T. Kelly Mason: Space Film
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November 1–December 14, 2019
Space Film follows a cast of characters traveling through space and time, including a depressed robot, a snarky space captain, and his co-pilot. The work is loosely based on the artist’s memory of watching John Lurie’s 1979 Super-8 film Men in Orbit, which featured two astronauts in conversation, set in a New York City apartment. Like this earlier “sci-fi povera” work, Mason’s Space Film has distinctly absurd, low-res qualities. It was largely filmed in the artist’s van in his driveway, using props that were intentionally crafted to appear deskilled. This crude mise-en-scène sits in stark contrast to the typical slick polish of a space odyssey, and underscores the peculiarity of the video’s plot.

The astronauts confront various problems that seem to go nowhere and never get resolved; they also spend significant time talking about mundane topics. Space Film has no linear narrative, but Mason employs standard cinematic tropes as well as audio to create mood, enrich the story, and make us laugh. Mason draws from theatrical and operatic traditions in the film’s sound design; the movies Tommy and All That Jazz are specific references cited by the artist.

Space Film is Mason’s first exhibition with the gallery.
Space Film, 2019. multi-channel HD video installation. 43:26 minutes.
Space Film, 2019. HD video. 43:26 minutes.
This is what 800 times the speed of reality looks like.
Rare indeed is the movie in which humans go to space and something does not go catastrophically wrong. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the sentient computer murders the astronauts on board *Discovery One* in service of a secret mission. In *Alien*, a deadly "xenomorph" with acid for blood invades the *Nostromo* and kills nearly everyone on board, the crew having been expendable in service of another secret mission—to bring the creature to Earth for study by a sinister corporation. In *Ad Astra*, the latest entry in the genre, Brad Pitt heads to Jupiter to recover his astronaut father, Tommy Lee Jones, because, for reasons unknown, blasts of the antimatter that fueled Jones's ship are causing deadly power surges on Earth. Unbeknownst to Pitt, the plan is to kill his father if he’s gone rogue.

The stakes of these excursions are always sky-high. This was the gag on a recent *Saturday Night Live*, where Chance the Rapper played an astronaut. “Promise you won’t make a mistake up there,” pleads his son. “I promise, because that would be the worst place to make one,” he says. Calling back to *Alien*'s tagline, he tells his fellow crew members, “You know what they say—in space, no one can hear you make a mistake.” And … you see what’s coming.

Now, into airless, cold, infinite space hurtles Los Angeles artist T. Kelly Mason, with his new video *Space Film*. This absurdist, lower-than-low-fi outer-space dramedy-meets-road movie has a duo of astronauts fleeing an unidentified global catastrophe, headed to points unknown, comically engaging with the tropes of his chosen genres along the way. But even as he offers ironically downbeat robots, jokes about space food, and inscrutable time travel, Mason grounds his creation in serious thinking about human nature and whether we can make a future on the only home we’ve got.

Mason stars as the pilot and copilot (as well as voicing on-board robots and others heard over the radio) in a multiplication of self that is doubtless grounded partly in keeping costs low (no need to pay actors) but also offers metaphorical possibilities. The action plays out on an unnamed ship; the front seat of Mason’s own spacious new Mercedes-Benz van serves as the bridge. After a rocky takeoff, Mason’s astronauts communicate with other escapees who are fanning out through space “like spokes on a wheel,” over scratchy radio waves. (“I miss Miss Toothpaste’s smile,” one sadly intones.) The sad-faced robot, consisting of a roughly sculpted head atop a tripod, reminds one of Marvin, the Paranoid Android of *Hitchhiker’s Guide* fame. As in just about every space epic, the food sucks. The pilot complains of intestinal troubles as we hear a toilet flush, and he asks if the food-making machine can pop out some prunes.

“This is radio from another time,” says a deejay, and, as in epics like *Interstellar*, the travel is not only through space, but also through time. “Allow me to explain time dilation,” says a voiceover, vaguely explaining the phenomenon, and voilà, the pilot is replaced with a young boy, played by Thomas Butler, son of L.A. art dealer Brian Butler. (Soon enough, the boy inexplicably turns back into Mason.)

