it that we want from them? Where in the universe are they?

The premise of *You Will Remember When You Need to Know* (1995), a mixed-media installation work by David Hoffos, is that “They’re here.” With these ominous words, Carol Anne Freeling announces the presence of malevolent spirits in *Poltergeist* (1982), a popular film based on a story by Steven Spielberg, who co-wrote the script. The plot revolves around Carol Anne, a five-year-old who talks to spectral creatures hidden deep inside the white noise on her suburban family’s television set. The terrifying ghosts abduct the child by pulling her into another world through a portal concealed at the back of her bedroom closet. In the Hoffos installation, which owes something to Spielberg and to George Lucas, the spectator is plunged into another world by walking through a pair of velvet curtains. On the other side of this portal lies the dark, tension-filled scene of an alien abduction.



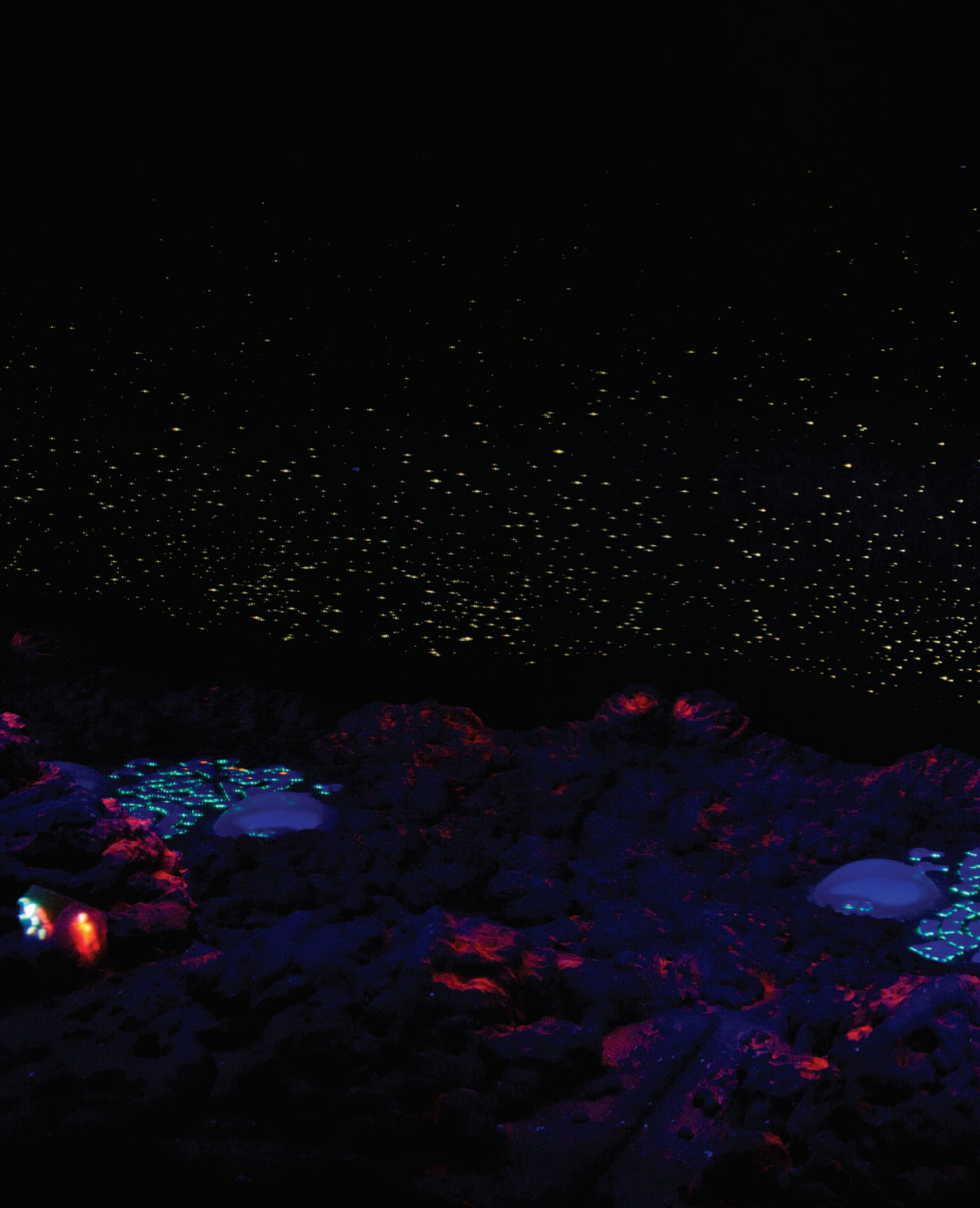


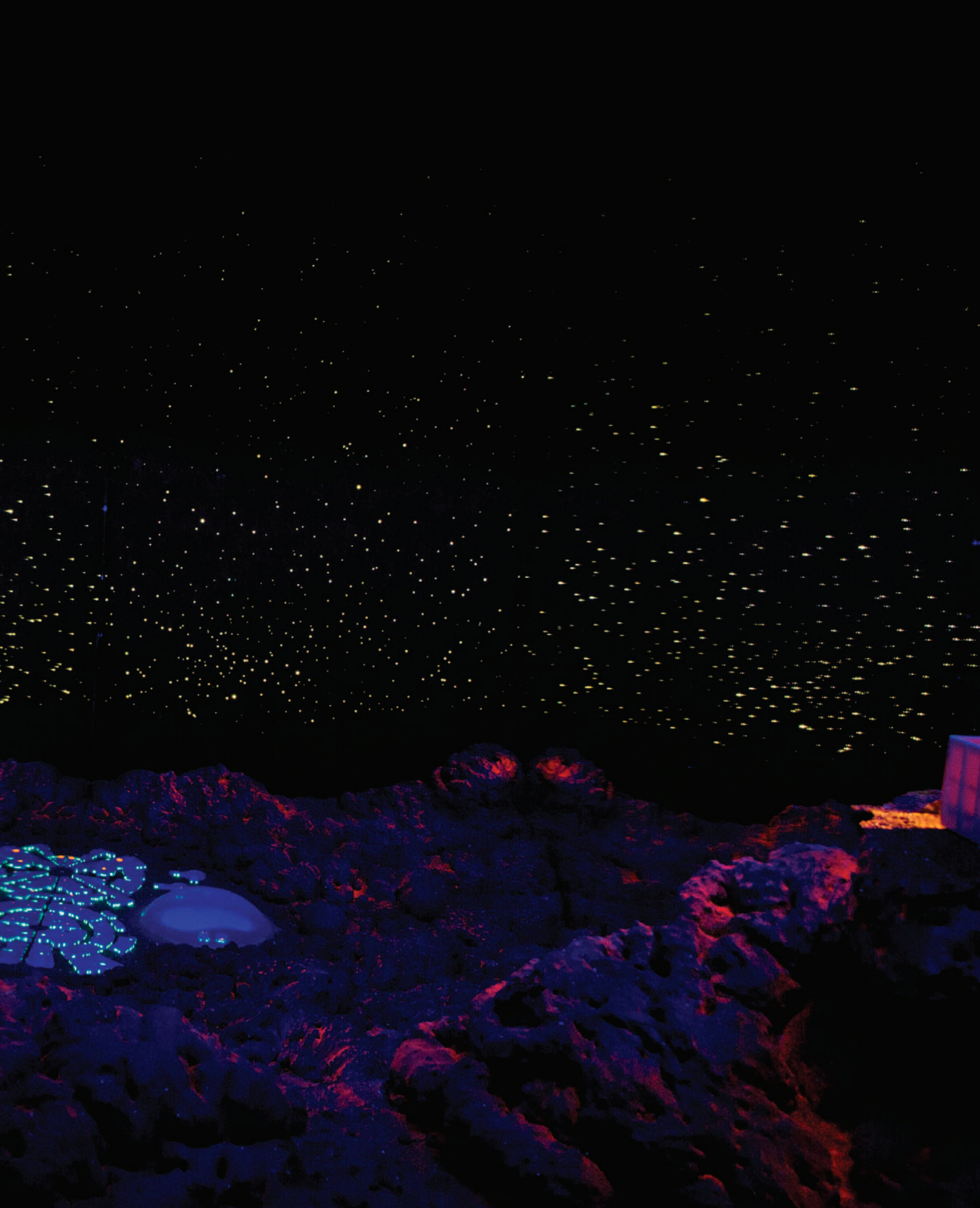


Hoffos, who is based in Lethbridge, Alberta, and whose work is steeped in the formal language of film, has been fascinated by outer space since childhood. Their first memory is of being in the kitchen with their family watching live television as the American astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the Moon for the first time.¹ The Apollo 11 moonwalk took place in 1969; the artist was then a rapt four-year-old in a high chair. But the memory has grown stronger, Hoffos says, with the visual reinforcements that childhood memories gather over time, and it has exerted an influence on their work. For the past thirty years, Hoffos has created moving images on glowing screens set into architectural spaces that convey a sense of wonder, mystery, and dread.

