

Floating in Portentous Skies

Marginalia, those whimsical but often-grotesque miniature line drawings that float on the pages of many medieval illuminated manuscripts, especially those depicting the Apocalypse, seem either to act as counter-commentary to a page's sobering narrative or can be understood merely as the scribes sardonic joke, one we may or may not 'get'.

Stephen Spurrier's iconography, whether drawn, painted, or screen-printed in artist books or canvas or paper, resembles this type of marginalia and is as intriguing and simultaneously (and intentionally) as ambiguous. Hovering aeroplanes and helicopters, electric drills, chainsaws, guns float in sometimes serene and sometimes turbulent celestial spaces shared with sensitive depictions of floating cloud formations, moons and exotic birds. Scientific-looking diagrams co-exist in commune with human skeletal forms, seemingly innocuous insects and strange-looking heads.

With this vividly colourful corpus of pictographs assembled variously to look like fun and child's play Spurrier cleverly manages to suggest a narrative saturated with gravitas, this despite the work's often irreverent and humorous titles, for instance *Book of Remarkably Meaningless and Extremely Irrelevant Sequences*, *Urban Nomad* and *Art Procedures*.

His large group of 2011 miniature paintings collectively titled *Intrepid Gaze* can be viewed as oscillating alternatively between representations of a childlike fascination with the world, the wistful gaze of the initiated and ultimately the portentous indecipherable stare of the monster. Amidst this mix of fanaticized activity, ancient generic moons float alongside a variety of paraphernalia that act as a reminder of our own mortality and as a dire warning of impending catastrophe. Similarly, his *Moon Gazing* paintings of 2014 – especially the large works, *Red Transition*, *Stick People* and *Bleeding Moon* – remind me of the depictions of rivers flowing with blood, black moons, volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, plagues of locusts, condemned souls and all the other evils unleashed upon the earth by the trumpeting angels of The Apocalypse. In these, the viewer (St. John) gazes helplessly but in wonder on the scenes unfolding before him just as Stephen Spurrier gazes on the potential events he has manifested but over which he has little control. Ever the educator, he teaches us that unless we change our ways we can expect to experience more natural disasters, wars and calamitous occurrences beyond our collective imagination.

Those of us who have collaborated with Stephen on various projects, especially artist's books, know that he is a convivial man of good cheer. This genial disposition does not preclude serious contemplation and concern for the future of our cosmos for which he has invented an armoury of pictorial imagery that permits us to acknowledge and share his concerns and, concurrently marvel in wonderment at his capacity gentle artistic admonishment.