

FRYE /
Art Museum



Door to the Atmosphere

October 29, 2022–January 22, 2023

Marking a tendency toward spirituality, myth, and the supernatural among artists working today in the United States, *Door to the Atmosphere* includes artworks in a range of mediums by Sedrick Chisom, Harry Gould Harvey IV, Cindy Ji Hye Kim, Mimi Lauter, Jill Mulleady, Naudline Pierre, Eden Seifu, and TARWUK. Apocalyptic visions, celestial visitations, and mysterious rituals and manifestations appear across these artists' works, reflecting the wonder and the dread of living in the present as well as specters of unsettled pasts. The exhibition title, borrowed from a drawing by Harry Gould Harvey IV, suggests a threshold one might cross from earth to ether, from the specific to the speculative, from surfaces to essences, sensations, and mood.

Artists have sought such metaphorical portals in previous periods of existential crisis. Fin de siècle European culture, which peaked in the 1890s and culminated in World War I, for example, gave rise to the fraught mythic imagination of the Symbolists and the hallucinatory intensity of the Expressionists. Many of the artists included in *Door to the Atmosphere* cite the influence of these forebears—as well as that of earlier visionaries like Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and William Blake (1757–1827). At the same time, while they incorporate themes from classical mythology, devotional imagery, and the occult, they draw just as often on newer traditions such as psychoanalysis and science fiction. Some include an element of social critique, alluding to legacies of exploitation and violence that haunt our present and can cloud future imaginings.

Ranging from visceral assemblages of scavenged “relics” to ecstatic landscapes and eerie dream tableaux, the works in the exhibition chart multiple routes into the liminal space between what is and what might be. Whether seeking transcendence or, in the words of TARWUK, “the emotionally charged undertow,” they open doors to other realms and alternate realities.



Mood Organs

Amanda Donnan, Chief Curator, Frye Art Museum

Funny that a moment such as this, so overflowing with content and commentary, should feel vacuous or be defined in terms of *lack*. Yet this era has been characterized, by writers like Marc Augé and Jonathan Crary, as one of homogenous *non*-places and *non*-time:¹ as, essentially, a frictionless continuum of consumerism and surveillance, lacking memory and atmosphere. Whether or not one accepts this premise wholly, in the American context there is a particular sense of historical amnesia and foreclosed futurity—of disconnected, perpetual now-ness in which meaning is elusive. At the same time, it is in many ways a remystified world, dominated more by feeling and affect than by reason and increasingly shaped by the obscure motivations of algorithms. In the vacuum, people have constructed separate realities; all are trying to divine the plot.

Against this backdrop, the artists in *Door to the Atmosphere* dream into and through historical forms to create new contexts, activating materials, symbols, and formats that are charged with memory and mythos. In different ways, their works reinvest in art's theatricality—its capacity to act as a proscenium framing a view into another world and to build up a density of signs and sensations, an atmosphere or mood, that transcends the object. Several of the artists use invented characters or avatars to transfigure the psychological dynamics of lived experience, while for others the artwork acts as a vessel for channeling the emotional or spiritual force of another time and place.

Populated by spectral figures and mythological creatures, **Sedrick Chisom's** paintings are directly tied into a notion of theatricality, elaborating a postapocalyptic world that he first envisioned in a sixty-page playscript. In the story, all people of color have abandoned Earth to explore the cosmos while “the enigmatic genetic disease revitiligo” causes the skin of those left behind to darken, “imperiling whiteness.” Struggling to assert their superiority even as they too succumb to the disease, a North American military alliance forms in opposition to the already transformed “monstrous people”; they adopt the insignia of the Confederacy and launch expeditions in search of “Aryanness in Other Places.” In the artist's paintings these characters move, zombielike, through hazy, seemingly irradiated landscapes.

