MUNDOS ALTERNOS
ART AND SCIENCE FICTION IN THE AMERICAS

SEPTEMBER 16, 2017 - FEBRUARY 4, 2018
Downtown Brooklyn
More than mere escapism, science fiction can prompt us to recognize and rethink the status quo by depicting an alternate world, be it a parallel universe, distant future, or revised past.

By imagining alternate worlds, we unveil something true about our own. In this way, science fiction allows us to understand our reality more deeply. Organized in thematic constellations, Mundos Alternos brings together artistic projects that speculate on the past and future, created by over thirty contemporary artists and groups working throughout the Americas. Brought together, these works engage science fiction with an understanding of the transnational and transcultural interconnections of “Latinidad” as demonstrated through shared hemispheric exchanges and experiences in language, culture, and visual expression.

In recent years, scholars of literature and cinema have begun defining a specifically Latin American science fiction, investigating the genre’s power to offer alternative perspectives on history. Building on UCR’s status as a center of excellence for the study of science fiction, Mundos Alternos extends that study to the visual arts, and expands the field of Latin American science fiction to include works made by Chicano/a and Latino/a artists as well. By exploring the colonial enterprise that has shaped our world, the projects on view here offer both utopian and dystopian visions. They address contemporary issues of nationhood, citizenship, and borders, and question the capacity of advanced technology to create radical change in the social order.


Mundos Alternos is the first exhibition of contemporary art by Latino/a and Latin American artists who use science fictional themes. The rich histories of science fiction literature and film, especially those of Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, and the United States, inspired the exhibition. The two installations in this gallery represent those primary movements and provide context for the artworks that make up Mundos Alternos.

Alex Rivera’s Sleep Dealer (2008) is the foundational cinematic work of Latino/a science fiction. Set on the U.S.-Mexico border, the film tells the story of Memo Cruz, a young Mexican who dreams of coming to the United States. Physically crossing the border is impossible, however, so the protagonist migrates virtually instead. By mechanically connecting his body to the internet, Memo performs labor in the United States, sending his work without sending his body.

Sleep Dealer screens every two hours during regular museum hours: 11:30am, 1:30pm, 3:30pm, 5:30pm, and 7:30pm.

Also installed in this gallery is a selection of books and periodicals from The Eaton Collection of Science Fiction & Fantasy, part of Special Collections at UCR. Containing over 300,000 items, The Eaton Collection is a major resource for the study of speculative fiction. It is the largest publicly-accessible collection of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and utopian fiction in the world, and consists of books, pulp magazines, fanzines, film and visual material, comic books, and ephemera. The selection displayed here includes publications dating from the 1940s to the present from Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, and Uruguay.
Beatriz Cortez was sent to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC for examination in 1962, and to the Max Planck Institute in Mainz, Germany, where a special saw was created for its slicing and analysis. El Taco was cut in half in 1965, and today one half rests in storage at the Smithsonian Institution, while the other sits on a plinth at the entrance to Galileo Galilei Planetarium in Buenos Aires.

The artists have amassed a sizable archive of material related to El Taco, which includes original documents, photographic negatives, and blueprints. The story of El Taco reveals the working environment in California, the Op-Cit connection between the Americas, diplomatic relations, and trends in science. It allows us to think about art and geopolitical borders in the context of an object that far predates such constructs. With its two halves, this “cosmic readymade,” as the artists describe it, celebrates the possibility of reintegrating two continents.