You Will Remember When You Need to Know, whose title is taken from an abduction account (Mack 1994, 51), is an installation work made in two parts, each of which offers a different point of view. I experienced the work when it was exhibited for the first time, at Stride Gallery in Calgary, in 1995. In this iteration of the installation, the two parts were seen one before the other.² A curtained doorway opened onto an intimate space, a wood-panelled rec room, containing, on one side, a model diorama in a mirror box. The spectator looked down and into its screen-like window from what filmmakers call a God's-eye view. This high-angle viewpoint suggests that someone is watching. The spectator is thus put in the position of an alien visitor who surveys a circle of identical houses from above and at a distance. As if on the edge of a development, the glowing houses are set among trees along the bank of a creek. Night has fallen. Each house is lit up in the darkness by a blazing red fire that rages inside it. Above the burning village cum subdivision an alien mothership hovers, blocking out the sky and emitting radiant swirls of multicoloured light above, searching rays of green below. The vivid *mise en scène* is utterly still and utterly silent: an intense vision of imagined destruction frozen in a moment extended in time.

A second set of curtains gave entry to a larger space that, with a change of scale, plunged the spectator into the night air in front of two eerily glowing houses, the miniature world of the model now writ large. In the darkness, illuminated only by the lighted portals and searching rays of the mothership, the thrill of fear blossoms. A dog barks in the distance, the sound of it mixed in with the rapid, rhymical clackety-clack of a running 16-millimetre film projector, the whistling-rumbling hum of the spaceship, the trickling water in the creek, and a haunting low Gregorian chant. The scene's visual and auditory aura hangs upon a heightened moment of suspense, like a held breath, whose duration is drawn out far beyond a breath's capacity to hold. The spectator stands still in anticipation: What happens next?







