

## *Tabiti Syndrome* 🌿 Aoibheann Greenan

Though Western society has become progressively more secular in the last one-hundred years, the same period has shown an increase in the human urge to seek contentment through a faith in and a longing for the transcendental by non-religious means. These longings are gratified in various new and developing ways relating to, for instance, new age philosophy, the arts and, most notably, consumerism. *Tabiti Syndrome*'s central theme is one of the longing for sacred experience and the often temporary and/or possibly unfulfilling sating of this desire. Increasingly untethered from the exclusive beliefs of our ancestors, our psychic needs are increasingly catered for by a smorgasbord of nouveau-spiritual ideas and rampant consumerism.

Greenan titled her degree show *Hallucinatory Resemblance*, and this could be an accurate moniker for the style of her output since then, including the holistic installation of her first solo show, *Motels & Mineral Surfaces*, at NAG, Dublin, in which she looked at the artifice of the tourist experience, focusing on the commodification of native American mysticism, its form and context mutated in a dilative settlers' interpretation. With her art inviting us into immersive, chimerical simulacra – touchstones for which being Beuys self-mythologizing installations and certainly the allegorically autobiographical gallery 'processions' of Paul Thek – she is interested in Sherrie Levine's idea of

a reconstituted object retaining its auratic qualities, as opposed to being a mere copy, by forging a 'tension' between the reference and the work.<sup>i</sup>

Greenan's meticulous drafting and propensity for the kitsch also calls to mind Grayson Perry, much of whose work is inspired by traditional craftwork and based around the iconography of his childhood teddy bear, Alan Measles.

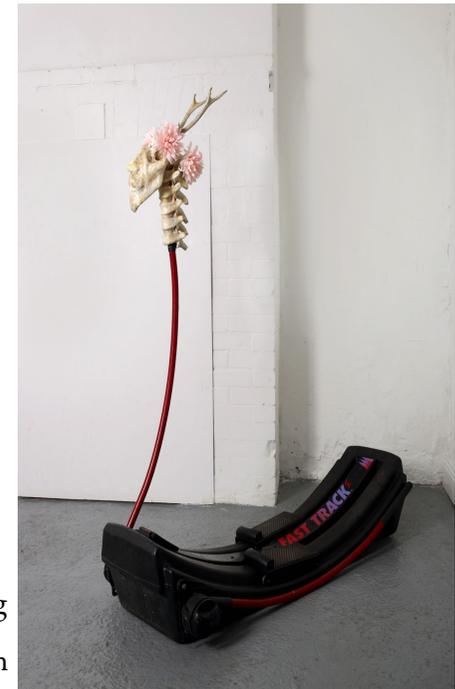


With *Gauguin Mode*, Greenan constructs a contemplative niche for the oft thwarted search for spiritual connection through an atavistic understanding of nature and ritual. Its textual touchstone, 'Sanctuary' is borrowed from the 1976 science fiction movie *Logan's Run*.<sup>ii</sup> The film begins in a domed, twenty-third century Earth city, sealed from the catastrophe fallen, off-limits, outside world. Its inhabitants live an ultra hedonistic

lifestyle until the age of thirty, when – to covertly facilitate population control – they voluntarily offer themselves up for sacrifice in a ritualistic public spectacle called ‘Carrousel’, with the false promise of ‘renewal’ by reincarnation – more of which later. The film’s eponymous protagonist – whose police-hitman job it is to prevent people from fleeing the city – discovers a clandestine group<sup>iii</sup> who are aiding those who wish to escape to a fabled Sanctuary on the outside. He is forced to become an undercover ‘runner’ by the city’s controlling supercomputer, with orders to ‘destroy’ Sanctuary. Logan never finds this fabled place, but instead, a world in ruins<sup>iv</sup>. On returning to the city, he is captured by Sandmen and interrogated by the computer. When calling into question the existence of Sanctuary, he causes the computer to overload and malfunction and relinquish control of the city. From our domed existences, potential sanctuaries display similar aloofness. On Greenan’s shamanistic treadmill, the hopeless dream of spiritual fulfilment through nature is borne-out in the ambulatorily fruitless nature of a mock arcade game. Our imaginary sanctuary remains where it is conceived, always seemingly just out of the reach of fulfilment. The title borrows from computer game parlance, where ‘cheat’ modes allow players special playing powers, such as the physical intangibility of ‘noclip’ mode, or the immortality of ‘God’ mode.

Gauguin identified atavistic qualities within himself, casting himself as barbaric savage – springing partly, he claimed, from his Peruvian heritage –

and finding it an artistic voice in the primitive aesthetics of his paintings. Here, in *Tahiti Syndrome*, he is bestowed horns, having been known to have included foxes/red dogs as anthropomorphic self-portraits into a number of his paintings, broadly symbolising the deviation of sexual urges.<sup>v</sup> As well as tireless self-mythologiser, he was also avid remixer of existing myths, as well as visual symbologies (much of which is documented in his extensive correspondences with art dealers, family, friends and fellow artists). This may have stemmed, in part, from common French imperial attitudes. In 1889, before his art sojourns to Martinique and Tahiti, Gauguin repeatedly visited the Colonial Exhibit at the Universal Exposition in Paris, with their living dioramas of Oceanic, Asian, African and Arabic scenes. This back-to-back, global village offered packaged idylls of these primitive ‘others’. The prima facie credence European audiences acceded this paternalistic medley, as well as the hybridisation of Gauguin’s subsequent symbolical explanations of his Tahitian output, was perhaps inevitable, with anthropological studies of their sources being in its infancy.<sup>vi</sup>