Beatriz Cortez’s Memory Insertion Capsule (2017) challenges viewers’ complicity in the disturbing history of eugenics in California, the oppressive imperialism of the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International), and other instances of violent white supremacy in this country. The installation takes the form of a space capsule that brings together references to space travel, local construction techniques, and Indigenous Maya architecture. The architectural shell features embellishments that evoke the river rocks commonly used in the construction of contemporary homes throughout Southern California. A mesh metal dome sits atop the structure, evoking the camping tents used by refugees and extending the conversation about immigration to the current housing crisis. Furnished like a home—with fireplace, desk, and bookshelves—the interior contrasts comfort with uncomfortable realities. By peering into a visor evoking at once the Mayan glyph for Zero and a machinic eye, the viewer takes in archival material that illustrates the fraught history between the United States and the artist’s native Central America. The relationship between these two regions is just one thread that encompasses the sequence of seemingly disparate, though completely interconnected, historical events that have collectively contributed toward white supremacy in this country.

By watching the video, viewers are implanted with “memories” related to immigration, racism, and science through the history of the United Fruit Company, which is notorious for its corporatization of Central America. Two brothers hailing from Altadena are at the center of this story. Frederick Wilson Popenoe (1892–1975) served as the chief agronomist for the company beginning in 1896, while his brother Paul Bowman Popenoe (1888–1979) was secretary of the Human Betterment Foundation, an American eugenics organization promoting forced sterilization programs, and the founder of The American Institute for Family Relations, a family therapy organization that he used as a platform to further his white supremacist agenda. Later in life, Paul became a marriage counselor, running advice columns and radio programs, and hosting a reality television show.

Challenging the conventional conception of time travel as utopian fantasy, Cortez instead asks us to reconsider the difficult reality of these histories, collapsing the past into the present so that we may look to the future.

Memory Insertion Capsule is an interactive work. Please ask for assistance.
By donning a garment or other physical apparatus, we can unfasten identity from its earthly boundaries and stratifying social constructions. The works displayed here include costumes from performances and everyday life that reorient Latino/a existence across global and planetary borders. Greeting viewers at the top of the stairs are the outfits of cosmic characters who transcend time and space across national borders and in their own barrios. Included is a costume from the AZTLAN Dance Company, a group that mounts original contemporary dance productions that build upon history, folklore, and popular culture. While traditional ballet folklórico tells a Mexican story, this troupe is devoted to the culture of Latinos/as on this side of the border, exploring issues related to Chicano/a culture and mythology. Sexto Sol: A Cumbia Cruiser’s Guide to the Galaxy (2012) takes as its foundation the hysteria accompanying the Mayan prophesy of the “end of days” that was predicted for December 12, 2012, reimagining Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Mexican people, in a cosmic setting. The character Silver Dancer, played by Paul del Bosque, uses his magical accordion and electrical cord appendages to nourish and revive the dormant ancient Mayan space travelers with cumbia music.

LA VATOCOSMICO c-s, formerly known as LA DAVID, is the cosmic persona of an artist based in San Antonio. His outfit is part of the artist’s everyday wardrobe. Hand-painted with fluorescent details, he wears the clothing to aid in his connection with extraterrestrial life; he maintains that he holds a special connection to aliens that are all around us. The painting E.T.’s Hovering Over S. Flores St. S.A.T.X. (2010) is part of his ongoing work with DayGlo fluorescent pigments. His pictures are often humorous, and feature local sites of San Antonio, celestial beings, and symbols of Mexican culture. The artist’s signature burros (donkeys) are figures who are in touch with their indigenous and cosmic roots, communicating with ancestors and aliens alike.

Luis Valderas wore this costume for his performance MASA Mission 2.5 (2007) during the grand opening of Museo Alameda that year. Located in downtown San Antonio, Museo Alameda was until its closure in 2012 the largest museum in the country devoted to Latino art. Valderas and his collaborator Paul Karam (born 1969) participated in the celebration of the new museum by donning silver astronaut suits and traditional Mexican serapes. They also wore the MASA logo they had created for MeChicano Alliance of Space Artists, a curatorial initiative devoted to promoting “an awareness of outer space as an integral part of the Chicano/a Modern Mythos / Reality / Iconography.” (Read more about MASA in the next section.)