Previous page: D. Hoffos, *Scenes from the House Dream: Irwin Allen*, 2005, 3-channel video, audio and mixed media installation, detail of miniature diorama, collection of the artist, Photo: David Miller & Petra Mala Miller.

Above: D. Hoffos, *Scenes from the House Dream: Winter Kitchen*, 2007, 2-channel video, audio and mixed media installation, detail of miniature diorama, collection of the artist, Photo: David Miller & Petra Mala Miller.

An alien abduction might just have taken place or yet be on the brink. The spectator's tingling spine and shivery skin, involuntary physical and psychological responses to the uncanny, ground her in the moment. As her eyes become more accustomed to the dark, curiosity draws her closer to the large 3-D pop-up reconstruction of the model's trees and houses. Through the window of one house she sees a television set in the living room. The moving image on its screen is a controversial 59.5-second film purportedly made of a female sasquatch in 1967 by Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin (Buhs 2009, 139). As the sasquatch walks along a creek away from the intruders, the legendary beast turns her head to look back, into the camera, directly at you.

Hoffos's means of accomplishing the illusion of a life-sized storyworld are as important as the scene. The two parts of *You Will Remember When You Need to Know* are analogous to a film set and a film scene, with special effects that are synonymous with pre-cinematic illusions, made with a DIY aesthetic that originated in the punk rock movement of the 1970s. The projection on the cut-out pop-up illusion was filmed on the model, whose houses and trees are miniature HO-scale railway models. The mothership is a perforated tin disc, with a swinging lightbulb mounted above it, a nod to Ed Wood, the 1950s film director whose flying saucers were undisguised paper plates. The ingenious workings of Hoffos's vivid illusions are not concealed, but rather than diminished, the power of the illusions to delight, transfix, and frighten is enhanced by their transparency.

