BRIAN ALFRED

BRIAN ALFRED Future Shock



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BRIAN ALFRED

By Ridley Howard

I often think of sound when I look at Brian Alfred's paintings...the audio that would accompany the image: traffic, a soccer stadium crowd, a strong breeze. The volume, though, is always faint and distant. It has something to do with the way his pictures work—and the silence that fills them. They are familiar scenes in a way—images taken from pop culture or places that are somehow known. But there is something distant and unattainable in them. They are dream-like moments, paused in a time we can't quite access, one that is both close and far away. Unfettered by the language of Instagram snapshots or sentiment (there is too much emptiness in them for that), these paintings feel personal, like the observations of a young person coming to terms with the world.

Place is featured predominantly in Alfred's flat, crisply edged, acrylic paintings. Location is defined by pop-influenced flat shapes that feel mostly geometric (although at times not quite), lines, and shades of color. The paintings are architectural at first glance. Looking further, they seem to be more about the still air around things and within spaces than the structures themselves.

Tied to this sense of place is, of course, a sense of time. We are paused at specific moments in which the spectacular and the banal often intersect. In a gray close-up of birch trees, the stillness of the leaves is notable. In another painting, a brightly colored explosion is suspended in space. Despite its diagonals, it almost has the fixed presence of a mountain peak. Perhaps the scenes leave us wanting animation. We wait for soccer players to run onto the field, a rescue boat to appear, or a leaf to flutter in the wind.

Overlying this stillness, is an ominous gravity. The sense of human absence is remarkable. Images of floods or fires contain the same invariable emptiness as paintings of trees, building facades, and a soccer pitch. It would be a relief to see someone—a sign of life. Instead, we are left to consider the unnerving quiet.

Ridley Howard is a painter living between Athens, GA and Brooklyn, NY. He is a co-founder of 106 Green Gallery.



FUTURE. TENSE.

By Sarah K. Rich

In a 1972 documentary entitled *Future Shock*, Orson Welles rides an airport conveyer belt and intones dystopian observations about the malignant effects of rapid technological change and quickening consumer culture. Expounding on insights derived from the Alvin Toffler bestseller for which the movie is named, Welles rolls through the crowded architecture, noting in his fatigued *basso profondo* that we suffer from, "a sickness, which comes from too much change in too short a time. It's the feeling that nothing is permanent anymore." Ensuing footage meant to terrify viewers with vistas of consumerism's proliferation (endless aisles of eight-track tapes, miles of wood-paneled station wagons) might seem antiquated and inspire more nostalgia than dread. But when Toffler died last year, commentators overwhelmingly emphasized the endurance and accuracy of his predictions—and with good reason. The expansion and instability of information systems, consumerism's infectious ethos of disposability, the "adhocratization" of labor in which everyone becomes a temp—these developments are anything but quaint. While Toffler may not have been the first to note them, he was among the first to extrapolate their implications in a tone sufficiently blunt and Delphic to fascinate vast numbers of the public.

The paintings in Brian Alfred's present exhibition marvel at Toffler's predictive power, even as their formal references to masters of Hard-Edge, acrylic Pop (David Hockney and Allan d'Arcangelo) recognize the long shelf life of postwar pessimism. Frequently, the paintings see the present as a misunderstanding of Toffler's points. In the section of *Future Shock* entitled "Time Horizons," for example, Toffler advised that leaders learn to better extrapolate the future effects of different technologies. Alfred's painting of the same name depicts a landscape fractured into greenhouses (which might simulate a certain temporality of seasons but won't change the underlying conditions of climate change). Since it is viewed from above, Alfred's landscape has no horizon at all.

Other paintings test Toffler's observations by filtering them through some of Alfred's most cherished iconographical preoccupations, particularly relating to sports. By "Organizational Upheaval," Toffler meant that new technologies would rapidly contribute to the instability of workplaces, governments,

and domestic spaces. Alfred's *The Organizational Upheaval* allegorizes places where people gather as a crepuscular football arena in which fans have become mobs, pennants have become protest banners, and festive lights have degenerated into arsonists' fires.

