LUIS DE JESUS LOS ANGELES

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Cosmic Laboratories: Jim Adams and the *Mythic Sketches*

Essay by Rhys Edwards

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Is there any symbol more potent than the pyramid?

The cross, perhaps. But the cross lacks the flexibility of the pyramid, which benefits from the loss of its cultural context. Untethered from place or purpose, it is a blank trapezoid onto which any and all ideas can be projected, unrestrained by geography or time. If pyramids hadn't been constructed by all manner of ancient civilizations (astral or otherwise), most certainly a savvy marketing executive of our own time would have invented them.

It is the paradox of the pyramid which underlies the art of Jim Adams. Although a historically specific construct, it attains strength in the light of the current moment: as, variously, a monument to cultural memory; the landing site or temple of extra-terrestrial beings; a symbol both of patriotism and efforts to curtail it; and, perhaps more saliently, the embodiment of Afro-Futurist ideals. But, as Adams reminds us, it is also an “eternal symbol;” it is always more than what it seems. Its cache extends beyond its own history. Likewise, Adams' myths always extend beyond their own precepts; they are never fixed, never singular, never the monoliths they may appear to be. Nor does Adams himself cling to the identities of a specific moment or place. He is akin more to an oral storyteller—his words seeming to communicate eternal truths, and yet embellishing them with his own, deeply idiosyncratic flourishes.

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In Adams' work, there lie the seeds of perennial stories—the universal histories of spirit popularized by thinkers such as Hegel, Jung, Campbell and Frazer. These voices are unified by a belief in a singular

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reality, its traces found in every realm of human cultural expression. This reality is particularly pronounced in religion and myth across time and place, while conforming to an internal logic that may be gleaned through the comparative study of culture. It asserts the continuity between ancient civilization and the present day, made visible in the stories we tell each other. The protagonists of Jim Adams' paintings are apparently the mythopoeic heroes of all time, inhabiting the mortal vessels of every era in a perpetual revitalization of spirit.

In the postmodern era, such narratives have lost their currency. From a contemporary anthropological perspective, they make totalizing assumptions about the equivalence of cultures; from a post-colonial perspective, they are a form of the hegemony imposed upon those same cultures. Yet, they also provide the grist for other, latter-day forms of social expression, such as the New Age movement (enthusiastically rekindled by an anxious Millennial generation), or, by contrast, Afro-Futurism. In a sense, the latter embraces the universalizing logic of Hegel et. al by arguing for an imaginative, magical unification of subjects beyond borders, space, and time—though, of course, it undoes this logic through a racialized, diasporic lens.

It is tempting to read Adams' art as a robust expression of Afro-Futurism, given both his own race and his frequent references to Nubia, space, flight, and ancient Egyptian mythology. The repeated casting of young Black men and women in the role of classical heroes and deities supports this argument and could be interpreted as a response to the domination of Western classicism in both the art world and throughout history generally. This reading could be extended more broadly to the counter-canonical efforts of those artists who inflect hegemonic culture with Black experience; such efforts have been massively popularized in recent years by artists like Kehinde Wiley, Yinka Shonibare, and Karen Walker, among others. But such a reading does not do justice to the extraordinary breadth of Adams' practice, which evades easy categorization.

Adams is certainly not politically naive, or apathetic. References to current affairs have appeared in his practice from its earliest years in the 1960s, when he produced a book work about the Arab-Israeli conflict, right up to the present day, with recent paintings referencing White Supremacy, Trump, the suppression of Women’s rights, and drug legislation, among other topics. Nor does Adams avoid broader conversations about art practice—he has held a lifelong commitment to arts advocacy, taught

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fine arts for more than four decades (in Philadelphia, Southern California, and British Columbia), and hosted public access television shows featuring exhibitions and interviews with contemporary artists.

But it is important to see these aspects of Adams' life within the broader context of his practice. For as many paintings as there are of specific people, places, and times, there are an equal number of ahistorical, dreamlike worlds. Just as much as Adams draws upon current events and geopolitics, so too does he capture the seemingly apolitical: enormous cloud formations, planetary eclipses, astral constellations, and, perhaps most idiosyncratically, aeroplanes—the latter of which Adams renders with loving precision, awarding them as much attention and detail as his portraits of friends and family (Adams himself holds a pilot's license).