Chisom's world-making endeavor is situated in the Afrofuturist tradition and influenced by science fiction writers like Octavia Butler and H. P. Lovecraft. At the same time, it draws on true histories of racist ideology, including the “monstrous races” of medieval encyclopedias and the miasma theory of disease. The latter, referenced specifically in Chisom's painting *The Nighttime Encounter of the First Miasma* (2019), associated foul smells and “unclean” bodies with contagion as well as immorality. Blending these histories into a supernatural vision of the future, the artist examines the construction of whiteness while “pushing against the deterministic desire for Black people to only exist in very contemporary social narratives”²—a specific kind of perpetual now. His paintings create a sense of atmosphere not only with their vaporous color-scapes, but by mobilizing references that spark a sense of specificity and fragmented memory within an unsettling dream.

A similar dynamic is at work in the paintings of **Jill Mulleady**, whose strange juxtapositions, lurid colors, and hints of violence and decay telegraph an ambiance of heightened, enigmatic emotion. The artist often includes recognizable figures from art and literary history in her compositions or makes altered versions of other artists' works, sometimes painting her present or aged self into their scenes. *Predators* (2022), Mulleady's piece for *Door to the Atmosphere*, extends a recent body of work made to the dimensions of Francisco de Goya's so-called *Black Paintings*, a suite of fourteen haunting murals he made late in life on the interior walls of his home. Portions of the compositions were lost when the murals were transferred to canvas supports almost fifty years after Goya's death. Despite this radical reconfiguration of the work, Mulleady sees within the *Black Paintings* “the power to resist time and carry life in the same way that a black hole or stardust does.”³

Mulleady's works reactivate the format of Goya's paintings but substitute new imagery, raising the question of where the power of an artwork resides: whether it's the narrative content or the physical vessel that carries potency and whether the two can be separated. *Predators* presents a menacing tableau in which an enchanting nighttime landscape is invaded by robotic poachers—a distortion of a hunting scene witnessed by the artist during her childhood in Uruguay. The painting is a second, truncated version of a piece with the same dimensions as a Goya painting known as *Witches' Sabbath* or *The Great He-Goat* (1820–1823). In this version, the image persists and the container changes, further probing, for Mulleady, the connection between the “external structure of the physical world and its inner psychological representation.”

Likewise attuned to the duality of interior and exterior worlds, **Cindy Ji Hye Kim** uses a unique symbolic language and the foundations of her medium to evoke taut psychological tensions under the surface of life. The artist's characteristic monochromatic approach, known as grisaille, dates to the Renaissance and is often used for underpainting—the creation of a tonal image in grayscale that is layered over with glazes of color. The wooden stretcher frame, typically obscured under a painting's canvas wrapper, also comes to the fore in many of Kim's works, as in her pair of paintings in *Door to the Atmosphere*, *Feign'd Vestal* and *Nameless Hour* (both 2022). In these works, she uses a translucent silk support and hangs the paintings away from the wall, allowing the shadow of bat wing-shaped crossbars to appear in the surface images.

Reflective of her early training in illustration, Kim's precise imagery is rendered in liquid graphite and often centers on a recurring cast of three faceless, cartoonlike characters who act out shifting dynamics of power and control. Imagined as a family triad, Mister Capital (a man in a brimmed hat) and Madame Earth (a 1950s housewife with big hair) are parents to the Schoolgirl, who is seen hiding beneath the bed in the two paintings. The artist resists specific interpretation of her works, but the act of painting is itself a key player in the fraught interrelationships she evokes. Kim notes that she thinks of painting both as “a form of submission” and as akin to dreaming, “an intuitive expression without a narrative goal.”⁴

Naudline Pierre's vibrant oil paintings are similarly a space in which she transfigures the emotional currents of lived experience, serving as an interface between her studio and an otherworldly realm populated by celestial beings. Among these is a protagonist the artist describes as akin to an alter ego: a figure like herself but with an independent will whom she “meet[s] at the surface of the canvas.” In making her paintings, the artist says, “I get to communicate with her and the other inhabitants [of her world]. Those precious moments of communication allow me to process my own existence.”⁵

Often Pierre's protagonist is pictured in scenes of tender communion, metamorphosis, and healing, surrounded or embraced by figures that seemingly personify her feelings. In the polyptych *There, There (It Was Foretold)* (2019), included in this exhibition, the artist's alter ego is attended by angels and seraphim. Traditionally depicted as protectors of sacred figures in Christian art, the latter are shown here as winged heads who weep as they look down from the uppermost panel. The format of the work evokes the hinged structure of multi-panel Renaissance altarpieces, which were opened on special occasions to reveal heavenly panoramas. As the daughter of a Haitian minister and a lifelong student of art history, Pierre is fluent in the symbology of the Christian tradition. Her paintings manifest a deeply personal vision, however, rendered in contrasty washes of brilliant color and with a unique vocabulary of flames, starbursts, and radiating auras.

