

# MIT List Visual Arts Center (2009): Exhibition Brochure



MATTHEW DAY JACKSON: THE IMMEASURABLE DISTANCE

*Matthew Day Jackson: The Immeasurable Distance* presents works based on Jackson's research as an artist-in-residence at MIT, with a selection of earlier works that demonstrates the artist's affinities for such an institution. Jackson's histories and hagiographies are manifested in sculptures, constructed paintings, objects, books, and videos.

One of the central themes in the exhibition is Jackson's investigation into human consciousness and how positive evolutionary developments in human thought and culture occur under physical or mental stress. He explores how constructive and destructive technological developments stem from the same impetus to expand human experience, prove something to be possible, and achieve progress, whatever the risk.

Manned space travel can seem to be a legend from an earlier, more heroic era. The 1969 Apollo 11 space voyage, (the first mission to land a human on the surface of the moon) is most deeply inscribed on the imagination of the public. The powerful images from the manned spaceflight showing the earth appearing small and fragile as viewed from the moon's surface, ushered in many of the utopian dreams of the 1960s as well as the environmental movement.

MIT developed the computer codes that brought the astronauts safely to the moon—a 1,400-page document called *Luminary 1A*, and another called *Colossus*, which are in the collection of the MIT Museum. Within the codes are quotes from Shakespeare, quotations from the radical politics of the 1960s ("Burn Baby Burn"), and strange asides to the astronauts and future readers. In collaboration with the MIT Museum, Jackson had the document digitally scanned and produced *Luminary 1A and Colossus (after Borges and The Library of Babel)*, (2009), a facsimile edition in the form of antique-style books that appear as if they might contain magician's spells or intricate legal codes. It is interesting to note that the original team that wrote the computer commands developed the rudiments of the code while working on the Polaris missile system. Thus the commands are an example of the reuse of weapons technology for peaceful ends.

It is fitting that this exhibition occurs during the Institute's celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission. A contributor to *Matthew Day Jackson: The Immeasurable Distance* is science historian David A. Mindell from MIT's Program in Science, Technology, and Society whose 2008 MIT Press book *Digital Apollo* discusses how the technology for the mission was written to give the human astronauts a function as pilots—rather than as-redundant passengers or as they derogatorily referred to the role they were assigned, "spam in a can."

In order to make the massive expenditure of resources required to send men in space palatable to the public, the pilots had to be allowed to control something and the press responded by emphasizing the aspects

of the mission with human, not mechanical protagonists. The Hollywood cinematic myth of the lone astronaut exposed to the dangers of space is conjured chillingly in Jackson's *Lonesome Soldier*, (2008)—where an astronaut is pinned high and specimen-like against the wall, evoking the sad end of many expendable characters in a thousand deep-space thrillers.

Jackson's *Study Collection*, (2009) an enormous stainless steel shelf-unit covered with objects, was inspired by his visits to the technological artifacts in MIT Museum's basement storeroom. *Study Collection* features models of both Soviet and U.S. nuclear weapons, including Fat Man and Little Boy and missile systems from V1, V2, Thor, Titan, and Cruise missiles. The scale models are represented in chronological order evoking the use of the biological term "evolution" as the constant metaphor for all technological developments.

*Study Collection* also includes a series of sequential models that shows the artist's skull morphing into a tetrahedron, through a spectrum of colors. The shelves also contain another famous skull, a replica of the scarred skull of Phineas Gage, an unfortunate railway-worker whose actual skull is in Harvard University's Warren Medical Museum. Gage miraculously survived a tragic accident in which an explosive charge drove a large iron rod through his skull, destroying a portion of his brain's frontal lobes. He survived for eleven years but with an altered personality. The accident has been chronicled in medical history as profoundly influencing 19th-century thinking about the brain and its localized functions as they relate to personality and behavior. The skull model is shown alongside a digital replica of the three-foot tamping iron that shot through Gage's skull making him a living oddity and example of the mind/body split.