The viewer may suffer the same claustrophobia as the spacemen; it’s nineteen minutes into the production before we escape the van and walk with one of the astronauts into the rest of the ship, which is set in the fluorescent-lit halls of a self-storage facility (a set choice inspired, says Mason, by the necessity of a recent move to a smaller studio). The spaceman treads awkwardly, walking on magnetized low-gravity shoes, recalling the unforgettable scene in *2001* in which the hostess rotates a hundred and eighty degrees, ultimately walking upside-down.

Mason’s props and costumes seamlessly become sculptures, like the armoires in which the astronauts hang their costumes (coveralls, baseball hats, Breton-striped tops, work gloves). *Space Film Dream Sequence 5 Figures* consists of a handful of lumpen terracotta
figurines that stand on an aluminum shelf. They serve as an infighting Greek chorus in the video, arguing about the nature of time travel, about whether a “course correction” is possible, about whether there’s hope. But, like much else, they remain amusingly vague. “The user experience is part of the problem,” says one; “the user is the other part.”

Knowing the rules of the space travel genre, we should not expect good outcomes. Ultimately, all the same vices that plague humankind at home follow them into space: power struggles, betrayal, weakness. The co-pilot, for some reason, is a Frenchman; the French are known for their wines and cheeses, less so for their spacegoing capabilities. To make matters worse, this particular Frenchman is constantly popping a variety of pills from a mints tin. When there’s a climactic but unspecified emergency on board, Mason goes on a long walk through the ship and, finally, emerges into blinding white light before the credits roll. It’s unclear whether this signifies his demise or, like the light show experienced by Dr. David Bowman at the end of *2001* may indicate, a hard-won higher consciousness. (There’s no Star Child to be seen, just a “bonus track” of a few minutes’ worth of electronic music.) And if Mason’s characters are as much road trippers as astronauts, they never do achieve the insights that genre promises.

*Space Film* joins a rich tradition of Los Angeles artists riffing on Hollywood. Paul McCarthy, with a titanically bigger budget, savages epics like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, subjecting his characters to sexual depravity or hacking away at their image of manhood. Ed Ruscha skeptically surveys the legend with his image of the Hollywood sign against crimson skies, suggesting the sun setting on Tinseltown mythology. A contemporary of Mason’s, Joe Sola drolly brought movie magic into the art world with his performance *Studio Visit*, where he escapes the awkward ritual by diving out a second-story window of fake glass, an abject stuntman’s version of Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void*.

Los Angeles curator Corinna Peipon, who has shown Mason’s work in two exhibitions, offers another predecessor. “I’d argue that William Leavitt is the artist who is the most relevant precedent in the previous generation of conceptual artists in Los Angeles,” she says. “There are many parallels and intertwined conversations to be found in and between Kelly’s and Bill’s work, from mid-century modernism in Southern California to Hollywood mise-en-scène and production design, to the relationship of sound and image, to a life-long devotion to listening to and making music as an adjacent practice to making visual art.”

*Space Film*, furthermore, engages in a rich history of low-budget films devoted to space travel, the most big-budget enterprise imaginable. In particular, it’s inspired by a distorted memory of John Lurie’s self-described “sci-fi povera” *Men in Orbit* (1979), in which Lurie and writer-director Eric Mitchell, high on LSD, hang around in a New York apartment kitted out as a spaceship with abundant tinfoil. “I remembered it as them eating McDonald’s in a VW bug,” says Mason, who saw the video at a screening organized by Christopher Wool in 1990. When he chuckled to himself that his new Mercedes resembled a spaceship, he associatively followed that joke through a thread that led back to a productive mis-recollection of Lurie’s contribution to the space genre.