The work of **Mimi Lauter** has also frequently operated in the space of Christian art, or the shadow of it, taking the form of multi-panel pieces, full-room "chapel" installations, or seasonal series that recall calendrical programs found in medieval books of hours. Often inspired by her carefully tended garden, Lauter's lush, abstracted oil pastel landscapes don't look like traditional religious art but do evoke a sense of thrumming energy within or behind earthly forms—a vital interconnection between things that could be described as sacred. The artist doesn't position herself or her work as mystical, however, viewing her art practice primarily as a self-aware study of the theatricality and power of painting.

While her titles suggest narratives drawn from literature, mythology, and memory, Lauter's work reflects chiefly on the history of Western art, which was long bound up with the aims of the Catholic church. Against this backdrop, she describes her approach as proposing a secular relationship to spirituality in painting: "My work . . . has everything to do with the origin of European painting. Painting was used as a tool to ignite passion and feeling in order to convince people to believe in something. That is ultimately the power of painting—it can induce so much passion and feeling that one can be swayed into believing."⁶

A more pointed appraisal of religious institutions animates **Harry Gould Harvey IV's** mixed-media works, which are deeply influenced by visionary outsiders like the English artist-poet William Blake (1757–1827). Blake viewed human imagination as the expression of God and condemned contemporary orthodoxies like organized religion, class inequality, and sexual repression; for Harvey he was an important example of "proletarian faith" who demonstrated "the heaven you can build in your head."⁷ The format of Harvey's diagrammatic drawings recalls Blake's illuminated books, in which hand-lettered texts are integrated with symbolic painted imagery to elaborate mystical themes, though Harvey's drawings often adopt a tongue-in-cheek tone.

Harvey makes their hand-wrought frames and sculptures with wood and Neo-Gothic architectural elements salvaged from churches in and around their native Fall River, Massachusetts, and from the Gilded Age mansions of neighboring Newport, Rhode Island. Charred and frequently dripping with melted red casting wax—a functional material that Harvey "sacrifices" to the art object—these artifacts of religion, labor, and capital create a menacing liturgical atmosphere. Fall River was the heart of American textile manufacturing during the nineteenth century, and though the industry has long since declined, the city remains home to a large—and largely Roman Catholic—Portuguese population descended from immigrant mill workers. *A Monument To The Families That Have Nothing To Offer The State But Their Children* (2021) channels these intertwined cultural and industrial histories, with salvaged church doors and organ pipes mounted to jobsite heaters of the same model as ones that have caused catastrophic fires in Fall River mills.

Charting inroads into the collective subconscious, the sculptures of **TARWUK** likewise incorporate "charged" materials from the artists' local environs, including detritus scavenged from the areas surrounding the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Their interest in such items, referred to as "BQE relics," stems from curiosity about how an object becomes "infused with energy and transfer[s] that to the viewer."⁸ Sculptures like *KLOSKLAS_5Till43r3* (2020) grow out of and around these objects through an unplanned process—sometimes years long—of ongoing accumulation, composition, subtraction, and recombination, ultimately achieving redolent hybridized or cyborgian humanlike forms.

TARWUK is themselves a hybrid—a merged "third entity" comprising Bruno Pogačnik Tremow and Ivana Vukšić in which, they say, "the boundary between one and the other blurs and becomes porous . . . [allowing] us to grow outside of the individual self." The role of language in defining notions of self and society is of interest for the artist, forming another type of border they seek to transgress. Originally from Croatia—where they lived through the 1991–1995 struggle for independence that left some 100,000 dead—they have invented a cryptic code system that appears in the titles of their artworks, alongside some Croatian. In addition to sculptures, they create paintings in which human forms often appear to be part of amorphous, craggy landscapes or, as in *MRTISKLAH_3_Vještice_(Inesa)* (2020), ephemeral manifestations of an ancient magical force.

