

Eva Díaz

Next Stop, MotherShip Earth

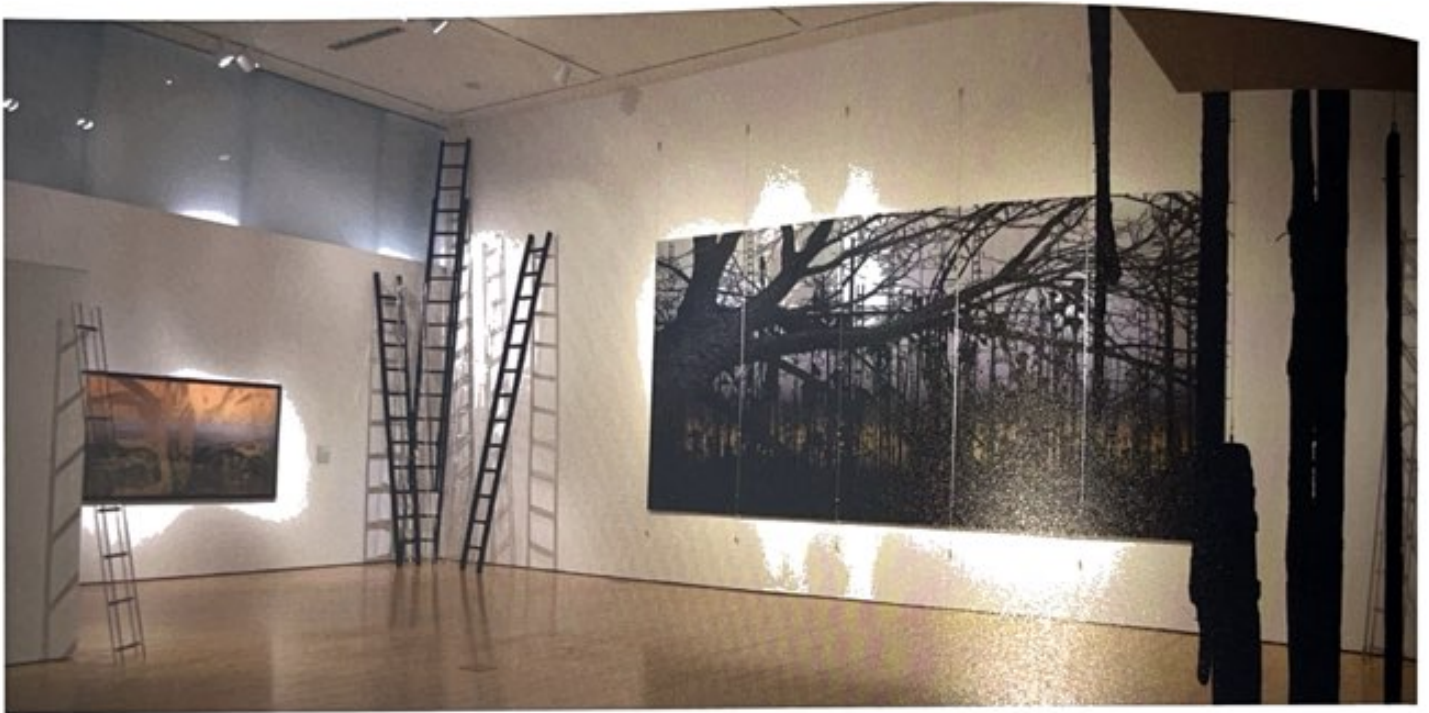
After years of COVID-19, doesn't it sometimes feel like we're on a treadmill of catastrophe? Perhaps everyone feels that way about their own era: for my parents, it was the A-bomb, Bay of Pigs, the Vietnam War, Nixon, 1973 oil crisis-induced inflation; for my grandparents, the Great Depression, World War II, the A-bomb We seem captive to an unrelenting parade of uprooting changes that often pretend to be progress when they are often merely destruction, usually caused by capitalist predation. The philosopher Bruno Latour has written that this besieged condition may in fact define modernity; a "catastrophist discourse" couches our present time as a continual apocalypse.¹ And yet, these awful events become mileposts by which we make our histories, and potentially, transform the present, if only by insisting that there *will* be a future, that the bad times are not, in fact, the end times.

Of these catastrophes that are the markers of recent U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina is among the most significant. It triggered a new and painful awakening about inequality and climate injustice in the United States. Dawn DeDeaux has been grappling with its consequences in the raw and powerful work she has produced in the years since the storm devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005. It is work that recognizes the catalytic horror of that catastrophe, and uses those experiences to experiment with prospective futures: some dystopian and some tentatively more hopeful.

DeDeaux evacuated her home and studio in New Orleans in the hours before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, driving ninety miles an hour down Old Highway 90 as water encroached from both sides. A lifelong resident of New Orleans, Katrina precipitated the longest separation from her city in DeDeaux's career: it turned into a multiyear dislocation as she slowly rebuilt her life in New Orleans over the course of a decade. This displacement and its consequences have been the backbeat of her artistic practice since. Every project she has undertaken since 2005 circles around Katrina: the fraught politics of racial and economic inequality it revealed, and the staggering ecological changes that bring ever more powerful storms into the Gulf of Mexico each year. Katrina has been a bellwether for the ongoing environmental catastrophe of warming seas and polluted waters in the Mississippi Delta region, exacerbated

¹ Dawn DeDeaux, *Daisy Space Clown in Black Field*, 2013
Digital drawing on polished acrylic, 88 x 40 inches
Collection of the Artist





11 Dawn DeDeaux, *MotherShip II: Dreaming of a Future Past*, 2014
Collection of the Artist
Installation view (Acadiana Center for the Arts, Lafayette, Louisiana)

by the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, overfishing, and other kinds of industry contamination. Forced migrations caused by rising seas and extreme weather are major global problems intensified by human-triggered climate change, and the vulnerability of much of New Orleans's population makes the city a portend for how to reckon with potential climate exile. The possible territorial conflicts that will arise when populations are displaced will make further claims on the limited land on Earth. These claims, as DeDeaux's work explores, may also extend to the accessible portions of the Earth's exosphere, to other parts of the solar system, and even into other galaxies of the universe.

