



## Adam Dix: Folklore & Technology

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*After his sellout show at London's Haunch of Venison, we meet the artist to discuss shamanistic rituals, science fiction and the quest for a technological utopia.*

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I stumbled across the work of Adam Dix by accident, during a particularly dismal day in London last winter. The rain poured, the winds howled, and the clouds cast menacing shadows over Mayfair. The morning had been spent with a friend from Wigan, checking out the exhibitions on Cork Street, armed with a shoddy golf umbrella. We ducked into the Haunch of Venison shortly before closing time, and squelched up the magnificent staircase to see *Transmission*.

The gallery had been temporarily relocated to number six Burlington Gardens, a building made up of gargantuan rooms and double height ceilings. Against these vast white walls, his paintings were modest in scale, yet still commanded my attention. At first glance, they appeared to be nostalgic, voyeuristic documents, reminiscent of 1940s tinted photographs. Closer inspection revealed a sinister undertone to each of these mysterious anthropological scenes, and I felt compelled to understand the narrative behind them. It's rare that I'll return to see the same exhibition twice, but there was something so genu-

inely mesmerising about the palette of pastel colours he'd used to paint these warped societies, that I braved the elements a week later for a second viewing. I casually sauntered up to one of the invigilators, and asked if he thought the press department would help me to secure an interview with this young artist. Emails and phone calls ensued, and a few weeks later I was invited to meet Dix at his studio in Hackney.

The steel framed windows shuddered slightly each time the London Overground trains rattled past the building. It was an organised and welcoming space: the walls

adorned with studies and yellowing pages torn from periodicals published some decades earlier. I noticed his canny use of old yoghurt pots as nifty paint vessels, and after cranking up the fan heaters, we started discussing the methodology behind his paintings.

A CONVERSATION WITH ADAM DIX

*When did your career as an artist begin?*

I had an epiphany about five years ago, up in Edinburgh. I'd been thinking about going back to college to do a Masters for a while, but looking at the works of Eduardo Paolozzi in the Dean Gallery that day made me realize that now was the right time to apply. He'd always been a real hero of mine, a man whose work was a true manifestation of what he believed in. I'd originally graduated in the 1990s and started jobbing as a freelance illustrator and working as an assistant to other artists, but somehow always managed to keep on painting. Over the years I ended up pretty disillusioned by the whole thing, but the experience was immensely helpful, and it gave me a nice back catalogue to delve into from time to time. We've all been around the block a few times – and not necessarily the right block, but being on the course gave me the time I needed to re-evaluate the way I painted. Apparently this is what happens on an MA – they break you down, and then they build you back up again.

*For the past decade or so, the media have repeatedly warned us about the possible dangers of mobile phone masts, or the health risks of living close to electricity pylons. Yet throughout your work, you place the characters uncomfortably close to these devices. What prompted your interest in humanity and its relationship with technology?*

My work had always been concerned with cities, urban culture and telecommunications. I'd grown up with the technological side of the visual and media world all around me. My mum was a freelance vision mixer, working in the television industry and my dad was a musician. I spent most of my school holidays trying to keep quiet on set when the programmes were being filmed, or sitting in those dimly lit control rooms, looking at banks of monitors and watching them switch from one camera to another.

This was coupled with an ongoing interest in science fiction, and old B-movies from the 1950s. When I started researching things further, I realized the way we live now owes a lot to the psyche and the advances made by people at that time. Without the technological breakthroughs that were made during the Cold War period, we probably wouldn't have the satellite dishes, mobile phones, and laptops that nowadays we just take for granted. Before the space race started between the US and USSR, computers were these immovable, clunky pieces of apparatus that were so colossal in size, that they filled entire rooms. Things had to be downsized pretty swiftly so they could fit into rocket ships, ready to be launched into space.

I spent a long time studying our relationships with



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## Field Notes

### 01 *Gesso*

An Italian word meaning chalk, gesso is a substance used by artists to prime boards and panels prior to painting. Traditionally consisting of rabbit glue, calcium carbonate and white pigment, it is applied in numerous fine and delicate layers, then sanded down or scraped until the desired surface is achieved. Although fragile in appearance, it is known to be extremely strong and durable. Evidence of gessoed artifacts dating back 3,000 years have been found by archaeologists in ancient Egyptian tombs. In contemporary gesso, the animal glue has been replaced by an acrylic substitute known as latex.

### 02 *The Space Race*

This began during the mid 1950s, when the two world superpowers of that era, the US and USSR were locked in a global conflict – democracy against communism. Each nation saw outer space as an arena for battle and began competing to see who would be the first to launch an unmanned artificial satellite, therefore proving their superiority and technological prowess. The US were pipped to the post when the USSR launched Sputnik 1 on October 4, 1957. Regardless of the fact that it was only the size of a beach ball, it was the first man-made object to orbit the earth.