If the miniature film set of *You Will Remember When You Need to Know* attracts a disembodied eye, the oneiric projected scene returns the spectator to her body, turning her into an embodied viewer who is drawn into the scene. It's as if she has physically crossed a line into the liminal space of the storyworld. The 3-D pop-up has been constructed with a forced perspective, which makes it appear larger and closer to the spectator. It might be across the street. Hoffos never shows us the aliens or the landscapes of planets in outer space, as Georges Méliès did in the first science fiction film, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Like Spielberg, whose *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) were set in suburbia, Hoffos keeps us in a familiar neighbourhood.³ Nonetheless, an uncanny alien presence is felt in the dark. It is a trick of the mind: show the spectator a glowing apparition in the dark in a gallery filled with sounds that deepen the nighttime space of its modest dimensions and this is bound to happen. Every science fiction television serial or science fiction movie the spectator has seen has prepared her for the experience.





Hoffos is not a storyteller whose works depend on narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead they represent a *mise en scène* taken from the midst of an ongoing situation whose beginnings and endings, or past and future, are implied. A spectator enters *You Will Remember When You Need to Know* and understands immediately that the components of the installation are reflections both of and on the film genre of science fiction. A story is not necessary, only the storyworld is. The genre provides a conceptual framework within which Hoffos sets a scene, replete with cues that might include archetypal images like spaceships, aliens, monsters, ghostly apparitions, or haunted houses, and other cues such as darkness and eerie lights and sounds. Genre images carry their histories within them as part of the content of the form.

The film theorist Leo Braudy writes that “genre films forge a deliberate connection between each new instance of a genre and its past tradition and manifestations” (1999, 608); at the same time, genre can “potentially criticize the present . . . to build subversion within received forms and thereby to criticize the forms” (617), and it can “arouse and complicate feelings about the self and society” (614). In his influential essay “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” the literary theorist Darko Suvin defines the genre as “the literature of cognitive estrangement,” in which cognitive estrangement—the factual presentation of a familiar storyworld made strange—becomes its formal framework (Suvin 2017, 116). Making the familiar strange has been a strategy of much recent contemporary art as well, especially art whose aim it is to make aspects of the real world visible in a new and critical way.

You Will Remember When You Need to Know, the first work Hoffos exhibited after graduating from university in 1994, laid the groundwork for everything to come after it. The making of the installation established a method of working in which Hoffos reconstituted the film apparatus and a film genre within a new three-dimensional configuration that incorporated filmic illusion, concrete material objects, and architectural space. The interplay of these elements embodies filmic devices, tropes, and images, producing a strong sensation of the uncanny, and pulls the spectator moving about in the dark into the work’s core, both physically and, in subsequent works, imagistically. Hoffos’s optical devices, which include film and video projection onto cut-outs, large miniature sets, mirrored boxes, phantom figure illusions, Pepper’s ghost video glass effects, homemade video projectors, and Cinerama, constitute the artist’s own apparatus of illusion. Inventions based on archaic optical effects, some of which look back to the seventeenth century, these illusions point to the time when, according to the cultural historian Marina Warner, “ingenious proto-cinematic machines actually brought into being models of

interior thought, and conjured all kinds of things that do not and cannot exist except in that enchanted condition: the enigma of appearances” (2006, 15). The spectator “sees through” them, in two senses of the event, she is cognizant of their optical trickery and, even so, in thrall to these illusions as an entryway to states of mind.

Embedded in film genres whose inventory includes spirits, mythic creatures, fairies, demons, ghosts, phantasmagoria, and monsters (like the mythical medieval wild man or the contemporary sasquatch) lies a long history of images and storytelling forms that contain the prehistory of aliens from outer space. During the 1990s Hoffos explored genres that, along with science fiction, included horror, fantasy, disaster, heist, and time-lapse nature documentary, often in combination. These variously scaled works concluded with two large two-part installations on contrasting themes. *Catastrophe* (1998) depicted a terrible disaster in which a plane crash, head-on bus collision, earthquake, tidal wave, and erupting fires are wreaked all at once on a suburban neighbourhood made of Fisher Price toys. *Another City* (1999) presented an ecstatic, futuristic, urban romance in which couples meet, embrace, kiss, and drive away, like *Bladerunner's* Rachel and Deckard, in flying cars.