The predicament of finding refuge for climate exiles is a political problem as much as an ecological one, as people displaced by rising waters and extreme weather frequently find themselves in unfriendly host communities, spaced into places with prior human settlements. In 2014–15, DeDeaux staged exhibitions of her ongoing *MotherShip* project in two locations in New Orleans. This migratory, multipart installation explores the kinship of climate change relocation and the disorientation of space travel.² First presented at the Acadiana Center for the Arts in Lafayette, Louisiana in summer 2014, *MotherShip II: Dreaming of a Future Past* arrived in New Orleans in fall 2014 as an installation in the downtown gallery of Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine during the height of the Ebola virus crisis. 11 Its other half, *MotherShip III: The Station*, occupied an abandoned warehouse on the edge of the Marigny district between the Seventh and Eighth Wards during the same time.³ 12 In the latter show, viewers accessed the exhibition through a nondescript alley on Elysian Fields

12 Dawn DeDeaux, *MotherShip III: The Station (Entrance view)*, 2015
Collection of the Artist
Digital images on aluminum, burnt wooden ladders, found objects and sound
dimensions variable
Installation view (Prospect.3 New Orleans, October 25, 2014–January 25, 2015)





131 Dawn DeDeaux, *MotherShip III: The Station*, 2015
 Digital images on aluminum, burnt wooden ladders, found objects and sound
 Installation view (Prospect.3 New Orleans, October 25, 2014–January 25, 2015)
 Collection of the Artist

Avenue that opened up to a sizeable open-air courtyard. A huge fifty-foot diameter metal ring truss—part of the armature of a zeppelin, a structural form later co-opted by the entertainment industry as a rigging device—leaned against one wall, surrounded by an overgrown jungle of plants that threatened to claim the site entirely. Hung on a wall in this courtyard were three large black-and-white photo panels depicting massive hangers in which zeppelins were under construction, their skeletons composed of ring trusses much like the one propped nearby. Beyond the courtyard inside the enormous warehouse, large trees grew amid the steel girders that once held up the ceiling of the building, now a roofless ruin. Another gigantic ring truss, this one perfectly balanced like a colossal hula hoop, stood amid the beams and trees. Tall ladders rose out of the undergrowth, extending far beyond where the original roof of the structure originally ended. Through the thicket of vegetation, some areas contained “stations” of groups of objects, with the crackling voice of Stephen Hawking warning of Earth’s imminent demise playing alongside the soundtrack of Sun Ra’s *Space Is the Place* and a reading by poet Anne Sullivan of historical poems contemplating death and the end of time. This soundtrack guided viewers from point to point as they encountered, for example, a jumble of old suitcases haphazardly piled behind a yellow caution sign, a reminder of possessions that may one day be left behind. 131

DeDeaux has discussed *MotherShip* as a reaction to the destruction wrought by climate change and the future potential wasteland of a human-altered ecology. Though these may seem like apocalyptic musings, between the devastation of Katrina and the catastrophe of the oil spill, DeDeaux's native Louisiana has been hammered by ecological disasters that have made parts of the region uninhabitable and threaten to destroy wildlife habitats throughout the Gulf region. *MotherShip* provokes viewers to imagine leaving their homes without notice, able to bring only one small suitcase, querying what "souvenirs of Earth" might accompany humans if they need to abandon the planet. The installation suggests itself as a dilapidated way station for victims of climate change, the dumped suitcases a reminder of the fragility of our possessions in situations of flight and crisis. A small wood and glass vitrine on a wooden table in the *MotherShip III* installation held a shred of paper, containing the following typewritten message:

Souvenirs of Earth

If I had a moment to pack, what would I take with me to remember my experience of Earth? What would survive the exodus prompted by a disaster or the ascent through a heat-charged atmospheric barrier? And how would I protect my souvenirs in new environmental conditions on an airship or another planet? What will remain of art: a surviving postcard? What of culture: the shards of a baseball bat? What of land: a seed? What of love: a knot of hair?

DeDeaux subsequently expanded these propositions about salvage and collecting into a stand-alone exploration, also titled *Souvenirs of Earth*. \4\ This project began in 2014 and continues to the present as a centerpiece of this retrospective through two new installations: *Tools Departing Definition* and *Where's Mary*.⁴ For *Souvenirs of Earth*, DeDeaux assembled a kind of ersatz junk shop, presenting eclectic objects—mushrooms, feathers, or acorns grouped in Mason jars; rotting leather gloves; leaves in clear bags; old postcards; birdcages; broken farm implements like pitchforks; careworn religious statuary; and decaying sports equipment and musical instruments, for example—into a reliquary of a ruined planet. This seemingly endless range of objects, poignant reminders of life on Earth, are displayed as scientific specimens, or anthropological artifacts, estranged from their uses or owners. Leaving the Earth, DeDeaux's project implies, will be agonizing; abandoning the material richness and diversity of nature and human creativity will be one among many terrible costs of our relentless destruction of the Earth and its atmosphere. Returning to techniques she used in works from the 1970s that invited the public to participate in, for example, conversations via CB radios, DeDeaux gives this project a public dimension, asking visitors to consider what their own essential objects may be: what they would bring with them, and what would be left behind. This mournful catalog, this archive, of objects will be endless, and the work's melancholic quality amasses a memorial to humans' past accomplishments at the very moment that humanity is most imperiled.



\4\ Dawn DeDeaux, *Souvenirs of Earth*, 2014
Collection of the Artist
Installation view (*MotherShip II: Dreaming of a Future Past*, 2014, Acadiana Center for the Arts, Lafayette, Louisiana)

The failure of a wealthy and privileged society to build a better future for all, and the neglect of the state in protecting the vulnerable and effectively planning for future ecological disasters, are themes explicit in DeDeaux's projects since Katrina. But these concerns are likewise threaded through her earlier works. An early adopter of video employed in large sculptural installations, DeDeaux has long used theatrical lighting and props to create dramatic and sometimes disturbing narratives about inequality and injustice. DeDeaux's work *America House* uses doorframes that mimic the iron security gates commonly found in New Orleans. In some installations of this project, motion lights atop these doors, which are set slightly ajar, alert us as we approach that we are on the threshold of trespass, highlighting the divisions between people we erect in the supposed name of protection. In other versions of the work, these doors have housed video stations presenting interviews the artist conducted with minors convicted of violent crimes. The videos show young Black men speaking about their own familiarity with violence and racial segregation. \5\ A project spanning years of discussions with the men she interviewed, the subjects' pained awareness of the narrowness of their educational and economic prospects, and their recognition that patterns of violence remain nearly a closed circuit disproportionately affecting members of their own communities, is a damning portrait of the reproduction of inequality through structural racism. Muddying the waters between who is protected and who is threatened—who is included and who is excluded—*America House* draws parallels between everyday acts of supposed security and the epidemic of mass incarceration, where Louisiana leads the nation and the world in rates of imprisonment.

