

ArtSeen

As If: Altrnative Histories from Then to Now

Curated by Giampaolo Bianconi and Isabella Kapur

by Avram C. Alpert
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Huma Bhabha, **Untitled**, 2010. Ink on C-print. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

In his now mostly forgotten work, **The Philosophy of "As If"** (1911), Hans Vaihinger argued that much of our mental life is taken up not by provable propositions, but by "as if" stories that we construct to make sense of our experience. Vaihinger's point is that

such fictions, “in spite of [their] theoretical nullity,” may still have “great practical importance.” But to say this is not to bask unreflectively in the power of fiction. A case in point: Vaihinger noted over a century ago that one of the greatest philosophical fabulators was Adam Smith, who created an entire economic theory by treating humans “as if” our only aim in life was to satisfy our own desires. The fact that this was a fiction, however, was quickly forgotten by Smith’s followers, who sought to remake the real world based on a fictive story about the human mind. One of the strengths of Giampaolo Bianconi and Isabella Kapur’s show is that it does more than call on us to imagine the power of alternative realities; it challenges us to remember that we are living in one.

On display in the show are a range of art and artifacts. They include science fiction book covers, Marvel comics, fantastic drawings for Sun Ra’s works, Keith Mayerson’s highly sexualized drawings of Pinocchio, mysterious photo-drawings by Huma Bhabha, and other slices of imaginative worlds. The diversity of selection is unwieldy at times, as if the curators wanted to include a moment from every possible as if scenario. This gives the cumulative effect of a show more about the broader concept than the works themselves. One prominent theme that emerges is that not only are other worlds possible, but that our world itself is only a thin fiction, a loose constellation of forces that hangs by a thread. A slight push, a minor disfiguration, a different choice of palate, and the whole system might change—for better or for worse. In Huma Bhabha’s haunting photo-drawing **Untitled** (2010), for instance, a murky, colossal figure hovers over a bright red landscape. Whether the figure is a colonial albatross refusing to fade into the distance or an emergent power about to challenge the forces of occupation is indeterminable. And what ultimately appears may very well depend on what fiction—of civilization or of emancipation—we choose to tell.



Sun Ra & His Astro Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra, *Discipline 27-II*, 1973. El Saturn Records, Chicago, Sun Ra LLC. Cover artwork by LeRoy Butler. Offset print on paper. Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis. Courtesy The Drawing Center.

One limitation of the show is how much of a closed archive it has summoned—only to make it still feel inaccessible. In addition to Bhabha’s ambiguous figure, we see book covers for out-of-print works but have no access to their narratives. We see drawings for

Sun Ra albums but hear none of his music. We are told of a film about the Nazis taking over Britain but see only its trailer. An entire hallway, meanwhile, is taken up by Jack Kirby, Barry Gieller and Mark Englert's "Lord of Light" series. The novel on which the series is based is absent, and we are told that the drawings were made for a film adaptation of the book that was actually just a cover for the CIA mission to extract hostages from Iran (itself fictionalized in the movie *Argo*, 2012). As visitors, we are left outside the full gravity of the worlds intimated by the display.

This may reflect a certain weariness with general trends in imagining alternative worlds. The most profitable films of all time, after all, are based on science fiction fantasies, the United States itself feels increasingly like an adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and there is certainly a danger that our current obsession with alternatives—even progressive ones—is a cover for our inability to make positive transformations in our own present. In this sense the show's weakness of display may become a thematic strength. Just as the works are accessible but distant, so is our access to the fictions that structure our lives. It is not just that science fiction is starting to feel like a reality, it is that our current fictions are trying harder than ever to get us to forget that they are fictions.

We are told today, for example, that Nazism has "returned." But the darker truth, of course, is that the alternative reality conjured by the Nazis—a world of hatred, conspiracies, and supposedly natural orders—is an as if story that never went away. This gives the poignancy to the title *It Happened Here* (1964), Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo's narrative film about an alternative reality in which Hitler conquered England: it happened. The curators present only the trailer for the movie. This removes the possibility of full immersion in the narrative, but it underscores what I take to be the broader curatorial point: the challenge to see alternative history as a slice of actual history; to see this event as actually happening and infecting our present; to recognize that these alternative histories shape and deform our reality. We look at these images of the "as if" not to see the world as it might have been, but to finally see it as the fiction it really is.