To create *The Lower 48*, (2006), Jackson traveled to 48 contiguous states over several months to photograph rock formations in which locals had found human likenesses. The human instinct that makes almost every culture see a face in the random patterns of the moon's craters reflects mankind's love of finding its own presence mirrored in nature.

*Tensegrity Biotron*, (2009) is a sculpture in the form of a Kenneth Snelson Tensegrity sculpture. The term "tensegrity" is short for "tensional integrity" and such forms, whether as sculptures or as design, appear today as iconic of the moment when high modernism slipped into the post war vernacular of design. The form is remade in the artist's simulated bones.

For *Heart of Prometheus*, (2009) Jackson commissioned the father of drag racing, "Big Daddy" Don Garlits, to build a display version of his Chrysler Hemi drag racing motor from *Swamp Rat VI*. The title refers to the myth of Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and paid a tragic price for his hubris. Garlits's motor, which was built out of previously raced parts, had the potential to propel a body down a straight track at inhuman speeds. It is important to Jackson that the keys to speed were previously in the hands of government and industry, yet Garlits was a normal citizen who used his ingenuity to steal fire from the powers that controlled it. He also suffered

physically in his attempts to achieve his goals, losing half of his foot and being engulfed in flames behind a burning engine. Despite these sacrifices Garlits continued to innovate in both driving techniques and engine design.

For *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance Colonel John Stapp)*, (2009) Jackson learned to drag race at Frank Hawley's Drag Racing School in Gainesville, Florida. He earned his license from the NHRA (National Hot Rod Association) to drive in the dragster division. Aspects of his training were filmed to be presented in an art context. Jackson's own physical immersion in the world of drag racing mirrors the physical stress and transformation test pilots such as John Stapp and Joseph William Kittinger II experienced in their quest to push the limits of human endurance. The title is a reference to Bruce Nauman's series of video works called *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)*.<sup>1</sup>

In creating *Chariot II-I Like America and America Likes Me*, (2008), Jackson rescued a crashed car frame from the front lawn of his cousin, racecar driver Skip Nichols. The artist restored and rebuilt the car as a material metaphor for transformation. One of the physical metaphors in the work is that the car appears to float on a spectrum of electric lights arranged in the circular ROY G. BIV sequence. State of the art solar panels collect enough sunlight to light the piece. For the work at MIT, Jackson teamed with MIT's Energy Initiative, which is dedicated to solving the world's pressing concerns with the scarcity of green reliable energy. Visitors experiencing the work will be reminded that solar energy is the basic source of all energy forms.

In *Little Boy and Fat Man*, (2009) models of the atomic bombs were filmed in MIT's historic Wright Brothers Wind Tunnel. They appear as though they are falling forever, never hitting anything and never detonating. In this video Jackson shows us the nuclear age as a dream, rewriting a story of apocalypse by adding a myth of delay.

Jackson engages the effects of the atomic bombs again in two paintings both titled *August 6th, 1945*, (2008-2009)—named for the day the first atomic bomb was used to end 140,000 lives. The two images present aerial views of two cities on rivers, but one is Hiroshima, Japan, and one is Washington, D.C. This god-like view reveals the cities forever linked in the history and legacy of the development of nuclear weapons.

Even in the face of horrors, Jackson proudly promotes redemptive strategies and demonstrates a resurgent belief that such a worldview pushed forward by artists might actually save us today especially in the redemptive power of the feminine spirit. In *Paradise Now*, (2006-2007), a group of young female ghosts gather at Mies van der Rohe's modernist masterpiece, the Farnsworth House, to wonder why masculinist modernism did not save the world.

The lessons of the twentieth century that fill Matthew Day Jackson's work, heart, and mind are not that progress, knowledge, or mankind

itself are intrinsically good or evil. Rather that the only possible road forward is muddling through these immeasurable distances, these unknowable realities, constructing myths and stories that make events like Hiroshima or the moon landing comprehensible.