In *The Face of God, In Search Of* (1996), DeDeaux surrounds a solitary metal bed with a six-channel video projection that portrays a cycle of birth to death. \6\ Inspired by Tennessee Williams's 1957 play *Suddenly Last Summer*, DeDeaux focuses on a character in the play, a poet named Sebastian, the son of a haughty and cruel mother who lives in a swank townhouse in New Orleans's Garden District. In the play, Sebastian sets out to find the face of God so he can write his greatest poem. He experiences a sublime revelation while witnessing a brutal scene of carnage on the Galapagos as thousands of baby turtles are killed by iguanas and predatory birds. Sebastian himself is later murdered, and his body possibly cannibalized, by local children whom he likely sexually exploited. As Williams wrote, "Man devours man in a metaphorical sense. ... Animals actually do it for survival, out of hunger. ... I use that metaphor [of cannibalism] to express my repulsion with this characteristic of man, the way people use each other without conscience ... people devour each other."⁵ Using this pessimistic take on human violence, DeDeaux's almost twenty-minute film, at times projected on the bed itself, begins with benevolent footage of nature—sea turtles swimming through a dark, inky sea to lay their eggs on a beach—and quickly turns to a bloodbath as birds of prey descend to feast on the newly hatched young. As these scenes of violent consumption overtake the film, DeDeaux conjures



\5\ Dawn DeDeaux, *America House* (partial view), 1991–95
Ten life-size translucent photographs applied to doors with acrylic cover; motion detector lights, ten video installations (one per room), studs, drywall, and ambient sound, dimensions variable
Collection of the Artist

\6\ Dawn DeDeaux, *The Face of God, In Search Of*, 1996/2001
Collection of the Artist
Rendering for three-screen adaptation for NOMA Retrospective

a terrifying world that reveals to us our own capacity for violence and indifference. As the film progresses, DeDeaux moves from sea turtles on the beach to the superficial buzz of a dinner party—clinking glasses and mindless conversation—contrasted with bodies being devoured by cancer and AIDS, as the hands of human children bang against the walls. *The Face of God, In Search Of* extends Williams's already horrific vision of violence, rapacity, and selfishness, to humanity's domination of the Earth too.

Exploring how this anthropocentric position is always in tension with the unpredictability of nature, DeDeaux's 2011 project *The Goddess Fortuna & Her Dunces in an Effort to Make Sense of It All* questions the very notion of human mastery in the face of ecological catastrophes. Using the figure of Fortuna, an ancient goddess who personified luck in Rome (she was previously named Tyche in Greece), DeDeaux's installation also drew on John Kennedy Toole's posthumously published New Orleans romp *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Set in the rarely used historical Brulatour Mansion and Courtyard in the French Quarter, *Goddess Fortuna* opened to the public at nightfall. \7\ A troupe of sculpted dummies in peaked witch hats—the dunces—were illuminated by eerie lights throughout