The preceding genre work culminates in *Scenes from the House Dream* (2003–8), the largest and most complex installation work that Hoffos has made to date. The five-year-long project was first exhibited in sections as they were made.⁴ The completed work consists of twenty dioramas set into the wall of a wide, dark corridor that zigzags and turns. Its conceptual framework joins the old symbolic archetypes of the house and the dream. Among their manifold references are the dream house of a supposed postwar suburban utopia and the house dream of Carl Jung, in which the Swiss psychoanalyst saw the house as a representation of his psyche (Farah 2014). Gaston Bachelard, the French phenomenologist and philosopher of science, envisioned the house as an extended architectural metaphor for the self and the daydream as creative reverie (Bachelard 1994), while Freud interpreted the dream as access to the subconscious and a form of wish fulfillment.

In the history of science fiction, the dream is the setting of one of the early texts claimed for the genre, *Somnium* (*The Dream*), by an important German astronomer and mathematician, Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), published posthumously in 1634.⁵ In the story Kepler falls asleep while reading a book about a magician and dreams about an adventurous young student of astronomy, daemons, his trip to the Moon, and the Moon's alien population. The twist at the end of the story hints at an alien abduction. Bachelard tells







Previous page: D. Hoffos, *Scenes from the House Dream: Airstreams*, 2003, 2-channel video, audio and mixed media installation, detail of miniature diorama, private collection/lost/destroyed, Photo: D. Hoffos.

Above: D. Hoffos, *Scenes from the House Dream: Mary-Anne Sitting*, 2005, single channel video and mixed media installation, detail of false wall and cut-out/projection, collection of the artist, Photo: Joe Kelly.

us in *The Poetics of Space* (1994, 33) that “Great images have both a history and a pre-history; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special color.”

If fascination with outer space and alien presence has spawned a popular genre of literature, film, and television with a deep history, Hoffos has made it a personal medium of introspection. *Scenes from the House Dream* sends the spectator on an archetypal journey into the dark with stops at stations along the way—the twenty scenes of the illuminated dioramas—in which tiny moving figures made of light animate miniature sets. The dream world in which they move is unsettled by states of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear; the atmosphere is more Hitchcock and David Lynch than Spielberg and Lucas. Places of refuge and security, the rooms of a house are discovered among nocturnal exterior scenes whose locations are on suburban streets, in deep woods, at the edge of an oceanic void, in a sinister boathouse, in an airport hotel, on a train without wheels or tracks stranded in the woods, and in an art gallery where a theft is underway.

A spaceship parked on the edge of a valley overlooks a sparkling spaceport where other ships take off and land in *Irwin Allen* (2005). The scene-within-a-scene is an homage to the TV producer of 1960s science fiction TV series, such as *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1964–8) and *Lost in Space* (1965–8), who became known in the 1970s as master of the disaster genre for films such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974). *Sherwood Schwartz* (2005), named for the producer of *The Brady Bunch*, finds a hidden alien in the happy family’s living room. Meanwhile *Treehouse* (2007) represents a space of refuge and reverie, in which Hoffos, the artist in their studio whose dreams have inspired these scenes, is the occupant.

Hoffos describes the little figures in the dioramic scenes as “people alone at night in a complicated world trying to figure out their surroundings,” in which danger might be lying in wait.⁶ The spectator in the corridor finds herself in a similarly vulnerable position. What appears to be another spectator a little farther ahead, who is jotting notes on a pad and turns to look at her, is not a fellow human being. This sudden apprehension of a doppelgänger, face to face in her own space, is literally hair-raising. The fact that in a few minutes she realizes the alien presence is a video image projected onto a life-sized plywood cut-out, entitled *Carolina* (2003), hardly lessens the powerful feeling of the uncanny that the encounter arouses. In another part of the corridor *Mary-Anne* (2005) waits, sitting on the floor with her legs outstretched, impatiently wagging her foot. The uncanny, a close relation of cognitive estrangement, is here in full play.