The works on display at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles primarily draw from Adams' *Mythic Sketches,* a body of work Adams has pursued consistently over the past three decades. They manifest mostly as studies of pyramids, or the previously mentioned portraits of deities. In a prior statement on the series, Adams notes that he portrays these figures in the garb of contemporary fashion in much the same way that historical painters portrayed mythical figures in the fashion of their own time[1] (it is telling that, while observers of Adams' work are often quick to assume this decision has symbolic meaning, the same cannot be said for portrayals of Christ or the Roman pantheon within the Western canon). Adams also states that these sketches function in much the same way they have always done in the history of figurative painting: as a preliminary means of rendering visual ideas, to be refined into a more finished work at a later date. In both their function and in their casting of the subject within the contemporary moment, the *Sketches* are comparable to the studies of any number of historical artists.

But it is worth noting that proportionally few of Adams' larger canvases (some of which are also included within the exhibition) appear to relate to the sketches. These works vary wildly in terms of colour palette, subject matter, and composition; by contrast, the mythic sketches largely draw upon the same set of visual schema and have done so throughout Adam's life. Yet Adams insists that the pyramids which appear throughout the series are still the basis upon which he constructs almost all of his more refined works. Even if they do not appear in a larger-scale canvas, they are nevertheless

[1] Jim Adams, “Mythic Sketches.” From *Jim Adams: The Irretrievable Moment,* Surrey Art Gallery, 2017, 32.

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their conceptual origin, providing Adams with the means to see things in perspective.[2] This is often literally the case, as when Adams portrays his subjects either posing upon, or at distance from, a pyramid, though more often it is an intangible prism through which the events of a given scene occur. In other words, the pyramid is the antediluvian launch pad for Adams' forays into an array of different subjects.

There is something to be said for the consistency with which Adams returns to these works. They belie the position of an artist who has steadfastly refused to succumb to the dominant trends of painting within the contemporary art world, and particularly in Vancouver, which ascended within the global art world concurrently to Adams' own development as an artist. They reflect Adams' fascination with the eternal recurrence of conflict and the perennial truths of myth, a la Campbell; but the paradox of this position is that it is itself deeply personal, arguably to the point that it has alienated Adams from the broader community in which he otherwise participates. In a contemporary art market ravenous for the relentlessly new, Adams stands apart in his uncompromising commitment to his own vision of the world.

The poet Lavinia Greenlaw said: “The past leads us to the future by reminding us that our perceptual framework is ours alone and will not sustain.”[3] The breadth of Adams' oeuvre (of which only a fraction is present at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles) is testament to the singularity of Adams' perception. Though he may address himself to a myriad of subjects—family and friends, nebulae and Nubia, microcosm and macrocosm—such statements always issue from the pyramid, looming over all, a silent witness. It encompasses all our hopes and fears, but in order to do this, it must never be commensurable to any one text. The universal symbol reserves something within its depths, something which does not translate. That which is held over is irreducible, unique only to Adams. Behind the mythical, there is the individual—and yet it is precisely because Adams establishes the mythical in terms of the individual that he transcends the perspectives that time imposes upon our lives.

In his 2019 untitled self-portrait, the artist portrays himself wearing a space suit. This work is the latest in a long line of self-portraits, going back to the 1970s, where Adams appears in the form of a pilot. His

[2] Conversation with the artist, December 5, 2020.

[3] Lavinia Greenlaw, “All Hail the Microbe.” *London Review of Books*, 18 June 2020, 22.

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destination is the upper echelons of the atmosphere, and beyond, where he is not beholden to the strictures of discourse, or the passing of time. From this lofty plane, he is able to see the world from a distance, untethered by the affairs of mortals. Here, he charters a course into alien territory, beyond *terra firma*.

Rhys Edwards is a critic, artist, and curator. His art practice employs figurative painting and drawing techniques in the pursuit of anti-representation. He has written for *C Magazine, Canadian Art, The Capilano Review,* and *BC Studies.* In 2015, he co-founded the Agent C Gallery with artist Debbie Tuepah in the Newton region of Surrey, BC, and in 2019 he was nominated for the Salt Spring National Art Prize. He works as Assistant Curator at Surrey Art Gallery, BC, and lives in Vancouver, BC.