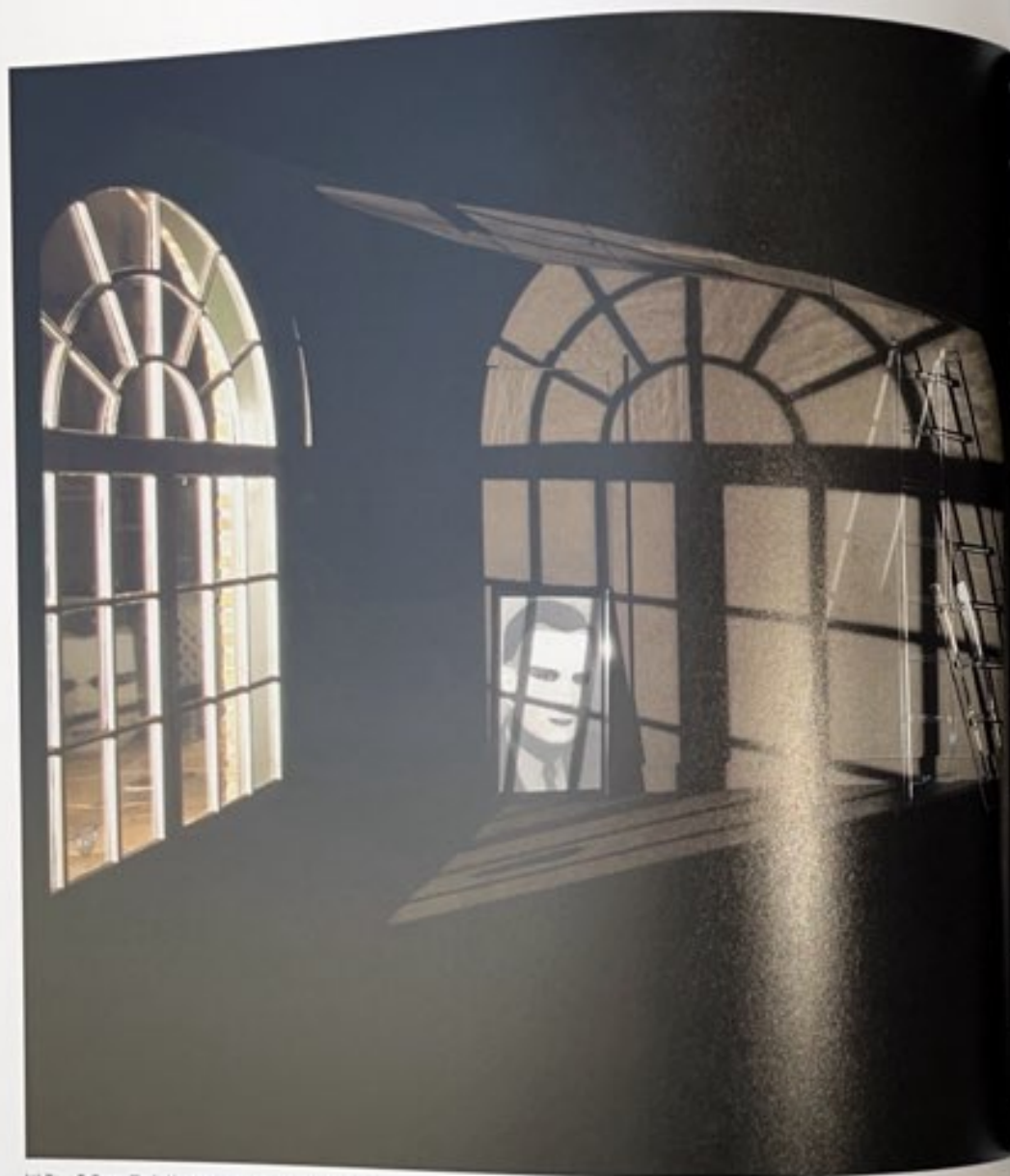


18) Dawn DeDeaux, *The Goddess Fortuna & Her Dunces in an Effort to Make Sense of It All (The Confederacy of the South Room)*, 2011
Collection of the Artist
Installation view (Prospect.2 New Orleans, Historic New Orleans Collection, The Brulattour Mansion and Courtyard, October 22, 2011–January 29, 2012)

the adjacent rooms and stairways. 18) DeDeaux cast local “sissy bounce” rapper Katey Red as its eponymous goddess character. 19) In a large circular projection, a haunting dirge-like soundtrack accompanied slowed-down footage of Red performing baton twirling in an eighteenth-century French court costume: white mask, a powdered wig, and metal hoop panniers. Periodically, the film returned to real time and a bounce beat took over, which felt massively sped-up, given the hyperactive, ass-shaking Red’s silver-lamé-hot-pants-wearing dancers perform in the video, acting as Fortuna’s assistants who spin the wheel of fate.

The grumpy, supercilious, misanthropic main character of *A Confederacy of Dunces* Ignatius Reilly is obsessed with early medieval scholar Boethius’s sixth-century volume *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which uses the figure of Fortuna to debate the nature of free will. To Boethius, “One’s virtue is all one truly has, because it is not imperiled by the vicissitudes of fortune.”⁶ While Reilly is hardly virtuous—the novel contains innumerable episodes showcasing the character’s selfish and self-aggrandizing actions to comedic effect—Reilly believed his education and independence rendered him superior to others, and that he would therefore be spared the consequences of fate.

17) Dawn DeDeaux, *The Goddess Fortuna & Her Dunces in an Effort to Make Sense of It All (Balcony view of Dunces)*, 2011
Collection of the Artist
Installation view (Prospect.2 New Orleans, Historic New Orleans Collection, The Brulattour Mansion and Courtyard, October 22, 2011–January 29, 2012)



191, Dawn DeGauss, *The Coldest Fortune of Her Dances in an Effort to Make Sense of It All (The Coldest Chamber Room)*, 2011
Collection of the Artist

Installation view (Prospect 2 New Orleans, Historic New Orleans Collection, The Brutus Manship and Courtyard), October 22, 2011–January 29, 2012





110 Dawn DeDeaux, *MotherShip III: The Breathing Room*, 2014
 Wood, plexiglass, air vent, record player, and orchid, dimensions variable
 Collection of the Artist
 Installation view (Prospect.3 New Orleans, October 25, 2014–January 25, 2015)

DeDeaux does not share Reilly's confidence about the triumph of individual will over fortune. In a stratified and unequal society, determinations of class, sex, and color are lotteries won or lost before a conscious "self" can even approach the goddess's wheel. After that, vulnerable human bodies are subject to societal inequalities and the powerful and unpredictable forces of nature. In a text accompanying the project, DeDeaux poses the following vexing question about human control: "Where our fate will land—a hurricane, an oil spill, or a tsunami—nobody knows."⁷ The language of fate (predestination) and fortune (luck or unluck) are themselves relics of faith in human agency that was, in practice, almost always squelched by caste. In order to justify the immovable nature of these hierarchies, the modern world explained the rigidity of the social order and one's fixed place in society as something determined by divine powers such as fortune or fate. What philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno termed "disenchantment" is, in part, the uncoupling of divine power from fate: the creation of a culture of personal responsibility whereby each individual becomes responsible for their actions.⁸ As Horkheimer and Adorno noted, however, the notion of personal responsibility is itself

a false consciousness: personal accountability and opportunity are no match for structures of inequality that present people a limited pool of potential outcomes all the while calling those options “freedom.” Even an “act of God” that seems to be outside of human control often affects populations disproportionately, with the privileged having resources to buffer themselves from misfortune. As DeDeaux shows in *Goddess Fortuna*, people can literally “miss” fortune.

The elegiac quality of DeDeaux’s *MotherShip* project bookends the turmoil of *The Face of God*, *In Search Of* and the unevenness of nature’s effects in *The Goddess Fortuna*. The potential absence of humanity on Earth, its desertion of the troubled, dying planet, haunts DeDeaux’s recent work. In one area of the sprawling outdoor installation of *MotherShip III*, a small room framed out by wooden studs stood amid the underbrush. Missing windows or doors, clear plexiglass acted as curtain walls and ceiling. Silver HVAC piping wound out of the room up the ceiling, as though a climate control system, now in disrepair, once protected this cabin. A single ratty armchair sat in the corner of the room, an old record player at its feet. The record player miraculously still worked, given that the baleful structure was largely outdoors: inside the shelter, it played tunes from the Sun Ra Arkestra on repeat, as music by George Clinton and P-Funk bled through from outside. The sense of the room as a decrepit capsule exposed to the environment was palpable. Outside the room a massive wooden wine rack lined a nearby wall, one capable of holding hundreds of bottles, but here sparsely stocked with less than a dozen, looking like a raided wine cellar down to its last stores.

DeDeaux cites the architect-engineer R. Buckminster Fuller’s warnings about population expansion and inefficient resource management as inspiration for the project, stating, “I was in touch with Fuller in 1981 or ‘82 just prior to his death to solicit an essay from him for a book I was aiming to publish titled *Out There: Man’s Invasion of Space*.” Born in Massachusetts in 1895, Fuller was an inventor and designer who worked in the late 1940s at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, alongside émigrés from the Bauhaus, focusing at first on easy-to-assemble “dymaxion” housing units, and later on geodesic dome design.⁹ To Fuller, the interdependence of human technologies and natural ecologies was exemplified in the notion of “Spaceship Earth,” and his metaphor subsequently became one of the most powerful and enduring of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He believed that humanity possesses resources to feed, house, and clothe the world’s population in equitable fashion, and he worked tirelessly to efficiently reallocate global resources to create a universal standard of living for all.