Adapted from the catalogue essay by Bill Arning

<sup>1</sup>This title come from a fax in which Nauman responded, "Fat Chance, John Cage," to London Gallerist Anthony d'Offay's invitation to participate in an exhibition of artists whose works had been influenced by Cage. Nauman explains, "D'Offay thought it was a refusal to participate. I thought it was the work." See Michael Auping, "A Thousand Words: Bruce Nauman Talks about Mapping the Studio," in *Artforum*, March 2002, 121.

## About the Artist

Born in 1974 in Panorama City, CA, Matthew Day Jackson lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Jackson first gained art world attention through his entry in the 2005 exhibition *Greater New York* at P.S.1 in New York City. His work, *Sepulcher* (2004), was a Viking burial ship with sails made from the artist's punk rock T-shirts stitched into a giant, Mondrian-like painting. For the 2005 Whitney Biennial of American Art, Jackson contributed *Chariot, The Day After the End of Days* (2005-2006), a pioneer covered wagon floating above a bed of fluorescent tubes.

Jackson's solo exhibitions include *Drawings from Tlön*, Nicole Klagsbrun, New York, NY (2008); *Terranaut*, Peter Blum Gallery, New York, NY (2008); *Diptych*, Mario Diacono at Ars Libri, Boston, MA (2007); *The Lower 48*, Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York, NY (2007); *Paradise Now!*, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, OR (2006); and *By No Means Necessary*, The Locker Plant, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, TX (2004).

Group exhibitions include *Art Focus 5, 2008*, Jerusalem, Israel; *Heartland*, Vanabbeuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, (2008); *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art, Mission: to interpret and understand contemporary art*, Barbican Gallery, London, UK (2008); *Matthew Day Jackson, Jen Liu, David Maljkovic: The Violet Hour*, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA (2008); *The Old, Weird America*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (2008); *1st Athens Biennale*, Athens, Greece (2007); *2nd Moscow Biennale*, Moscow, Russia (2007); *3rd Beijing Biennale*, Beijing, China (2007); *Huma Bhabha and Matthew Day Jackson: Sculptures and New Print Editions*, Peter Blum Gallery, New York, NY; Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York, NY (2007); *To Build a Fire*, Rivington Arms, New York, NY (2007); *Uncertain States of America—American Art in the 3rd Millennium*, Herning Kunstmuseum, Denmark, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland (2007); Whitney Biennial, *Day for Night*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2006); and *Greater New York*, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, NY (2005).

## **Related Public Programs:**

### **Saturday, May 9, 2PM, Bartos Theatre**

A conversation with Matthew Day Jackson and MIT science historian David A. Mindell, author of *Digital Apollo*, MIT Press-moderated by exhibition curator Bill Arning

### **Wednesday, May 13, 12:30PM**

Gallery talk with LVAC educator Mark Linga

### **Thursday, May 14, 7PM, Bartos Theatre**

LVAC Film Night, organized by John Gianvito  
*Solaris*, dir., Andrei Tarkovsky, (Soviet Union, 1972, 165 min.)

### **Saturday, May 23, 2PM**

Gallery talk with Mark Linga

### **Wednesday, June 3, 12:30PM**

Gallery talk with Mark Linga

### **Thursday, June 11, 7PM, Bartos Theatre**

Talk with Harvard University Medical School Warren Museum curator Dominic Hall

### **Wednesday, June 17, 12:30PM**

Gallery talk with LVAC director Jane Farver

### **Wednesday, June 24, 6PM**

Gallery talk with Matthew Day Jackson and curator Bill Arning

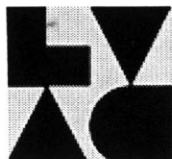
### **Saturday, June 27, 2PM**

Gallery talk with LVAC educator Mark Linga

### **Wednesday, July 1, 12:30PM**

Gallery talk with Jane Farver

Support for *Matthew Day Jackson: The Immeasurable Distance* has been provided by the Council for the Arts at MIT and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Special thanks to the Peter Blum Gallery, New York, NY and Phoenix Media/Communications Group.



MIT List Visual Arts Center  
E15, 20 Ames Street  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
617 253 4680  
<http://listart.mit.edu>



[massculturalcouncil.org](http://massculturalcouncil.org)