

Ah Pook Was Here

What started as a primarily esthetic fascination in American tract-housing patterns, seen at first from cabin windows during jet flight take-offs and landings, and later on through exploration with internet-based satellite image sites, has become for me a vehicle with which I can elaborate on some of my favorite civilization-critical scenarios. I try to exercise this critique without asserting or projecting what I would call manipulative readings and stay as observational as possible, and let the material speak to me, enhance my theses, and encourage new ones. When I do manipulate, I do it for the sake of storytelling, and what I deem to be sound picture-making. I am a trained visual artist, an aesthete by nature, and I am just as determined to tickle the senses, the subconscious, the belly, the groin, or what have you, as I am to stimulate the intellect. I believe that art which does the one to the disadvantage of the other isn't doing what it could and should.

My earliest pieces using this satellite imagery were three "Symmetric Settlements" (2008–2012), communities folded-in on themselves, both visually and contextually, evoking baroque gardens, mandalas or Rorschach inkblots. There are no prospects in these communities, no roads for entering or leaving. The community in "The Garden" has one singular central hub, an ambiguous workplace and/or school and/or shopping mall, "Spider Woods" is a world gone mad with leisure, and "Leviathan" is an organism, a finite system for the seemingly infinite cycle of sleeping, working and consuming, surrounded by desolation. A fourth work depicting a secluded swamp island covered with a myriad of houses along squiggly canals (with a sewage treatment plant at its core, its one and only institutional structure) was never finished; the size and complexity of its digital media grew to unmanageable proportions. These works are observations on the pursuit of perfection and safety through introversion and exclusion, and the more I explored satellite imagery of tract-housing, the more banal these early works became in my estimation, far surpassed by the "real" gated communities in upper middle class America. I have grown to appreciate, even enjoy, instances when the "real" world transcends my own fiction; a valuable regeneration or upgrade of my critical toolbox ensues.

Much time and money was spent during this production period, on computer-based media that was subsequently printed using light- or ink-jet printing. I grew increasingly tired of the process, and critical of the results in terms of their validity as artworks or art objects, and this growing scepticism was confirmed by the curatorial and market fields in which I operate. The inundation of "the art world" by photo/image-based media since the mid-1990s begs scrutiny, and it is my reading that this phase, which is what it is, has reached a critical checkpoint. Something about "painting with pixels" made me increasingly uncomfortable, which led me to the body of work where I decided to edit or adjust photographic material with paint.

Ah Pook Is Here is a work by William S. Burroughs from the early 1970s which, after various attempts, was finally published in paperback in 1979. The protagonist of the piece is John Stanley Hart, "The Unspeakable Mr Hart, an American billionaire... obsessed by a desire for immortality... who discovers and acquires lost Mayan books containing some of the basic secrets of life and death, and uses this knowledge to set up a rather ill-advised control machine". The monotheistic (culturally speaking), singularity-fixated Hart,

"...stupid vulgar greedy ugly American death-sucker", in all his ignorance, ultimately achieves his desired immortality, but it is a sordid, decrepit version where, although he is living, the world about him deteriorates. This is the tragic existence of mostly all immortals throughout our mythological inheritance—the Greek gods and demi-gods, vampires, etc.—they are only immortal within their inner realm, while entropy marches on around them. (Immortals have their share of problems. One has only to recall the incessant control issues of the Greek gods in Homer's works. These gods are consistently more fucked-up—neurotic, indecisive, incestuous, law-breaking, prone to in-fighting—than the mortals they are fixated upon.)

The body of works in and around the exhibition "Ah Pook Was Here" (Galleri Ping Pong, Malmö, Nov. 2015) consists of material I found on a popular satellite image site. These motifs reminded me of Mesoamerican, pre-Columbian designs. In a few instances, I manipulated the material to even more resemble such designs. Contemplating viable corollaries between our world and the world of the Mayans, I considered two references: 1) the endeavors and ultimate demise of Burrough's "unspeakable" Mr. Hart, and 2) the book and subsequent film, *Chariots of the Gods? (Memories of the Future: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past)*, a flagship work in the 1970s wave of pseudo-scientific pop culture by Erich von Däniken, where ancient architectures and monuments—among others, the zoomorphic geoglyphs in the Nazca desert in southern Peru—were deemed to be beyond the capabilities of ancient civilizations, and therefore the handywork of far-superior extraterrestrial beings. Wading through this comic delusionary mire, I was able to arrive at a scenario of my own which has, however tongue-in-cheek it may seem, held my attention for months on end. I can't seem to shake it off.