Drawing on a different kind of found material to produce archetypal figures, **Eden Seifu's** fantastical paintings bring together influences ranging from comic books, pulp fiction, and fashion illustrations to opera, Baroque art, and illuminated manuscripts. Her narrative scenes place protagonists of color at the center of extravagant dramas inspired by the fundamentals of myth, portraying heroes embarking on life-altering journeys, stories of love between mortals and divine beings, and martyrs who suffer valiantly for a worthy cause. For *Door to the Atmosphere*, Seifu created three new paintings representing "scenes of unification and non-duality." This theme is perhaps most apparent in *Styllite Altarpiece* (2022), in which an array of angels and demons, lifted into the planetary atmosphere atop an impossibly tall pillar, raise their voices in a rapturous cosmic harmony that joins together Earth, outer space, and heaven.

Seifu reveals what is at stake for her in creating such works, saying that they "contemplate exuberance, expression, and revelation as transfiguring forces" and "represent a desperate, urgent joy and rejoicing in the face of futility, oblivion, evil, and fear."⁹ Imagining other worlds, connecting to mythologies of the past, acting as mood organs for collective emotion—these are ways of holding up oblique mirrors to the present. They represent a desire not necessarily to escape our strange, airlocked moment, so much as to achieve a distance from which to gain perspective. Or perhaps, to crack open a door and let the atmosphere in.

Essay Endnotes

1. See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2009); and Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).
2. Chisom in Anna Walker, "State of the Art: Sedrick Chisom" (interview), *Reader's Digest*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/culture/art-theatre/state-of-the-art-sedrick-chisom>.
3. Gladstone Gallery, "Jill Mulleady, *Bend Towards the Sun*," exhibition press release, September 2022, <https://www.gladstonegallery.com/exhibition/10071/bend-towards-the-sun/info>.
4. Kim in Olivia Gauthier, "Collapsing Interior and Exterior: Cindy Ji Hye Kim Interviewed by Olivia Gauthier," *BOMB*, July 15, 2021, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/collapsing-interior-and-exterior-cindy-ji-hye-kim-interviewed/>.
5. Pierre in Lucy Rees, "Naudline Pierre's Epic Paintings of Alternate Universes Explore the Concept of Power," *Galerie*, April 19, 2022, <https://galeriemagazine.com/naudline-pierres-epic-paintings-alternate-universes-explore-concept-power/>.
6. Mendes Wood DM, "Mimi Lauter, *Consequential Landscapes*," exhibition press release, June 2021, <https://mendeswooddm.com/en/exhibition/mimi-lauter-bxl>.
7. Phone call with the author, November 18, 2021.
8. TARWUK in Irene Machetti, "In-Depth Conversation with TARWUK Exploring Their Practice and the Idea of Identity through Metamorphosis," *FAD Magazine*, November 9, 2021, <https://fadmagazine.com/2021/11/09/in-depth-conversation-with-tarwuk-exploring-their-practice-and-the-idea-of-identity-through-metamorphosis/>.
9. Email message to the author, July 6, 2022.

Cover: Cindy Ji Hye Kim, *Feign'd Vestal*, 2022, Graphite on silk with shaped birch stretcher bars, 68 x 52 x 1.25 in. Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. © Cindy Ji Hye Kim. Photo: Kyle Knodell; **Opening spread:** Sedrick Chisom. *...Meanwhile a Young God Pours Life On The Planet Kemetopia*, 2019. Acrylic on tiled sheets of paper glued to canvas. 59 1/3 x 43 1/3 in. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Brown. Photo: Paul Salvesson; **Poster:** Harry Gould Harvey IV. *A Monument To The Families That Have Nothing To Offer The State But Their Children*, 2021. Partially stripped and charred church doors from Providence, casting wax, candles, lead organ pipes, jobsite heaters from Fall River, scrap metal from Whole Foods, steel angel from New Bedford, cast white bronze, and colored pencil on Xerox. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni

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