Fuller’s efforts toward the redistribution of what he thought of as modernity’s post-scarcity abundance are, however, tempered by his unflappable faith in the positive benefits of technology. With this in mind, there’s certainly much to question about what Fuller termed



[11] R. Buckminster Fuller, *Autonomous Dwelling Machine*, 1949
Courtesy, The Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller
© Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller/John Ferry

"evolutionary" thinking, in which Earth is just one stop on humanity's inevitable journey of progress to conquer the universe. This vein of technocratic utilitarianism has had countless negative consequences, and continues to hamper understandings of the non-human origin of ecologies on Earth in the current anthropocentric era of irreversible human alterations to the planet.

DeDeaux's work explores a side of Fuller that perhaps he himself could not acknowledge: an urgency about nomadism in which an improvised and precarious existence may become the unavoidable feature of a coming postapocalyptic world. This duality between utopianism and the repressed dystopian was evident in Fuller's own projects; for example, his and his partner-in-firm Shoji Sadao's 1960 proposal to shield midtown Manhattan with a plastic dome, ostensibly to provide a controlled climate to economize on snow removal costs, but with an unavoidable implication that the dome could provide protection from nuclear fallout. ^[12]

DeDeaux's work merges Fuller's techno-utopian vision with influences drawn from Afrofuturism. Her *MotherShip* project, for instance, takes its name from the P-Funk Mothership, a "funk deliverance" spacecraft used as a stage prop in Parliament-Funkadelic's large arena shows in the 1970s. The P-Funk Mothership acted in part as a heuristic object, delivering the lessons of funk bestowed by the mother, Mother Africa. ^[13] The mothership metaphor in the band's mythology is powerfully joined to that of the parliament as a collective identity. The word *parliament* is derived from the French *parler*, "to speak." Invoking a deliberative body of governance, a parliament in this sense speaks for the Earth in anticipation of the return of the mothership, or even speaks for the mothership about whether to visit Earth at all.

As the theorist Kodwo Eshun has argued, P-Funk's *Mothership Connection* is "the link between Africa as a lost continent in the past and between



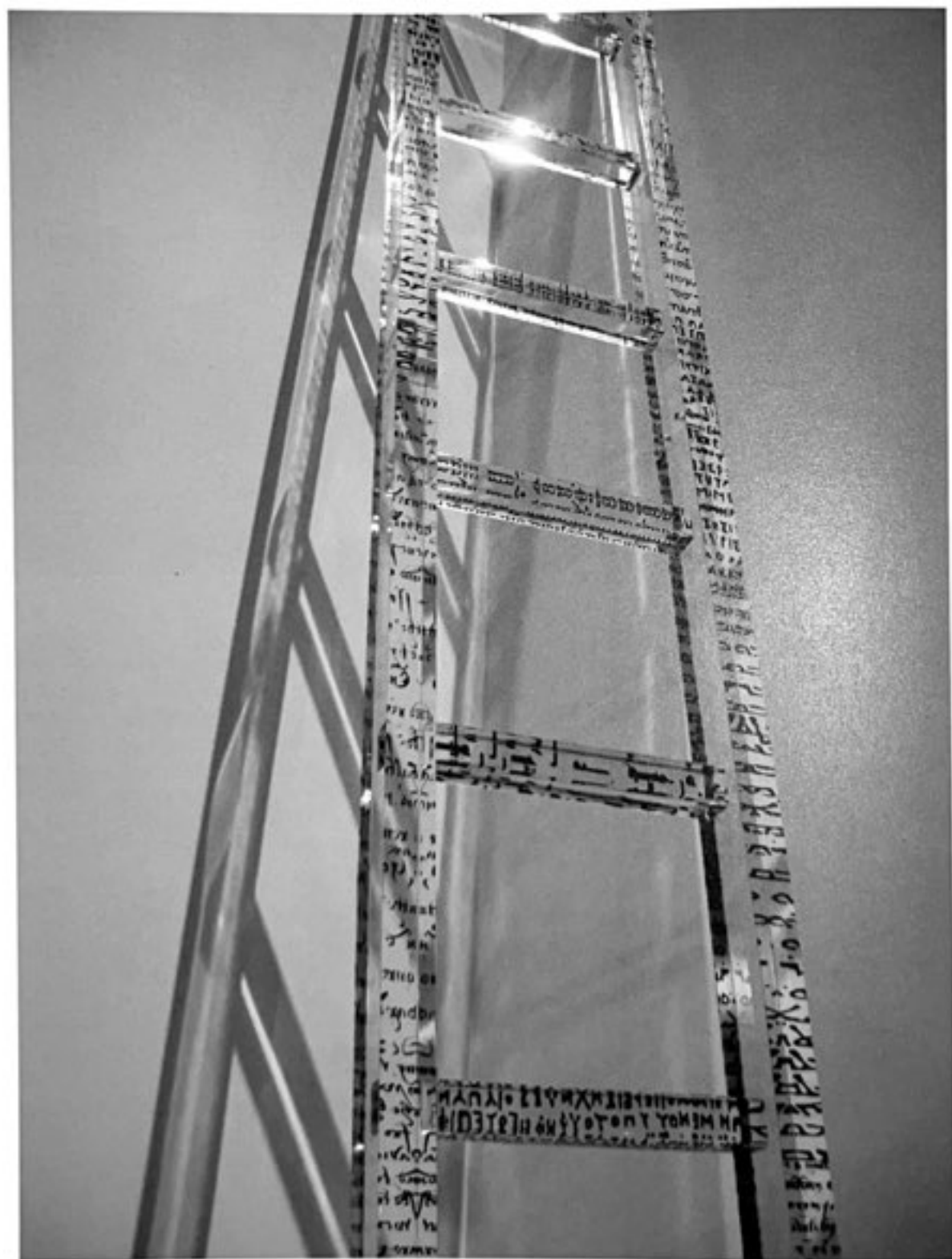
^[13] *The MotherShip*, Designed by George Clinton, Jules Fisher, and Peter Larkin and Used by Parliament-Funkadelic, 1990s
Metal, plastic, glass, 120 x 250 x 113 inches, 1,500 pounds.
Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Love to the planet, 2011.83.1.1-9
© George Clinton



[12] R. Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao,
Dome over Midtown Manhattan, 1960
Courtesy: The Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller
© Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller/John Ferry

Africa as an alien future.”¹⁰ While Sun Ra’s call to rapture Black people to Saturn with his interplanetary Arkestra—using the metaphor of the ark fleeing Earth—contested the history of slavery and its slave ship vehicles, the metaphor of the mothership, in contrast, invokes the concept of the brood, in which the big ship may transport travelers to safety upon her return. It also inverts the concept of Mother Earth to instead envision technology as feminine and maternal, comforting children upon her arrival, and nourishing them with a funky party, initially the lavish P-Funk Earth Tours of 1976 and 1977.