The *end of days*, according to some interpretations of the Mayan Long Count calendar, came and went on the 21st of December, 2012. All our Hollywood-inspired eschatological fantasies of cataclysm were dashed, and Christmas persisted, as it always does. Perhaps the *end of days*, according to Mayan science and belief systems did, in fact, transpire on the 21st of December; maybe everything *they* considered significant in terms of the end had come to its fruition. Perhaps their version was not as gaudy, bombastic, or magnificent as ours. Perhaps their world simply went out with a faint whimper, a whimper we failed to hear through the din of our constant "information" flow.

And what if their world and our world are one in the same, *The World*, and this world did, in fact, end, but our own "ill-advised control machine", which streams a perpetual tailor-made version of the day-to-day or *the present*, suspends us in a delusionary limbo where we, despite the already-consumed end of the world, continue to work, build, expand, consume... but to what, or more poignantly, *who's* advantage? The immortals, of course! The billionaire vampire demigods, whose immortality is contingent upon us keeping ourselves in a state of suspended delusionary animation. Perhaps we are not only living on borrowed money, way above and beyond any legitimate equity, but also on borrowed time. Like Burroughs' description of Ah Pook, or Death, We, also, need to borrow past time and future time because we have used up our quota of present time.

My focus on the middle class, first and foremost the seemingly infinite (at least from a height of 400 meters) American upper middle class, whose very existence and perpetual expansion defy all reasonable theories of finality, is a converse study of the poverty, starvation, genocidal wars and the "natural" disasters we are reminded of daily. I feel it is impossible to understand the latter without familiarizing myself with this made world.

My method is to view this world from my own chosen anthropological gaze, a distance from which the macro-imprint of this group on its environment is revealed. From this distance, human beings are not, or barely, discernable, while the marks they make are. The tract-housing patterns themselves seem organic in their form, in the way the streets fit together in clusters. After researching the engineering/architectural basis for this plan-technique, it is still difficult for me to discern how much of what I see is planned, and how much is the result of a myriad of human and environmental variables. I like to think that the patterns more or less make themselves, pre-determined by some kind of cultural DNA. This cultural DNA is very much a product of a broad consensus embraced by this sector of society.

A closer look reveals this world's denominators—McMansions, with their swimming pools, atriums, etc. This material reveals much more than an established status of development; it maps the perpetual expansion of this world, revealing construction sites on the periphery. One can also look back in time, at earlier scanings of the same area, and watch the development progress (and in some situations, digress).

Most of these areas are more or less isolated, with few, if not singular, entrance/exit possibilities. I choose to manipulate this material so that the settlements are entirely sealed, without any in/out roads. It is, for me, a matter of freezing and objectifying the material, both visually and contextually. The paradox of insularity ensues, where comfort and paranoia walk hand in hand. This attempt to identify, isolate and close out the bad is reminiscent of medicine's often futile attempts to battle viruses. (These patterns' or markings' visual similarity to viral forms has been fodder for contemplation as well).

I call these *macro-graffiti* markings "anthrogllyphs" because I find the term *geoglyph* to be all too exclusive of the predominant human factor here. They are, for me, formidable icons representing the values of the American upper middle class. My wish is that, through these works, we can "play God", a curious God who watches, tracks and maps the seemingly perpetual progress of these organisms by observing, not them, but their traces; traces, certainly not of strife, but of a striving. Expelled from Eden, we are doomed to perpetually create and recreate our own perverse version of that which we so long ago lost. And the affliction which necessarily follows is the Conundrum of Maintenance, which is a conundrum of time.

Clay Ketter
Malmö, November 2015