Mason’s work also calls back to Bruce Nauman, that titan of West Coast art, especially his pioneering early videos in which the confines of his studio, like those of Mason’s van, create a claustrophobic space for Nauman the director to abuse Nauman the actor. Just as Nauman had no filmmaking knowledge, Mason counts his relatively amateur status as a filmmaker as an advantage: “I don’t know a lot of the tricks of the trade,” he says, so he can’t manipulate the viewer. “Which is good,” he says, “because my cynicism isn’t through the roof.” Nauman often speaks of taking on new mediums as a way of remaining an amateur, leaving some rawness in the resulting work. And if being an amateur makes for some ambiguity in his sci-fi road movie, says Mason, all the better: “I’m not trying to lay it out for you. I’m going to rant a little bit and see what you can make of it.”

Before becoming an artist, Mason studied music and played in bands, but after a chance meeting with John

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1 Interview with Corinna Peipon, November 2019.
2 All quotes by T. Kelly Mason are from interviews with the artist, November 2019.
Baldessari, as Mason tells it, “I thought, ‘Cool, maybe I’ll be an artist.’” His musical knowhow figures into Space Film; throughout, music as low-fi and rough-hewn as the video overall sets the mood. While earning an MFA at the ArtCenter College of Design, in Pasadena, Mason soaked up the lessons of faculty like Stephen Prina, Christopher Williams, and, most of all, Mike Kelley, for whom he subsequently worked for some years. From Kelley, says Ann Goldstein, Deputy Director and Chair and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, Mason absorbed the habit of “looking under the rocks of American culture.” From all three, he learned “a spirit of irreverence and interrogation of existing models of production and systems of knowledge.” Mason, she adds, “has a way of bringing all of this into the everyday.”

While it’s productive to trace the cinematic and artistic references in Space Film, Mason isn’t aiming just for riffs, or for laughs. Over the radio soon after liftoff, Mason voices words from the immortal Carl Sagan, inspired by a grainy 1989 photo of Earth, a tiny dot, taken by Voyager 1 just before leaving our solar system. “Everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam,” Sagan wrote, urging us to conserve this gift from the cosmos.

This humbling message aligns with another, read haltingly by a computer, also near the video’s beginning, suggesting a theme for all that is to come: “If your life is a collection of identities,” it says—think Mason’s multiple roles—then “pulling it all together is practice for establishing just and productive conversations between individuals.”

These are the hints that, behind the japes, there’s an urgent humanist message to Mason’s video. Asked whether Space Film is an entry in the tradition of films in which Earthlings populate other planets, he shot the idea down. “Do we really want to do what we’re already doing, but somewhere else?” he asked. “Or would we rather rethink how we’re doing things here?”

When asked why we need so many space films anyway, he agreed to do a bit of “armchair cultural theorizing.”

“It’s like Romanticism. It’s the unknown, so you can put anything into it. I spend a lot of time in the ocean. You set foot in the ocean and you’re in this great unknown space. People want to see something in the movies that’s beyond their vision. It’s like death. What happens after you die? Nobody knows.”

What we do know, speaking of death, is that like the planet Mason’s astronauts are fleeing, our own is in dire circumstances. The looming tides of climate refugees will outnumber the current ones by many orders of magnitude, and it will be the planet’s poorest and most vulnerable who will suffer the greatest pain. “This is the subject of our day,” says Mason. We need to find a way to “establish just and productive conversations between individuals,” and on a global scale, because if we wreck the mote of dust we’re on, we’re not all going to fit into the spaceship—even if it’s a nice, roomy Mercedes.

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3 Interview with Ann Goldstein, November 2019.

Space Film Deep Listening Android, 2019. glazed ceramic, wax, foam earplugs, microphones, audio recorder player, epoxy, aluminum shelf. 14 1/2 x 11 5/8 x 11 5/8 inches (36.8 x 29.5 x 29.5 cm).
Space Film Helmet and Stool, 2019.
plastic helmet, inert polyester foam, wood stool, acrylic.
36 x 12 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches (91.4 x 31.8 x 31.8 cm).
Space Film Dream Sequence 5 Figures, 2019.
terra cotta, wax, epoxy, steel, aluminum shelf.
12 x 12 x 11 inches (30.5 x 30.5 x 27.9 cm).
Space Film Robot Head Skin Melted, 2019. wax, aluminum shelf, polyester resin armature. 9 1/2 x 11 5/8 x 11 5/8 inches (24.1 x 29.5 x 29.5 cm).
Space Film Cup Holder Android, 2019. aluminum, aluminum foil, plastic, mylar, acrylic, acrylic adhesive, tape, steel. 8 x 18 1/2 x 5 inches (20.3 x 47 x 12.7 cm).
previous spread:

*Space Film Inked Script*, 2019. India ink on acid-free drawing paper. each: 14 3/4 x 11 inches (37.5 x 27.9 cm). overall: 48 x 75 inches (121.9 x 190.5 cm).
Space Film

The world is destroyed. Our astronauts narrowly escape destruction.