The allure of such paintings, of course, derives from the dissonance between their grim subjects and their style, which is deceptively clean and halcyon. Consider *Personal Stability Zones*, named after Toffler's term for an anti-consumerist sphere of refusal, in which one might resist the pressure to dispose of or update things. So it may be surprising that Alfred's painting of the subject is so gratifying to the eye. Its lateral parades of color are festive. Its layers of acrylic are as smooth and substantial as vinyl. Its rows of balconies and laundry lines establish a modernist grid that locks the happenstance of everyday existence into a gratifying compositional rigor. Yet, as is the case with many of these paintings, something is amiss. The top row of balconies is cropped, so it doesn't quite make it into the picture. A slight tilt of the viewpoint upward, such that the building's facade doesn't quite match up with the sides of the canvas, gives a queasy quality to the modernist grid. It turns out that the painting's superficial pleasures are a lure, pulling the viewer into conceptual depths, both social and art historical.

There is also a careful, iconographical richness to these paintings that rewards close analysis. The social queasiness in Alfred's *Personal Stability Zones*, for example, derives from familiar modernist depictions of urban streets crisscrossed with laundry lines. In such images—most of them from the early- to mid-twentieth century—shirts wave like banners among tenements (as if poverty is waiting for its parade), and lines seem to await a tightrope walker (as if slums are an opportunity for death-de-fying spectacle). The frisson of the subject matter, which derives from a voyeuristic mix of intimate garments and public exposure, enters a more ironic mode in Alfred's painting. For while the laundry may seem to create a personal stability zone by curtaining doors from view, it does so by exposing the occupants' intimates to the world. Alfred's painting also pays attention to recent developments in this modernist tradition of depicted laundry, as his image is an amalgam of today's viral photographs and chatty blogs that invite Internet denizens to marvel at the frieze-like contour of garments drying on balconies of high-rises in Mumbai, slums in Cairo, and dormitories in Chinese megacities whose names most Americans do not know.

Essential to Alfred's project is that, in the end, it recognizes the uncomfortable relationship between modernist painting and its complex social context. Throughout the twentieth century, modern painting developed strategies of pictorial flatness in order to proclaim formal victory, temporal transcendence, and historical optimism. Alfred's close-ups of solar panel grids, playing fields, facades, and outspread linens quietly tug at that flatness and question its victory. They pull it into oblique imperfection, perhaps in the hope that by way of such anamorphosis we might develop a better way of looking for a slightly less shocking future.

Sarah K. Rich is an associate professor of art history at Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Rich specializes in art after 1940, with a particular emphasis on art produced in the United States and France during the 1950s and '60s. Her current book project, forthcoming with the University of California Press, is titled *Past Flat: Other Sides to American Abstraction in the Cold War.* Research for that project has been supported by a postdoctoral grant from the Getty Research Institute, as well as by Penn State's Institute for the Arts and Humanities. While completing her book about American abstraction, Dr. Rich has begun research for a second book about Jean Dubuffet's collaborations with other artists. Dr. Rich has recently delivered papers at the National Gallery in Washington, MIT, Yale University, Harvard University, the Institute of Fine Arts, and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. She is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*, and her scholarly publications have appeared in *American Art, Art Bulletin*, *October, Perspective*, and the *Oxford Art Journal*, as well as in many exhibition catalogues and compendia of essays.



IN OUR LIFETIME?

By Erik den Breejen

"We got to stop all men From messing up the land When won't we understand This is our last and only chance Everybody, it's a future shock"—Curtis Mayfield, "Future Shock," 1973

Concerns about the environment and overpopulation are nothing new. They flare up with intensity at various intervals as the march of "progress" and capitalism stampedes on, eviscerating everything in its path. But how close to the end are we, really? When do we reach the point where it truly is too late? Will it be, as Marvin Gaye pondered in the title of his 1981 album, *In Our Lifetime*? Have we reached it already?

Brian Alfred's approach to painting, which recalls elements of Color Field, Pop, and Minimalism, is the perfect vehicle for a reinvestigation of these themes. He makes the disconcerting look pretty. And perhaps we need this initial seduction to help us swallow the heavier content. One easily becomes overwhelmed and exhausted by the flood of disastrous news. But if we could aestheticize the message, the art that results could be subversive.

Alfred has named his new exhibition *Future Shock*, after Alvin Toffler's 1970 book and Herbie Hancock's 1983 album. What's striking about the ideas expressed in Toffler's book is how timely and relevant they are today. Toffler argued that we were in a state of shock because of too much change in too short a period of time. The book also popularized the term "information overload," a fitting phrase for 2018, but also a little retro-sounding. Tellingly, the 1972 *Future Shock* documentary finds itself billed on YouTube as a "kitschy" vision of the future. Toffler dubbed himself a futurist—not to be confused with the early twentieth-century Italian artists of the same name.