Cloaked figures in the photographs of Hector Hernandez reference popular culture while speculating “alienation” within a rapidly gentrifying East Austin. The title Bulca (2019) is a play on the word “Vulcan,” a species in the world of Star Trek. Sound of Winter (2014) alludes to the transporter pads often seen on the television program, where characters are “beamed” from one place to another.

Ricardo Valverde was an important fixture in East Los Angeles in the 1970s and 80s, and frequently documented members of his Chicano/a community.
Cyclona Legorreta was known for the 1983 Halloween party held at the trendy Robert Angeles. Although he retired as a performance persona upon the AIDS-related death of Meza in 1985, was a Chicano artist based in East Los Angeles. He was a window dresser, painter, and performance artist, and was part of an artistic circle that included the important Chicano artist and close friend of Mundo Meza, Mike Moreno, who has collaborated with her sister, Laura Molina, and his partner Jef Huereque. Meza’s Chicano performance artist, and was part of an important Chicano/a art collective formed in the early 1980s. It was at this time that he and his partner Jef Huereque retreated to a loft in the Brewery Art Colony. For a 1983 Halloween party held at the trendy West Hollywood nightclub Palette, they worked together to design a costume that would compete in the fashion show, where it won first prize. By covering every inch of Meza’s body, it also served to hide his lesions, allowing him temporary freedom from social alienation by virtue of his alien garb.

A close friend of Mundo Meza, Robert “Cyclona” Legorreta was known for conceptually situated actions and provocative performances throughout East Los Angeles. Although he retired Cyclona as a performance persona upon the AIDS-related death of Meza in 1985, he reprised the persona for an event in 1989, when VIVA: Lesbian and Gay Latino Artists of Los Angeles staged a massive event called Transcend to the third eye. The third eye, a mystical symbol of esoteric perception, was a fitting emblem for an artist who once stated, “I am perception, perceive me as you will.”

Guadalupe Maravilla (formerly Irvin Morazán) uses performance, sculpture, and video to address the mystical, political, and autobiographical. The artist created the sculpture Border Headdress (2016) using part of a costume from a performance entitled Illegal Alien Crossing (2011), a ceremonial traversing of the Rio Grande river at the U.S.-Mexico border in Ciudad Juárez, Texas. Outfitted in an elaborate costume that included a metallic headdress using a car window sun refector, a field of light was refracted over the river as Morazán crossed. The futuristic costume posited questions of how we will view issues of citizenship, borders, and migration in the future, suggesting that the term “alien” can hold both extraterrestrial and political meanings. Maravilla created Border Headress by breathing new life into the costume through the addition of a mannequin torso, “dazzle camouflage,” cinderblocks, and a brick made from soil collected at the border.

Finally, displayed are two costumes worn by Carmelita Tropicana in Schwarz-Beast (2015), a science fiction film-performance-lecture hybrid that investigates the question “what separates humans from beasts?” Tropicana is a queer feminist artist who has collaborated with her sister, the filmmaker Ela Troyano, on projects since the 1980s. Their works often use fantasy and humor to explore identity, ‘race’-mate change, ethics, animal rights, and preservation, as well as issues of class, gender, and sexuality.

The content of the video works presented here ranges from the real to the mystical. La Gravedad de los Asuntos (Matters of Gravity) is a group project of Mexican artists and scientists who together explore the relationship between art and science through the concept of gravity. Resulting from their collaborative research into weightlessness on a zero-gravity parabolic flight, Supernova (2015) playfully explores the implications of human embodiment through the image of an exploding, star-shaped piñata. As candydisperses throughout the aircraft, we are invited to consider the cultural histories of national space programs while reflecting on the physical forces that make life at all possible.