Freud defines the uncanny as a “remote province of aesthetics,” a “class of the terrifying” that arises from two sets of contradictory ideas: the *heimlich*, or familiar and congenial, and the *unheimlich*, or concealed and kept out of sight, which is secret and dangerous.⁷ The latter is the province of science fiction: the aliens who walk among us masquerading as *us*. The uncanny arises again in *Scenes from the House Dream*, with a shock, when the spectator looks into the diorama, *Petite Princess* (2008), and down a long hallway to a dining room where she sees herself as a tiny figure peering inside through a window. As she sees herself outside of herself, she suddenly becomes an actor in both spheres of the work: the waking-dream space of the corridor and the space of the individual dream scene.

The line between illusion and reality in *Scenes from the House Dream* is a permeable boundary through which people and phantasms pass, as it was in *You Will Remember When You Need to Know*. This is the crux of Hoffos’s illusions. They hold out the possibility of agency. Immersed and enthralled, the spectator can surrender to illusion or, conversely, seek to understand it as a construction that tricks and distracts. Hoffos’s works construct their spectator as an upright mobile individual who is free to choose a path through their spaces as an embodied viewer who is alert to what is going on around her. Unlike consumers who succumb to the phantasms of increasingly sophisticated high-tech media, the Hoffos spectator is an engaged spectator who is not allowed to disengage or to become inured to what is psychologically unbearable. In a complex contemporary world the ability to separate reality and fantasy becomes an increasingly necessary skill. According to the science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, “We’re on our own, the focus of no interest except our consuming interest in ourselves. . . . How strange: In our ongoing eagerness to create aliens, we express our need for them. . . . And yet we are unable to get along with those aliens closest to us, those aliens who are, of course, ourselves. . . . Sometimes we just need someone to talk to—someone we can trust to listen and care.”⁸ History tells us to be careful when we make the choice.



notes

1. The televised footage of the Apollo 11 moon walk can be viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9HdPi9lkhk>. Accessed 24 August 2023. Millions of people watching worldwide witnessed the momentous event. Dread associated with watching the live broadcast arose from the anticipation that something could go wrong.
2. The first iteration of *You Will Remember When You Need to Know* was shown only in Calgary at Stride Gallery, in 1995. Hoffos made a second iteration of the installation, which toured to London, Ontario, and Lisbon, Portugal, in 1999, with a smaller pop-up illusion and the addition of a video projection of a figure onto a life-sized cut-out. Its configurations were variable. The second iteration is in the collection of the Art Gallery of Alberta, with a cut-out projection made specifically for the gallery.
3. Stephen Spielberg directed or wrote a trio of science fiction films set in a richly textured American suburbia: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Poltergeist* (1982), which was directed by Tobe Hooper, and *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Spielberg and George Lucas films were important influences on Hoffos's work at this early stage of his career. Spielberg mirrored Hoffos's experience of suburbia. The Hoffos family lived in the Calgary suburb of Lake Bonavista, the first community in Canada built around a man-made lake, during his adolescence.
4. Between 2003 and 2008, *Scenes from the House Dream* was shown in sections at the artist's then dealer, TrepanierBaer Gallery, in Calgary, Alberta. The complete installation toured from 2008 to 2011 in an exhibition organized by Rodman Hall Art Centre, Brock University, in partnership with the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, to five venues, including the National Gallery of Canada and the Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Alberta College of Art and Design (now the Alberta University for the Arts).
5. The most recent scholarly edition is that of Rosen 1967. The introduction lays out the circumstances of the work's publication. See also the Somnium Project, available online at <https://somniumproject.wordpress.com>.
6. Interview with the author, August 17, 2023.
7. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), translated by Alix Strachey, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, accessed August 5, 2023, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.
8. Octavia Butler, "The Monophobic Response," Connie Samaras, accessed August 3, 2023, https://www.conniesamaras.com/DOCs_current/Web_Biblio_pdfs.5.11/26_Biblio_Butler_partialcorr.pdf.

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