Artists of Alfred's generation were not even born when Toffler's book came out, and they were still young when the similarly minded film *Koyaanisqatsi* was released in 1982. This film, whose title is Hopi for "unbalanced life," contains no narrative and consists of time-lapse and slow-motion footage depicting natural and man-made forces, from mass destruction to mass production. It is a cinematic tone poem featuring the music of Philip Glass. The music combines symbiotically with the rhythm of the film's actions, creating a beautiful, invigorating piece about the vast impact of human beings on the planet. I am reminded of that film when I look at Alfred's new paintings, *Time Horizons* in particular. Its aerial view of seemingly endless greenhouses and food production facilities delights on a formal level with its subtly shifting set of closely related colors. The painting also recalls Richard Diebenkorn's topographically inspired abstractions of the 1950s and even his later Ocean Park series. Upon viewing *Koyaanisqatsi* recently, I was struck by how prescient and moving it was and declared that it should be required viewing in schools. Coincidentally, the film version of *Future Shock*, with narration from Orson Welles, was distributed by the textbook giant McGraw-Hill, presumably for use in schools.

Alfred's painting *Personal Stability Zones* depicts a dense apartment block with laundry hanging in front of each unit. The implication of overpopulation is offset by Alfred's use of cheerful colors and a satisfying modularity akin to Lego creations. As they say in the movie, "everything is awesome." But I also think of Blur's recent song "There Are Too Many of Us," in which vocalist Damon Albarn sings of a land teeming with "tiny houses." *Experimental Industries*, a painting of an illegal tech goods factory hidden in the woods, inspires a sense of dread, and it dovetails with an image in my immediate memory from the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, in which the sinister mind control institution is nestled in a forest. Alfred complicates this reading, however, with his use of color and light, making the scene look almost cozy and inviting. Through these balancing acts, he is able to introduce troubling content without beating anyone over the head with it, making the viewer think while he experiences sensory enjoyment. An effective use of this dichotomy can also be found in the classic 1970s music of Pink Floyd; that band juxtaposed Roger Waters' often dystopian lyrics with David Gilmour's rich musicality. One gave the listener something to think about; the other made it sound good.

The 1983 Herbie Hancock album *Future Shock* was a notable departure for the artist. It featured the hit "Rockit," which contained the first use of scratching and turntablism (courtesy of GrandMixer D.ST, now GrandMixer DXT) on a pop song. The album also features cover art by the pioneering digital artist David Em. Hancock's "Rockit (Mega Mix)" opens with a tolling bell before sending us back (via a sample) to an earlier Hancock masterpiece from 1973: "Chameleon," from the *Headhunters* album. The juxtaposition of these two iconic synthesizer riffs is striking. "Rockit" feels stark, edgy, even paranoid, while "Chameleon" suggests a warm, bubbly, funky vision of the future. *Headhunters*, like minimalist painting and towering apartment blocks, may have been a last gasp of high modernism before it yielded to the postmodern movements of hip-hop and electro, Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Geo, as once utopian apartment blocks that were thought to further urban renewal decayed through neglect and overuse. As the '80s wore on, "Rockit" found itself re-imagined as a slightly more intricate, slightly less edgy hook in the *Beverly Hills* Cop theme "Axel F" by Harold Faltermeyer.

The cautionary tone of Curtis Mayfield's portrayal of the realities of modern urban life did not begin with "Future Shock"; it is a recurring theme for the artist, going back to "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go" from his 1970 solo debut and continuing with his songs for *Superfly* and beyond. The same word could be used to describe Mayfield's songs and Brian Alfred's paintings: realism. Alfred's work has a journalistic quality, as though the subjects have been ripped from the headlines. He and Mayfield both act as reporters, delivering their news in masterfully crafted packages.

Bombardment of the Senses employs Alfred's imagined view of a real-life gas explosion in Niger. The artist's treatment of the scene of destruction is seductive and even inviting. I am reminded of being told as a child that the prettiest sunsets come from polluted skies. Explosions can make for dynamic visual compositions, just as they can excite a musical recording. The hard rock band Gillan (featuring Deep Purple's Ian Gillan) used the sound of explosions to create an effective sensory bombardment in its track "Future Shock," from its 1981 album of the same name.