An installation by Sofía Gallisá Muriente revisits the surreal spectacle of snow falling in the Caribbean. Combining newsreel footage with the lilting audio of a slowed-down mambo, Lluvia con nieve (Rain with Snow) (2014) transports viewers to mid-centu- ry Puerto Rico as if in a dream. In 1955,
“Princess of the Snow.” At the same time, we can see the boisterous crowd between the United States and the territory. By slowing the film, the artist asks us to scrutinize the ideology at work in collective memory. In Gallísá Muriente’s treatment, Mon Rivera’s upbeat number slows during torrent storms on the island, Vargas turns found materials into mystical curtains from circus tents. Calls for Puerto Rico’s independence date back to revolts by the native Taíno people against colonizing Spaniards in the early 1600s, and have continued since the United States seized control of the island in 1898. As a leading figure in the independence movement starting in the 1920s, Pedro Albizu Campos (1891–1966) sought at first to achieve nationhood for the island through political processes, but later advocated a militant approach, organizing armed uprisings. In El retorno de Albizu (The Return of Albizu) (2008) three men hold a séance to summon the ghost of this nationalist hero. Remembered as a great patriot of the soul.”

A new installation by MASA (MeChicano Alliance of Space Artists) brings together the work of eight Latino artists working with science fiction themes. The name MASA is a play on NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), located in Houston, and masa de maíz, the corn dough of Pre-Columbian civilizations still used today for dishes such as tortillas, tamales, and pupusas. Conceived in 2004 by San Antonio-based artists Luis Valderas and Paul Karam, the project grew to include artists from California, New Mexico, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere, and manifested in three exhibitions that focused on decolonization (2005), gender (2006), and the Space Race (2007)—themes that are all present in the newly assembled constellation on view here.

Laura Molina’s painting Amor Indio (2016) sets the tragic story of mythic Aztec lovers Itzatl and Popocatepetl in outer space. The composition reimagines the iconic picture Amor Indio (1964) by Mexican illustrator Jesús Helguera (1910–71), which was popular in the Chicano art movement of the 1960s, and typifies the ways in which the image was recovered in a nationalist discourse that simultaneously eclipsed feminist visibilities. Here lata is depicted as a green alien, sleeping in the arms of Popo as he gazes upon her. Presented as an agent of the West, the male figure emulates a recurrent trope in science fiction: the astronaut’s mastery over space travel is enabled by his masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness. However, he is incapable of staying on this planet for long, and his futuristic technology—the very helmet that allows him to survive here temporarily—is a barrier that ultimately keeps him apart from his beloved.

La Ciudad Hidroespacial (The Hydrospatial City) is the utopian world of Argentine artist Gyula Kosice. Beginning in the 1940s, Kosice embarked on this body of multimedia work depicting floating dome-shaped habitats. Responding to ecological concerns about environmental sustainability and population growth, The Hydrospatial City questions assumptions about the form and function of human dwellings and how powerfully they shape our understanding of life on Earth. The diagrams for his transparent bubble habitats include fantastical designations for different living spaces: “A habit of full unclassifiable words,” or a place for “the operational lodgings of the soul.”

Within science fiction, post-industrial narratives feature the use of technology in ways not anticipated by their inventors. The installations presented in the atrium use pneumatic, aeronautic, and mechanical technologies to critically engage the concept of borders. At the center, Chico MacMurtrie’s inflatable architecture activates the space with seemingly living structures that extend into tall undulating arches before contracting back into bodily tendrils. Architecture and organic organism meet, as do the static and the dynamic, the natural and the artificial.

Simón Vega’s Tropical Mercury Capsule (2010/2014) fuses an object once associated with state-of-the-art technology with the provisional architectures found in the favelas (shantytowns) of the developing world, designed more for daily survival and subsistence than for space exploration. It is a space travel machine created with no access to global powers or the technology of NASA, but which is reminiscent of NASA’s Project Mercury (1958–63). In contrast to NASA’s sleek durable materials, this capsule is made of wood, cardboard, rope, plastic water vessels, and metal roofing. We find it here in a state of post-crash landing, with debris surrounding the structure. The space capsule is a clear enunciation of the artist’s geographical and geopolitical point of departure, El Salvador, offering a glimpse into what a Central American space program could look like by creating it in a future past tense: it has already landed.