We see astronauts #1 & #2 inside the vehicle. There is some discussion of the catclysm.

They eat...

Entropy is what gives time energy. That which is entropic is lost in the past.

Radio from another time is heard.

The engine is powered by music, bees and flowers.

Science fiction is subversive and has utopian tendencies.

The robot is a tripod wearing a mask.

There is a discussion of death, boredom, and tasks including a search for a place of meaning within our known universe.

The astronauts use special shoes to adhere to the floor utilizing a magnetic fabric.

This should be watched in the dark.
THE ROBOT

The robot’s head is seen from behind in darkness. The light glances off his head, and illuminates a small stack of equipment and materials.

- WHAT ARE YOU WORKING AT.
- COMMUNICATIONS TROUBLE
- WHAT’S WRONG?
- I’M TRYING TO FIX THE GEAR... I’VE BEEN AT IT FOR AGES...
- I KNOW... WE HAVEN’T SEEN YOU FOR TWICE THAT
- I'M MAKING PROGRESS... SIGH... IT’S SUCH SLOW GOING.
- I ASKED "WHAT’S WRONG" I DIDN’T ASK HOW YOU FEEL.
- SO... WHAT’S WRONG - WITH THE EQUIPMENT.
- WELL, MY RUBBER FACE IS ROTTEN. I DON’T RECOGNIZE MYSELF ANYMORE. I DON’T HAVE ANY HANDS.
*Space Film Inked Script Page 16, 2019.*

India ink on acid-free drawing paper.

14 3/4 x 11 inches (37.5 x 27.9 cm).
Space Film Mobile Titles (Recto Black), 2019. Watercolor paint, graphite and acrylic on 140 lb. Arches watercolor cold pressed block paper, brass, monofilament, wire, PVA glue.
24 x 6 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches (61 x 16.5 x 16.5 cm).
Space Film Armoire #2, 2019. FR fabric and cotton jumpsuits, campaign medals, canvas and rubber shoes, felt, nylon and rubber gloves, wool cap, aluminum, Speedrail parts, vinyl laminated MDF, mirror polished Dibond, carnauba wax. 81 x 40 x 40 inches (205.7 x 101.6 x 101.6 cm).
Space Film, 2019. HD video. 43:26 minutes.
Space Film Statement
T. Kelly Mason
November 11, 2019

“One of us is going to die.”
- Captain, Co-Pilot, Robot 1, Robot 2, and Deep Listening Robot in Space Film

I started this film based on a dim recollection of something I’d seen 29 years in the past* and the interior styling of my new van. “It’s like a space ship,” I joked to myself. My mind’s editorial process follows a joke with a question. What kind of space is the “Space Ship,” and what happens there typically?

In my recollection of Men in Orbit, I thought the mise-en-scene was the interior of a Volkswagen Bug. In reality it’s nothing of the sort. How does that square with my initial response? I kept away from re-watching Men in Orbit until weeks after writing and filming Space Film was completed. I would partake in experiments of the mind in order to reveal expression in my work.

The characters in the film live in a reality of shared experiences, appropriated means of communication, misreading, and overstated polemics. Their close quarters exacerbate the unresolved nature of future Consciousnesses. This is an escape, not a mission.

