



Fig. 1

Frist Art Museum

919 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203

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Chaos and Awe was organized by Mark W. Scala,
chief curator, Frist Art Museum

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CHAOS AND AWE

PAINTING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



INSTABILITY has always been the mother of progress and innovation. The absence of clarity opens the door to the imagination, as creative people devise languages to describe precarious conditions that are more felt than seen. *Chaos and Awe* features paintings by an international array of artists that induce sensations of disturbance, curiosity, and expansiveness. They visualize dark ideologies and virulent conflicts, the interweaving of physical reality and the digital realm, and the deepening of consciousness as limitations morph and dissolve.

Straddling the border between figuration and abstraction, works in the exhibition show how paint's chameleon-like properties can allude to powerful currents of globalism, political and ideological conflict and related wars and diasporas, and evolving technologies that seem limitless in their applications for good or for mischief. These often intangible influences may inspire fear at their immeasurable reach into our lives, or excitement at the promise of a previously unimaginable opening of possibilities. Strong emotions like these are associated with the *sublime*, a word that has often been used to describe the feeling of being terrified or overwhelmed by the unfathomable nature of God and the cosmos. Equating the sublime with the mystery of the human mind and its extensions into the world, *Chaos and Awe* provides visual analogies for the feelings of precarity that mark many people's experiences in the 21st century.

Organized into thematic sections, the exhibition begins with "No Place," featuring paintings that appear to map hidden mechanisms of urban existence, which may give rise to feelings of vulnerability and confusion. Evoking architectural schematics, Peter Halley compares the claustrophobic spaces of modern-day buildings to cells, connected only by conduits, which suggest electronic communication, plumbing, and other systems that function efficiently while enabling people to remain isolated from one another. Franz Ackermann's monumental *Untitled (yet)* envisions the swelter of systems that enable vast metropoles around the world to operate, from sewers to underground transportation and the electric grid. In this painting, these networks are torn up, exposing the vulnerability and even helplessness that accompany our reliance on technology.

Works in the section titled "Shadows of History" allude to deep currents of racial animus or extreme ideologies that sustain injustice, oppression, and conflict. The insidiousness of racism is the subject of Ellen Gallagher's *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* (fig. 1), which was inspired by the unethical medical experiments on African American men at the Tuskegee Institute, whose cases of syphilis were secretly studied over the course of decades. In *Untitled Anxious Audience*, Rashid Johnson illustrates the impact on people of color as racist attitudes have emerged from the shadows in recent years. Showing correlations between white supremacy and colonialism, Neo Rauch's *Waiting for the Barbarians* portrays the paranoia of a colonial outpost as it waits for an invasion by

the indigenous population, which never comes but nevertheless causes the interlopers to abandon their sense of humanity. In additional works by Radcliffe Bailey, Jeremy Blake, and Nogah Engler, power relationships are defined in terms of oppressor and victim, with the veiled forces of history shaping the conditions that allow inequity to seem natural.

Competing historical ideologies can lead not just to injustice, but to open conflict, as seen in the section titled "Collisions," which relates to confrontations in the Mideast. Tehran-born artist Rokni Haerizadeh's series of violent images, which are printed from online sources and then overpainted to exacerbate their inhuman narratives, capture the raw bestiality and hallucinatory intensity of warfare (cover). War's explosiveness, grotesquery, and fragmentation are also reflected in works by Ahmed Alsoudani and Sue Williams.

"Collisions" flows into "Interzone," in which paintings show the transformative effects of travel and migration on language, traditional beliefs, and cultural assumptions. In *Contact*, Iran-born Ali Banisadr depicts a vast landscape where armies of nebulous figures come together in a violent explosion (fig. 2). Yet, saturated with the glowing colors of Persian miniatures, abstract brushwork, and the dreamlike eeriness of painters



Fig. 2

like Hieronymus Bosch, the work has a symphonic quality, rich with passion, vitality, and new growth. Cross-fertilization is equally chaotic and beautiful in the works of Ghada Amer, who links Islamic and Western ideas about freedom and sexuality, and Jiha Moon, who synthesizes aspects of Korean and global identity, both traditional and current. Critical readings of colonial history appear in paintings by Kenya-born artist Wangeci Mutu and Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga of the Democratic Republic of the Congo; they define a destabilizing interaction between native African traditions and the consumerism and technology of the developed world.