Rubén Ortiz Torres’s Alien Toy (La Ranfla Cósmica) (1997) is a kinetic sculpture inspired by the customizing aesthetics of Chicano lowriders. Modifying a white Nissan pickup truck, a model commonly used by U.S. border patrol, and echoing the graphics of the border patrol logo, the vehicle is labeled “Unidentified Cruising Object” and “Space Patrol,” linking it to the space travel genre within science fiction. The remote-controlled car can split open into absurdly spinning parts, driving home the discourses of immigration, street culture, and science fiction.
The works on view in this gallery all engage Indigenous communities and technology, recognizing the collective knowledge that is intimately tied to language, social relations, spirituality, and worldview.

Guillermo Bert’s tapestries are inspired by his observation that QR (Quick Response) code patterns resemble textile patterns woven by the Mapuche people of Chile. Scanning the codes with a QR reader application on your smartphone will take you to a website with Mapuche quotations from the tribal members featured in the related videos. The aphorism linked in Lukutuwe (Fertility) (2012) is: “The Mapudungun [Mapuche language] is the sap needed for the transmission of the culture.” The graphic pattern of the textile features a female fertility symbol associated with creativity, and the yellow color mimics the clothing worn by the filmmaker featured in the video. By embedding this information into a format compatible with current technology, Bert preserves cultural heritage while asserting its continued importance in the present and future.

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Beatriz Cortez and Rafa Esparza’s *Nomad 13* (2017) takes the form of an unconventional space capsule. Built of adobe bricks and steel, it houses a garden of plants indigenous to the Americas, evoking a long history of migrating plants. Cultivated by the Inca, Maya, and Aztec civilizations, these ancient species are known for their wholesome nutritional qualities and profound spiritual meanings. In symbolically sending these plants into the cosmos, the artists evoke NASA’s real ongoing experiments aimed at growing fresh food for future space travelers. Within *Nomad 12*, the crops are protected in their travels by Xolotl who takes the form of a dog. At once feared and loved, this Aztec deity guards the sun as it travels through the underworld every night, and protects travelers as they move through unknown territories, through space and time.

Grounding his work in community-based forms of art practice, Rigo 23’s *Autonomous InterGalactic Space Program* (2009–ongoing) was created in collaboration with Zapatista artists and artisans in Chiapas, Mexico. The immersive planetarium of Zapatista iconography, hand-woven baskets, and large wooden corn-shaped spaceship presents an image of the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) in a future where Indigenous autonomy has been achieved. Three wooden caracoles (snails)—an important image for the group, and the name for their autonomously governed communities—ride in the front of the spaceship. Paintings depict scenes of cosmic struggle against organizations like the World Trade Organization—representations of which are pictured as teeth amid stars and flowers. Zapatista figures are pictured wearing iconic pasamontañas (balaclavas), obscuring individual identities in favor of a resistant, collective identity. A poetic, intergalactic sensibility infuses the narrative of the EZLN’s fight for social justice.

The work of Marion Martinez is informed by her upbringing in the Southwest; she was raised near the Los Alamos National Laboratory—an important research facility for nuclear technology and the birthplace of the atomic bomb—and near Native American territories. Drawing on the syncretic Indo-Hispanic cultural context of northern New Mexico, she repurposes e-waste such as computer circuit boards to create sculptural works that participate in a long tradition of santero folk art. In *El Sueño del Matachín* (The Dream of the Matachín) (2006), the fringes of the traditional costume of matachín dancers are evoked in a halo of computer wires, and the sculpture is complete with a three-forked sword representing the Holy Trinity. By referencing religious and cultural symbolism through high-tech trash in what she playfully calls “Aztechna” artwork, Martinez expresses her environmental concerns and spiritual commitment.
PERFORMANCES
La Pocha Nostra
Ex-Machina 3.0: A Psychomagic Exorcism of the Tech Industry
7pm Friday and Saturday, October 20 and 21
Ex-Machina 3.0: A Psychomagic Exorcism of the Tech Industry is a new performance in the series “Mapa/Corpo” by the group La Pocha Nostra. At its center, the performance features a nude cyborg-like body, acupuncture with tiny flags representing the most insidious tech companies. By requiring audience members to remove the needles, the performance asks the participant to liberate the human body from corporate domination.