There is a sense of freedom associated with dread of the apocalypse. This is particularly evident in much of the music of the '70s and '80s. In simplified terms, the despair and ennui of the early 1970s begat the explosion of punk later in the decade, which, combined with disco and funk, morphed into the rich and varied music of the early '80s, both in New York and London. Elvis Costello was already "Waiting for the End of the World" in 1977. Then there was new wave, no wave, electro, hip-hop, *Breakin*', and *Electric Boogaloo*. Perhaps it is the acknowledgement that we are doomed that allows for such funky freedom to transpire. As Prince sang, "If I gotta die, I'm gonna listen to my body tonight." "Future Shock," as rendered by Herbie Hancock (with vocals by Dwight Jackson Jr.), like Prince's "1999" and Brian Alfred's new group of paintings, does not let its dark message get in the way of getting down.

Erik den Breejen is a painter based in Brooklyn, NY, whose work involves text and frequently deals with musical subjects. A zine of his own writing accompanied his last solo exhibition, Song of the Earth (2016). Other recent projects include a large-scale text portrait mural of Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun, commissioned by the label for its New York headquarters.

Time Horizons, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 62 x 73 inches 157.5 x 185.4 cm



The Environmental Screen, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 48 x 60 inches 121.9 x 152.4 cm



Experimental Industries, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 70 x 80 inches 177.8 x 203.2 cm



Sunlight and Personality, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 36 x 48 inches 91.4 x 121.9 cm





Personal Stability Zones, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 70 x 84 inches 177.8 x 213.4 cm



The Organizational Upheaval, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 70 x 90 inches 177.8 x 228.6 cm



STAN.

Bombardment of the Senses, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 48 x 60 inches 121.9 x 152.4 cm



Time and Change, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 36 x 48 inches 91.4 x 121.9 cm



Friendships in the Future, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 10 x 11 ½ inches 25.4 x 29.2 cm



Enclaves of the Future, 2017 Acrylic on canvas 70 x 84 inches 177.8 x 213.4 cm



BRIAN ALFRED

Born in Pittsburgh, PA Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

EDUCATION

MFA, Yale University, New Haven, CT Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Madison, ME

1997 BFA, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2018 "Future Shock," Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY

2017 "Techno Garden," Maho Kubota Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

2016 "In Praise of Shadows," Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe, New York, NY

2015

"It Takes a Million Years to Become Diamonds so Let's Just Burn Like Coal Until the Sky Is Black," Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe, New York, NY

2014 "New Animations," Hezi Cohen Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel "Beauty in Danger," Salon 94 Video Wall, New York, NY

2013 "Storms and Stress," Hezi Cohen Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel

2012

"It's Already the End of the World," Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, TN 2011 "Co-op," Giraud, Pissarro, Ségalot, New York, NY "Rise Above," Haunch of Venison, London, England

2010 "It's Already the End of the World," Haunch of Venison, New York, NY

2009 "Majic Window," Studio La Città, Verona, Italy

2008

"Millions Now Living Will Never Die!!!," Haunch of Venison, Berlin, Germany

2007 "Global Warning," SCAI the Bathhouse, Tokyo, Japan

2006 "Surveillance," Haunch of Venison, Zürich, Switzerland "Space Is the Place!," Mary Boone Gallery, New York, NY

200

"Paper and Pixels," Mary Boone Gallery, New York, NY "Conspiracy?," Haunch of Venison, London, England

2004

"The Future Is Now!," Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ "Overload," Max Protetch Gallery, New York, NY "Fallout," Samek Art Gallery, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA

2003 "New Work," Sandroni Rey Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

200

Max Protetch Gallery, New York, NY

2000 Max Protetch Gallery, New York, NY

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2016

- "Room with a View," EDDYSROOM, Brooklyn, NY
- "Art Film," Art Basel Miami Beach, Miami Beach, FL
- "Tokyo / London / New York," Maho Kubota Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
- "Audacious: Contemporary Artists Speak Out," Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
- "Genbi Shinkansen," Echigo Yuzawa, Niigata Prefecture, Japan "In an Illusion Village: Our Form Connected by Media Art,"
- Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori City, Japan
- "Extended Practice," Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

2015

- "BLACK / WHITE" (curator), Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe, New York, NY
- "The Search for the Real" (curator), De Buck Gallery, New York, NY
- "Villissima," Hôtel des Arts, Toulon, France
- "The Everywhere Exotic," Culturadora, Art Miami NY, New York, NY
- Animation Screening, Marfa Contemporary, Marfa, TX; Animation at the Dallas Art Fair, Dallas, TX

2014

- "BLACK / WHITE" (curator), LaMontagne Gallery, Boston, MA "Art Film," Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong
- "100 Works for 100 Years: A Centennial Celebration,"
- Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ
- "Mercury Retrograde: Animated Realities," Lafayette Art Galleries, Lafayette College, Easton, PA
- "Film Cologne," Art Cologne, Cologne, Germany