The technological expression of the collective human intellect and imagination, cyberspace embodies the anarchy of infinite possibility. Our deep absorption in the virtual has contributed to widespread doubt about our capacity to distinguish data from reality, truth from falsehood. With the section titled "Virtual Worlds," the exhibition moves from geographic and cultural interfaces to expressions of this conundrum. In paintings by Korakrit Arunanondchai, Wayne Gonzales, Wade Guyton, and Corinne Washmuht, and a virtual reality work by Rachel Rossin, solidity melts away, and space and time hover between the unfixed and the concrete.

Like a computer's screen or a camera's viewfinder, the geometric edges of a painting form a window, enabling us to focus on the information contained within our visual field. But as with those other rectangular openings, paintings can also hint at the broader world that extends in every direction outside the frame. "Virtual Worlds" segues smoothly into "The Boundless," where abstract paintings by Matti Braun, Barnaby Furnas (fig. 3), Julie Mehretu, James Perrin, and Pat Steir link human perception with such elusive phenomena as clouds, waves, rain, gas, flame, and light. Color, form, and space envelop viewers, bringing an experience of psychological expansiveness through the effects of paint alone. Also in this section, Hamlett Dobbins, Charline von Heyl, Heather Gwen Martin, and Barbara Takenaga introduce elements of mathematics or science—disciplines devoted to broadening an understanding of the invisible universe.

The exhibition concludes with "Everything," in which paintings chart invisible energies and futuristic spaces to envision a larger sense of connectedness. Including works by Pedro Barreto, Dean Byington, Anoka Faruque, Guillermo Kuitca, Matthew Ritchie (fig. 4), Danielle Tegeder, Kazuki Umezawa, and Sarah Walker, the section proposes that distinctions between humanity and the cosmos, rationality and mystery, the internal and external, and even past, present, and future are no longer definitive as we strive to function in a world that is at once increasingly shared and deeply fractured. Integrating interests from systems theory and cosmology to science fiction and philosophy, the works in "Everything" defy the impulse to allow fear of the unknown to lead civilization inward or backward. But even here, a virus remains visible in the form of glitches, tumorlike

Illustrations

COVER: Rokni Haerizadeh. *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise* (detail), 2014. 1 of 10 parts exhibited from a 24-part work: gesso, watercolor, and ink on inkjet prints, 11 3/4 x 15 3/4 in. each. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2015.89. © Rokni Haerizadeh. Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde
Fig. 1: Ellen Gallagher. *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity*, 2008. Ink, graphite, oil, varnish, and cut paper on canvas, 79 1/2 x 74 in. Collection of Larry Gagosian (promised gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art). © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy Gagosian
Fig. 2: Ali Banisadr. *Contact*, 2013. Oil on linen, 82 x 120 in. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Gift of Mrs. Georgia M. G. Forman, by exchange, Bequest of Arthur B. Michael, by exchange, Elisabeth H. Gates Fund, by exchange, Charles W. Goodyear and Mrs. Georgia M. G. Forman Funds, by exchange, Philip J. Wickser Fund, by exchange, Gift of Mrs. Seymour H. Knox, Sr., by exchange, Gift of Miss Amelia E. White, by exchange, 2014, 2014.8. © Ali Banisadr. Photo: Tom Loonan
Fig. 3: Barnaby Furnas. *Untitled (Flood)*, 2007. Urethane on linen, 84 x 140 in. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Sarah Norton Goodyear Fund, 2010, 2010.12. © Barnaby Furnas. Photo: Tom Loonan
Fig. 4: Matthew Ritchie. *A bridge, a gate, an ocean*, 2014. Oil and ink on canvas, 94 x 120 x 2 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Matthew Ritchie



Fig. 3



Fig. 4