### 03 *The Leipzig School*

A term coined by art journalists to refer to the mid 21st Century German art movement comprising of students from the Leipzig Academy of Art. Born in the 1970s, the exclusively male-only group were raised behind the Iron Curtain during the years of the German Democratic Republic. The work features clear narratives and abstract elements, with the skilfully deployed use of muted, institutional colours. Notable artists within the group are Neo Rauch, Christoph Ruckhäberle and Matthias Weischer.

01 Close-up of desk

02 Vintage postcards and imagery

03 View of the studio

04 Selection of oil paints

05 Source material

06 Study in work from archive photo



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communication and connectivity, and started to wonder what might happen if the human race were suddenly forced to obliterate all knowledge of telecommunications and technology – and then be reintroduced to it again. I was pretty sure that the whole thing would appear disconcerting and illogical. But then, after watching films like *The Wicker Man*, it struck me that some people would probably begin to revere these awe-inspiring, incongruous monuments. I imagined entire communities starting to display cult-like behaviours, worshipping these bizarre relics of a bygone era.

When you look at most science fiction, the subtext is nearly always concerned with the trials and tribulations of communicating with people or beings beyond our planet. Looking at the modes of modern telecom-

munication, I started to see elements of absurdity, as if there was some kind of contemporary folklore attached to it. We've all seen people holding their mobiles up to the heavens when they can't get a signal – it's almost a spiritual act. There's even a church in London (St Lawrence Jewry) where a Christian Reverend has taken the ancient medieval custom of Plough Monday and given it an upgrade into the 21ST Century. Traditionally, farm-workers would attend the service to have the tools of their trade sanctified, in the hope of a healthy harvest. As I sat there and watched members of the congregation take their mobiles and laptops to the altar for a blessing by the Reverend, I couldn't help thinking that this really was a golden moment.



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*Your paintings are executed using limited, and outdated institutionalised tones. Who and what are your main influences?*

The work stems from a lifelong obsession with collecting old printed material from the 1950s: science-fiction books, vintage *LIFE* magazines, *National Geographic* and comics. I loved the fact that there were always these little imperfections in the way things were printed back then. Sometimes, if you hold them up to the light in a certain way, you can see they have a definite surface knowledge.

I have a continued interest in Belgian painters Michaël Borremans and Luc Tuymans. Both of them, along with artists from the Leipzig School in Germany are well known for using muted colours in their work. I've also been influenced by a 19TH Century French printmaker called



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- 07 Work in progress – part of the triptych *Silent Servitude*
- 08 Studio stool
- 09 Fan heater
- 10 Dix and his painted studies

Honoré Daumier, who has been labelled by some as ‘the Michelangelo of caricature’. Literature-wise, I’m a real fan of writers like Aldous Huxley, E.M. Forster and the social historian Eric Davis.

*The work appears designed and constructed, as opposed to more traditional forms of painting. Was this your intention?*

Each piece is meticulously planned, and only executed after I’ve seen all the colour swatch tests. I need to be guaranteed that when I start layering the inks, the final results are what I expected to get. There are still times the colours will seep and spread, giving the work a glow like an old television set. I love those moments, because it all goes back to those outdated techniques and the whole character of misregistration. There is a certain kind of slipperiness to my painting – one of my old mates, who isn’t an artist called it “the controlled splodge”. I’ve always really liked that quote, a totally non-technical way of looking at my work.

When you get up close to one of my paintings, it suddenly disintegrates in front of you – but when you stand back, it all falls into place. The main reason for this is because there’s only so much control I have with the inks and glazes. Generally, I work with panels or canvases on the flat, using layers of gesso as a primer. Once each layer is dry, I’ll sand it down, ready to build it up again, and then start sketching onto the surface.

I’m not the fastest painter in the world, and because I can only paint one small area at a time, I have to be patient and wait until it dries. I tend to work on lots of different pieces at once, because otherwise, I am literally waiting for paint to dry. Occasionally I’ll have to use drying agents within the paint, and fan heaters to speed things up a little. I remember for the Haunch show, one painting left the studio in a carry frame because it was still wet. The gallery told me afterwards that it hadn’t even been unwrapped and they’d already sold it. Amazing.

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2011 has been a very busy year for Dix. His acclaimed work has caught the eye of numerous international art collectors and has been exhibited widely. When asked if the success of the past year has changed things, he beams “finally, I can lock myself away and get on with it.” —