“Other peoples’ things.”
- Captain, Co-Pilot, Deep Listening Robot in Space Film

Over the previous 10 years, I’ve spent a great deal of time with other peoples’ things: digging into artists’ studios and workspaces, going through the things they leave behind, the things that are not art but are the means or sometimes the subject of art. I’ve been fabricating activities in these other spaces and doing it with materials at hand: a light source in the room, actions that could have happened or, importantly, things I desired to happen but lacked permissions. If x then y, what would have been the result? Are we reordering old things to make new meanings, or are we understanding old things and proposing a future tense?

Ohayo (Good Morning) Yosujirō Ozu, 1959 Color Film
- Captain and Co-Pilot’s screen entertainment in Space Film

Our experiences of films and artworks sit atop knowledge of certain structural tropes. Barring the rare individual who grew up nowhere, we know some things because we know them. Space films are rarely just Space Films; they are space Westerns, a space Adventure Tale, a space Historical Drama, a space Horror, or probably in this case, a space Road Film. Scenes of: the characters in a car, the characters in a café, the characters in a hotel room.

Actively using a knowledge-framework to give a thing shape defines any formal inquiry. Inquiries into invisible phenomena—nano materials, black holes, quarks—establish new frameworks for new solutions and, beyond the event horizon, new ideas. Creative endeavors do this.

In the film I had the privilege of time to do everything. Everything. Almost. I had some help (see film credits). I didn’t have THAT much time. The construction of props was basic, and used the elements of sculpture: clay, metals, wax, fabrics, polymers, and adhesives. The framework of the edit is that of any space film. Establish the location, the scene, use decor and events to show the characters and their lives, escalate the dialogues, and move them into a state of dramatic tension. Relax that tension then build it all over again, perhaps more than once, with a musical interlude. In the soundtrack, music, dialog, Foley and film sound are all treated as a percussive instrument. The dialog is overdubbed. The edit runs on music. It’s all musical interlude and maybe what’s left is emotional or funny or abstract in form.

“THE WORLD IS DESTROYED OUR ASTRONAUTS NARROWLY ESCAPE DESTRUCTION”
- Future Times, Communication Number 1 2019, Page 1

The business of “dislocation people” fleeing from a change in climate results from our obsession with technological solutions combined with a lack of awareness of the underlying human and emotional consequences of the resulting productions. This is the subject of our day. Are we headed toward something in particular or aimlessly away from it? In the 21st century, it seems easy to say, “I can make this happen.” It’s much more difficult to say “this is what happens.” Are we dislocation people yet?

*John Lurie’s film Men in Orbit was shown at a graduate seminar at the ArtCenter College of Design in 1990 by Christopher Wool. Wool screened a selection taken from Hell Is You, The New Cinema retrospective, by Anne Kugler, Eric Mitchell and Christopher Wool at Printed Matter, 77 Wooster Street, New York. 1989
Space Film Prop Robot, 2019. wax, plaster, brass, steel, camera tripod, plastic mask, elastic strap, inert poly foam. 54 x 36 x 36 inches (137.2 x 91.4 x 91.4 cm).
Space Film Prop Robot (detail)
Space Film Communications Satellite 14.5 oz, 2019. aluminum foil, Wiffle ball, tin can, brass, monofilament, wire, PVA glue. 24 x 18 x 3 inches (61 x 45.7 x 7.6 cm).
T. Kelly Mason (b. 1964, Hollywood, CA) was at the forefront of the domestic Conceptualism that emerged in Los Angeles in the 1990s. His sound installations, sculptures, images, and performances activate historical and contemporary ideas of domestic space, cultural production, the body politic, and the artist's milieu. Mason has exhibited internationally at numerous institutions including the Bass Museum of Art, Hammer Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, MOCA Los Angeles, Washington University at St. Louis, Whitney Museum of American Art, ICA London, LACMA, USF Contemporary Art Museum, Blaffer Art Museum, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, among others. In 2013, he received a Fellows of Contemporary Art Fellowship in recognition for his contributions to the California art scene. Mason currently teaches at The Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, and he lives in Los Angeles.
Photography credits:

John Muggenborg: 1, 7, 8-9, 14-15, 27, 28-29, 31, 33, 34-35, 44-45, 47, 53

T. Kelly Mason: 4, 23, 24-25, 37, 39, 41, 43, 51, 55