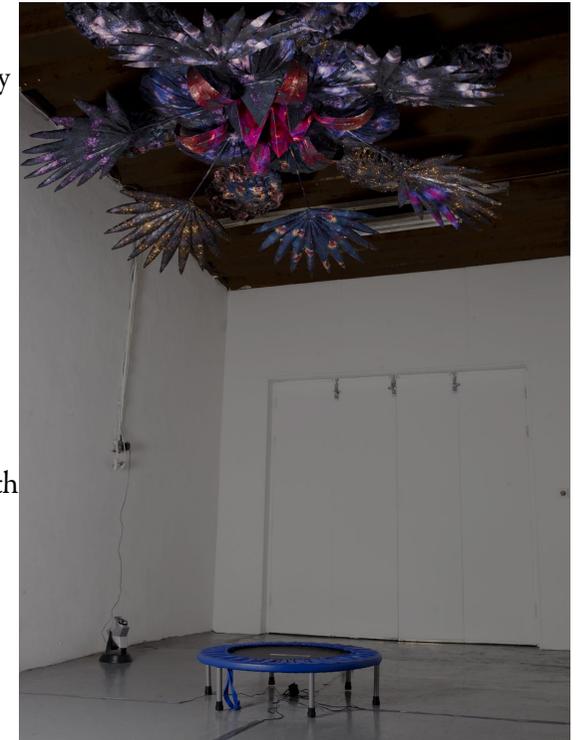




Such hybridisation of exotic source material continues to be a distinctive feature of representations of the exotic in Western popular culture. Greenan plays on this in *Karma Coma*, with its explicitly wilful mishmash of cultural and mythopoeic elements, including the Romeo & Juliet-esque Mexican fable of Popoca and Izta, the blaxspoitation movie character Cleopatra Jones, the Hindu God Vishnu and a (Karma) cobra. The piece is named after the title of a song by seminal trip-hop collective Massive Attack.<sup>vii</sup> Echoing the song's jumble of erotic, lyrical non-sequiturs, Greenan's mixture of stoner, daydream mythopoeia also dreamily (and humorously) comments on reductive Western takes on a host of cultural sources, including Rastafarianism. Criticism has been levelled at the writers of the original Star Trek series of the sixties, on a

number of race related issues. The idea of a 'Tahiti' or paradise 'Syndrome' is pulled from a 1969 episode,<sup>viii</sup> in which an American Indian-esque tribe is depicted as noble savages, but naturally simpleminded and frozen in time – with the suggestion they are almost incapable of evolution.<sup>ix</sup>

In the past, Greenan has worked almost exclusively achromatically – favouring the greater control that the neutrality of black and white offers. For *Tahiti Syndrome* she has introduced colour – sporadically in the first two rooms, but *One for One* – with its darkly hued, internet culled, celestial imagery – envelops its sculptural components, which form an



enormous and elaborate ornamental ceiling rose, which instead of hosting a chandelier, channels the heavens. It continues Greenan's look at humanity's aspiration for the transcendental being divided by anchorage to a restricted purview and an earthly reach, as like *Gauguin Mode*, our coordinates are inescapable. In *One for One* the pillar – but also the lie – at the heart of

Logan's City of Domes is the alleged, transmigratory equilibrium of Carousel. The maxim, 'one for one', is the promissory note for a population raised on gratuitous consumerism. In Mesopotamian myth, the hunting of lions symbolised the circularity of the life cycle through death and resurrection; in ancient Egyptian lore, the constellation-filled night sky was a lion, who swallowed the sun every evening,<sup>x</sup> and so it is perhaps fitting – for an exhibition that draws greatly on science-fiction and pulp philosophy as muses – that as we bounce, it asks of us that darlin' question, 'what is the stars?'

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#### ENDNOTES

- i Sherie Levine, interview by Constance Lewallen, *Journal of Contemporary Art*. <<http://www.jca-online.com/slevine.html>>
- ii Logan's Run, dir. Michael Anderson, writ. David Z. Goodman, William F. Nolan, George C. Johnson, MGM, 1976.
- iii Whose code-sign is an ankh, the Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol for eternal life.
- iv Though, in the source novel of the same name, a rocket ship brings him to Sanctuary, which is on Mars.
- v In Brittany, where Gauguin lived during the latter part of the 1880s, the fox is a traditional symbol of carnal desire. Amy Dickson, "Gauguin: Maker of Myth" (talk presented at Tate Modern, London, 2010). <<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/digital/podcast-directory>>.
- In a letter to Émile Bernard, he describes them as the 'Indian symbol of perversity'. Bernard Denvir, comp., Paul Gauguin – *The Search for Paradise: Letters from Brittany and the South Seas* (London: Parkgate Books, 1998), 40.
- vi For further reading on this topic, see Nancy Perloff, "Gauguin's French Baggage: Decadence & Colonialism in Tahiti," in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* ed. Elazar Barkan, Ronald Bush. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 232-235.
- vii Karmacoma: perhaps inspired by Gita Mehta's 1979 book *Karma Cola*, a study of the impact of American culture on Indian society in the nineteen sixties and seventies.
- viii *The Paradise Syndrome*, dir. Jud Taylor, writ. Margaret Armen, NBC, 1968.
- ix Daniel Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-Ing Toward a White Future* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 44-49.
- x Hope D. Werness, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in World Art* (NY: Continuum, 2003), 255-257.

#### IMAGES (in order of appearance)

- 1/2 *Karma Cola*, mixed media, 2011/12
- 3/4 *Gauguin Mode*, mixed media, 2012
- 5 *One for One*, mixed media, 2012
- 6 *Iron Lion Zion*, mixed media, 2011/12

Photography by Mella Travers