Metaphors are powerful, and Fuller’s use of the now famous “Spaceship Earth” formulation puts forward a vision of Earth as a technological ecology created by humans. The concept of Spaceship Earth seeks to supplant the biological codependency of humanity and nature with a vision of a human-authored, technologically administered planet that can find surrogates in or be replaced by other spaceships—Spaceship Mars or Spaceship Europa, Moon of Jupiter, perhaps. To redirect us from the plurality and profligacy of the metaphor of the spaceship, I propose a new metaphor—that of Mothership Earth, combining the two singularities of the Mother and the Earth. Parliament is a collection of voices, but, in every way, the Earth is understood as a singular object: we have but one Earth. And like we have but one Earth, in P-Funk lore *the* mothership is a singular object; one can have but one biological mother. There is pointedly not one mothership among many. We cannot build our mothers as we would a spaceship; rather, they make us.



While Afrofuturist imaginations of space travel are explicitly critical of the history of colonization, in our moment, white tech billionaires are in a race to spacestead, to colonize the moon or Mars, hoping to create artificial ecologies that will require the continuous techno-engineering of synthetic air, or alter other planets into Earth-like worlds by way of terraforming—an immensely expensive proposition of creating synthetic capsules to weather the inhospitable environment of outer space. Why do the privileged not protect the air on Earth for those who currently inhabit the planet? “NewSpace” endeavors funded by Amazon’s Jeff Bezos—his Blue Origin company—and PayPal co-founder Elon Musk—SpaceX—race to flee the planet. The so-called exit strategy of these private NewSpace exploration and colonization schemes will be limited to those who can afford a wholly simulated atmosphere shielding them from the asperity of space. These are not universalist projects but rather elitist ones. They are planned with privileged, not vulnerable, populations in mind.

DeDeaux’s three *MotherShip* installations, and many of her subsequent projects, all use the haunting object of the tall ladder, propped against a wall or projecting vertically into the air, as a repeated motif. ¹⁴ Imagine climbing such a vertiginously high ladder, only to be stranded at its apex; it’s a lonely and frightening thought. In a statement accompanying the *MotherShip* Series, DeDeaux posed the question, “Who gets a seat on the (air) bus? Who gets left behind?”¹⁵ Waiting for the zeppelin to come rescue you from the rising floodwaters, waiting on the roof of your flooded house for a helicopter to spot you, DeDeaux uses the ladder to emphasize the precarity of our times. Though the dependency on others for one’s very survival is nothing new, the manner in which dysfunctional neoliberal governments distribute lifesaving resources unequally needs to be addressed in times of increasing vulnerability to ecological changes. DeDeaux is here at her most Cassandra-like, warning that these may be ladders to nowhere, awaiting in vain a Blue Origin or SpaceX rescue that will never come.

As part of many of DeDeaux’s *MotherShip* installations, she also shows a series of digital drawings of astronaut-like creatures on metal panels, based in large part on photography sessions she conducted with first responders dressed in moderate to extreme protective equipment. Many of these digital photocollages, titled *Space Clowns*, depict full-length silhouettes of figures in a kind of hybridized protective gear based on hazmat suits and diving equipment. ¹⁵ The original portraits were shot at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in Captiva, Florida, and the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine in New Orleans, where DeDeaux had artist residencies. The surfaces of the works are decorated with lace, floral, or wrought iron patterns. According to DeDeaux, these biomorphic ornamental motifs will remind future space travelers of Earth’s lost bounty: as she writes, the explorers she depicts are adorned with “colorful curvilinear patterns belonging to our place of origin, a place called Earth It is imagined that even the most manly men now wear their flower suits like a badge of honor, a symbol of identity.”¹⁴ The appearances of DeDeaux’s

¹⁴ Dawn DeDeaux, *Speaking in Tongues*, 2020
Digital drawing on polished acrylic, 142 x 15 x 3 inches
Collection of the Artist

space travelers are as important as their destinations, and, like the elaborate getups of the Sun Ra Arkestra and Parliament-Funkadelic, their costumes are a pastiche of historical references; while DeDeaux combines diving bells and radiation equipment, the Arkestra drew on the geometries of the ancient Egyptian visual canon, and Parliament-Funkadelic riffed on 1970s urban street fashion styled in futuristic metallic fabrics.

The current fascination with outer space colonization, in the time of human-driven climate change, political upheaval, and a widespread health crisis, recently brought DeDeaux back to the photographic origins of *Space Clowns* such as *Something Funny in the Air (Wavy Gravy)*. /16/ What initially seemed like mere source images for the baroque *Space Clown* collages now appear as harbingers of a new kind of breath regulation akin to the artificial air required in outer space. These first responder portraits, which DeDeaux initially shot using Rauschenberg's own 8-by-10 camera in *Captiva*, she terms *Guardians*. The images present an eerie foreshadowing of the protections necessary to survive in the ongoing age of deadly airborne viruses. From mustard gas to nuclear radiation, from oil spills to gas leaks, from influenza (fowl or swine origin) to coronavirus (bat origin), humans have created countless situations in which air has been made toxic and unbreathable due to alterations to ecologies and encroachments on and the destruction of wildlife habitats. In *Fallout* (2013), one of DeDeaux's photographs from *Guardians*, a man in a neon-green cloaked hazmat suit with a clear visor gazes above the viewer's line of sight. \17\ Photographed at an extreme horizontal angle from a perspective beneath his chin, he appears reclined, and his fixed stare lends him a preternatural stillness that is almost corpse-like. Wearing a ventilator beneath his face shield, he assumes an uncanny, cyborgian quality. As he looks upward, the blur of palms and other plants around him gives the impression that he is moving in space, plunging backward in a vertiginous fall. The isolation of his stuffy, fogged-up suit keeps him from the surrounding jungle of vegetation, a habitat on Earth that humans once traversed naturally, effortlessly, without fear of whatever hazardous condition from which he is insulated.