Founded in 2001, La Pocha Nostra is a transdisciplinary group devoted to erasing the borders between art and politics, practice and theory, and artist and spectator. Ex-Machina 3.0 will be performed by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Balltronica Gomez, and Saul Garcia Lopez.

Carmelita Tropicana
Hybrid Alternos
7pm Saturday, January 27
Hybrid Alternos is a new interactive performance-lecture by Carmelita Tropicana, a queer feminist artist who uses fantasy and humor to explore issues pertaining to identity, politics, gender, and nature. Building on her earlier works Post Plastica (2012) and Schwarze-Beast (2015), Hybrid Alternos is set in a future where a Hyena hybrid species called Hye, through dialogue with an android scientist, navigates application to a foreign land called Nebula. The performance touches on issues of immigration, xenophobia, climate change, and endangered species. A panel discussion will follow the performance.

LECTURE
Itala Schmelz
“The Insubordination of Alternate Worlds”
7pm Thursday, November 9
In this talk, scholar and curator Itala Schmelz investigates trends of neo-exoticism in science fiction through close readings of films such as The Aztec Mummy vs. The Human Robot (1967), a popular Mexican film of the 1950s. This type of science fiction embraces appropriation which takes the form of parodic tropicalization of the colonizers’ imaginaries, aimed not at imitating but rather sabotaging the dominant models of identity.

Schmelz is the director of Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City.

FILMS
September 2017-February 2018
Join us for a film screened in conjunction with Mundos Alternos. Curated by Sherryl Vint, Director of the Speculative Fiction and Cultures of Science program at UCR, the series presents seminal science fiction films alongside more rarely screened pictures, including El Topo (dir. Alejandro Jodorowsky, Mexico, 1970), Sleeper Dealer (dir. Alex Rivera, USA, 2008), Juan of the Dead (dir. Alejandro Brugués, Cuba, 2011), Ro 2098 (dir. Luiz Bolognesi, Brazil, 2013), and many others. Visit artsblock.ucr.edu/Film for details.

DAILY TOURS
noon and 2pm
Join ARTSblock museum educators for a tour of Mundos Alternos, offered Tuesday through Sunday at noon and 2pm. The 2pm tour on Sundays is conducted in Spanish.

Mundos Alternos is on view at the California Museum of Photography and the Culver Center of the Arts at UCR ARTSblock from September 16, 2017 through February 4, 2018. The exhibition is curated by Robb Hernández, Assistant Professor of English at UCR; Tyler Stallings, Artistic Director of the Culver Center of the Arts; and Joanna Szupinska-Myers, Senior Curator at the California Museum of Photography. Kathryn Poindexter, Assistant Curator at the California Museum of Photography, is Project Coordinator. Gallery guide by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, translation into Spanish by John Pluecker and Carolina Villarroel. Design by Zach Hooker. Installation photography by Nikolay Maslov.

Mundos Alternos is part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles, taking place from September 2017 through January 2018 at more than 70 cultural institutions from Santa Barbara to San Diego, and from Los Angeles to Palm Springs. Pacific Standard Time is an initiative of the Getty with arts institutions across Southern California. The presenting sponsor is Bank of America.

Major support for this exhibition is provided through grants from the Getty Foundation.

Additional support is provided by UCR’s College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS), and the City of Riverside.

For more information, visit artsblock.ucr.edu and pacificstandardtime.org.