2013

"Uncanny Congruencies," Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA "Art Film," Art Basel Miami Beach, Miami Beach, FL "Mercury Retrograde: Animated Realities," Stephan Stoyanov Gallery, New York, NY "Epic Fail," Storefront Ten Eyck, Brooklyn, NY

2012

- "exURBAN SCREENS," Frankston Arts Centre/Cube 37, Melbourne, Australia 15th Japan Media Arts Festival, Tokyo, Japan
- "Sourced," Steven Vail Fine Arts Project Room, Des Moines, IA

2011

- "Beyond," SCAI the Bathhouse, Tokyo, Japan
- "Videosphere: A New Generation," Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
- "The Big Screen Project," Big Screen Plaza, New York, NY
- "Printer's Proof," Bertrand Delacroix Gallery, New York, NY

2010

- "12th International Cairo Biennale," Cairo, Egypt
- "The Big Screen Project," Big Screen Plaza, New York, NY
- "Me, Undoubtedly. 1309 Faces," Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg, Germany
- "Aichi Triennale," Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, Nagoya, Japan
- "Surface Tension," South Bend Museum of Art, South Bend, IN "onedotzero," The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC), Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY
- "New Art for a New Century: Contemporary Acquisitions 2000-2010," Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA

2009

- "Mercury Retrograde: Animated Realities," Big Medium Gallery, Austin, TX
- "The Figure and Dr. Freud," Haunch of Venison, New York, NY

"Uncoordinated: Mapping Cartography in Contemporary Art," Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH
"Ru Ru Ru Landscape: How I See the World Around Me," Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, Shizuoka, Japan
"Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks," Den Frie Udstilling (Den Frie Center of Contemporary Art), Copenhagen, Denmark

200

"The Shapes of Space," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
"System Error: War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning," Palazzo delle Papesse, Siena, Italy
"Art Fair Tokyo," Tokyo, Japan
"Art Film," Art Basel, Basel, Switzerland

2006

"The 59th Minute," Times Square Panasonic Astrovision Screen, Creative Time, New York, NY
"American Academy of Arts and Letters Invitational Exhibition," American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
"Radar: Selections from the Kent and Vicki Logan Collection," Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
"New Code," Studio La Città, Verona, Italy
"Signal Channel: Contemporary Video Art," Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, NE

200

"Produced at Eyebeam," Eyebeam, New York, NY "Surface," Lucas Schoormans Gallery, New York, NY "ART!@*<>WORK," Ignivomous, New York, NY

2004

"Metropolis," National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

"Art and Architecture 1900–2000," Palazzo Ducale, Genoa,

"Inaugural Show," Sandroni Rey Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

"Trouble in Paradise," Van Brunt Gallery, New York, NY "Happy Ending," Kingfisher Projects, Queens, NY

2003

"Toxic," Max Protetch Gallery, New York, NY

"Digital Showcase," Austin Museum of Digital Art, Austin, TX

1999

"Group Show," Max Protetch Gallery, New York, NY "MFA Thesis Exhibition," Yale School of Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

CURATION

2016

"Animated! Explorations into Moving Pictures," Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

2015

"BLACK / WHITE," Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe, New York, NY

"The Search for the Real," De Buck Gallery, New York, NY

2014

"BLACK / WHITE," LaMontagne Gallery, Boston, MA

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Selected artists include Trudy Benson, Inka Essenhigh, Ellen Harvey, Daniel Heidkamp, Shara Hughes, Wendy White, amongst others.

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY

Cleveland Clinic Art Program, Lyndhurst, OH

Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO

Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY

Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT

Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA

Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY

University Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, MA

Wellmark Blue Cross Blue Shield Corporate Art Collection, Des Moines, IA

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

AWARDS

2016

College of Arts and Architecture Faculty Research Grant, Pennsylvania State University

2015

Institute for the Arts and Humanities Individual Faculty Grant, Pennsylvania State University Jerome Foundation Grant

2013

CarriageHouse Arts Residency, Islip, NY Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant

2011 Excellence Award, Japan Media Arts Festival

2008 Pennsylvania State University Alumni Achievement Award

2006

Joan Mitchell Foundation Award American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Award Pennsylvania State University Alumni Award

2005 New York Foundation of the Arts Inspiration Award

2003 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant

1999 Phelps Berdan Memorial Award Skowhegan Matching Scholarship

1997 Edwin W. Zoller Scholarship Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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