In her *Guardians* Series, DeDeaux is reassessing the ways in which our current moment has returned to consciousness the insecurity of ever being fully protected against often invisible threats like warming oceans and disease, or of being prepared for the unpredictable effects of the depletion of life-sustaining resources on MotherShip Earth. As she states:

During the [COVID-19] quarantine, I have come to value equally my straightforward photography of responders. The decorative aspects of the [Space Clowns] work went extreme future tense, imagining us already exiled from the planet, when the curvilinear lines of flora and fauna superseded the straight lines of flags in terms of conveying our place of origin, Earth, as we drifted further and further away, looking for its closest replica. It is the natural world of Earth and rain, the fresh water,



[16] Dawn DeDeaux, *Something Funny in the Air (Wavy Gray)*, 2014
Digital drawing on paper, 88 x 40 inches
Collection of the Artist



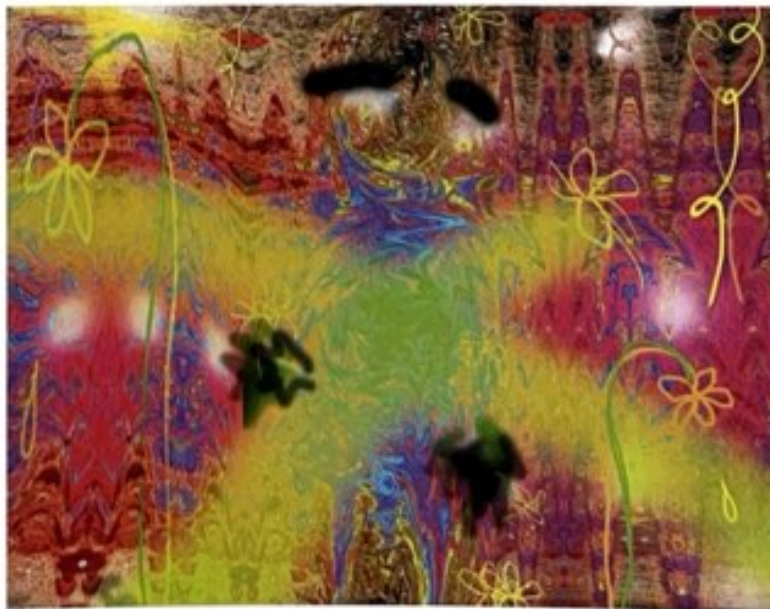
that shaped the aesthetic of our planet and perhaps our future wardrobe signifiers. . . . [Yet] the original portrait photos offer a greater punch of evidence for our NOW. This time of alienation is REAL, and the unadorned photo seems more poignant.”

In addition to reconsidering the origins of the *Space Clowns* by returning to her source photography, DeDeaux has also pushed the portraits into a zone of abstraction in her most recent work, her *Extinction Portraits* (2019). \18\ At times, vestigial aspects of the astronaut-like silhouettes of the *Space Clowns* are evident in these vertically oriented works, but a new character of “Acid Frog” emerges, an often unsmiling and sometimes leering cartoonish face awash in a bath of digitally painted neon color. Sometimes printed on mirrors, the works’ highly reflective surfaces employ vivid colors and psychedelic swirls to dissolve distinct outlines; form succumbs to pattern. The contours of these amorphous bodies are further confused by large Xs scribbled atop the characters; one blurred image with an X also includes text reading “Party Over” scrawled like graffiti in block letters over the entire surface of the work.

{17} Dawn DeDeaux, *FALLOUT: Green First Responder in Headlights with Palms*, 2013
Digital drawing on paper, dimensions variable
Collection of the Artist

While the character of the *Space Clown* went, according to DeDeaux, “extreme future tense,” Acid Frog lives perhaps in the near future, or at least a future that is nearer in the sense of more terrestrial. Acid Frog, according to DeDeaux, is a mutant, a human-amphibian hybrid that imagines what “humankind might evolve into once the effects of global warming have gripped the planet, and the human race is faced with the hard choices of extinction or evolution into a species that can survive the new anthropogenic biosphere.”¹⁴ Whereas the *Space Clowns* wear signs of biomorphic nature as emblems of a lost or distant Earth, the Acid Frog merges with nature, much as many amphibians are dependent on water and air: the word amphibian comes from the Greek *amphibios*, meaning “both kinds of life.”

The art historian T.J. Clark has written of the “twinned” project of modernism, that there are two interconnected techniques by which art represented the conditions of modernity. On the one hand there was a dream in art of plenitude, of “sensuous immediacy,” of the world “becoming a pattern of privacies—of appetites, possessions, accumulations.”¹⁵ On the other hand, in a related but distinct manner, modernism to Clark was the fascination with techno-utopianism, which offered a world as “more and more a realm of technical rationality, made available and comprehensible to individual subjects by being made mechanized and standardized. The world is on its way to absolute material lucidity.”¹⁶ Clark’s notion of “sensuous immediacy” can be understood, in modernist art, as a series of formal techniques of representation, from romanticism through expressionism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism, in which plenitude, lush color and gesture, and excess are emphasized. The notion of technical rationality, in some ways, can be traced through the emphasis on line and experiment in



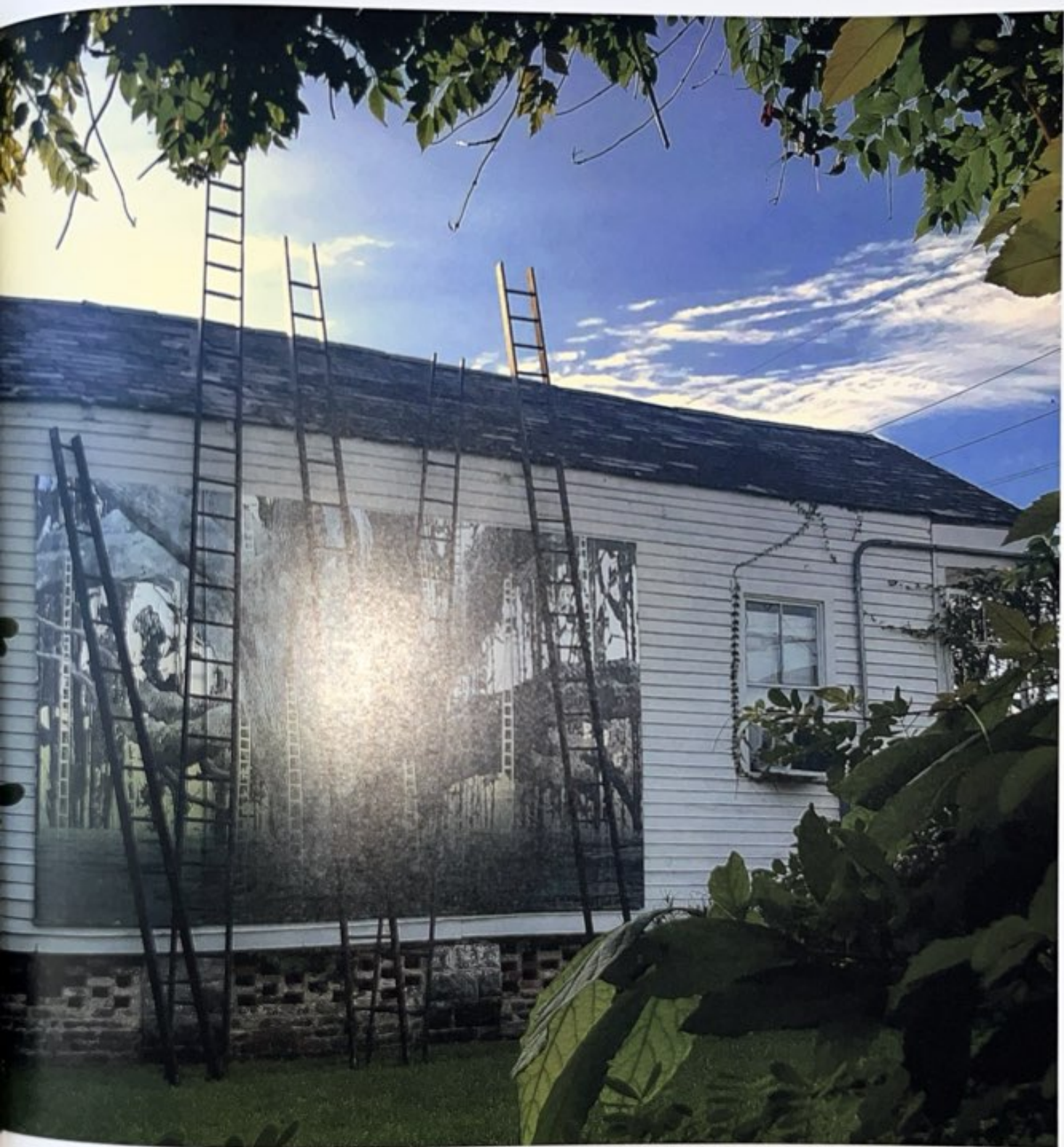
{18} Dawn DeDeaux, *WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE WTF???*, 2019
Digital drawing on polished metal, 88 x 96 inches
Collection of the Artist

neoclassicism, to pointillism, futurism, and geometric abstraction. Of course, as Clark cautions, these dreams are not antithetical, but rather mutually informing, and therefore difficult to separate from one another. What is the translation of evanescent light conditions into paint in impressionism but a sensual deployment of a near mechanized technique of representation?

In DeDeaux's case, the dreams of modernism—its delight in sensuous, organic pattern, on the one hand, and its promise of technological rationality, on the other—begin to blur and fragment. The dissolution of the self into nature, one stylized into highly controlled ornamentation, is perhaps the dream of symbolist art. The cyborg is perhaps the ideal of futurism, of humans becoming better than nature. The astronaut, perhaps the preeminent figure of mechanized, near cyborgian dependency on technology, in DeDeaux's hands is garnished with the organic forms of nature. The pattern of privacies, of plentitude, is blasted open into an almost unbounded mutant whose limbs camouflage with its surroundings. It is no surprise then that DeDeaux's studio is housed at a property near where her grandmother lived that she calls "Camp Abundance," a series of buildings and gardens that feature some of her outdoor works, an artist residency, and her production facilities. \19\ In times of precarity, with the very real possibility that the warming of the Earth in the Anthropocene caused by greenhouse gasses will make the planet uninhabitable for future generations, DeDeaux instead focuses on the wealth of possibilities available to us today, and the plentitude of this marvelous Earth we get to reside in, at least for now.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 194.
- 2 An earlier phase of the project was shown at the Center for the Living Arts (now Alabama Contemporary) in Mobile, Alabama in 2011–12.
- 3 The Ebola outbreak in nearby Dallas in 2014 brought a fresh fear to the region; at the time of a residency DeDeaux conducted there, Tulane's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine was among the leading combatants against the spread of the Ebola virus.
- 4 *Souvenirs of Earth* was first exhibited in June 2014 at the Acadiana Center for the Arts, Lafayette, Louisiana.
- 5 Williams quoted in Devlin, Albert J., ed., *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* (Oxford, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), p. 146, 304.
- 6 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 52.
- 7 DeDeaux, Statement on the work *The Goddess Fortuna & Her Dunces in an Effort to Make Sense of It All*, <http://www.dawndedeaux.net/goddess-fortuna---about.html>, last accessed March 15, 2021.
- 8 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Continuum, 1947).
- 9 See Díaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, Chicago, 2015. "Dymaxion"—a neologism of "dynamic," "maximum," and "tension"—was coined in 1929 by a Chicago department store ad executive.
- 10 Eshun, speaking in John Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History*, 1996.
- 11 DeDeaux, Statement on the work *MotherShip III: The Station*, <http://www.dawndedeaux.net/mothership-iii.html>, last accessed March 9, 2021.
- 12 DeDeaux, Statement on the work *Space Clowns*, <http://www.dawndedeaux.net/space-clowns.html>, last accessed March 14, 2021.
- 13 Email conversation with the artist, July 21, 2020.
- 14 Press release for *Dawn DeDeaux: The Adventures of Acid Frog & Friends*, Arthur Rogers Gallery, New Orleans, November 6, 2019.
- 15 T.J. Clark, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam," *October*, Volume 100 (Spring 2002), p. 164.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 165.



119 Dawn DeDeaux, *Camp Abundance (Artist's home)*, 2021
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