

Contact was made

Written by Gabi Lane

“Did you ever look up at the night sky and feel certain that... not only was something up there but... it was looking down on you at the exact same moment just as curious about you as you are of it.” Agent Fox Mulder, *The X-Files*¹

Forty-four years ago, mankind sent a message out into space.

Etched in copper and plated in gold, The Golden Record was inscribed with a collection of sights and sounds of life on Earth. This phonographic record is a compendium of natural and manmade sounds – from volcano eruptions, through an advent of modern technologies, to compositions by Ludwig van Beethoven and Mozart. On its final spin, the record needle ripples across the shimmering surface to leave one final dedication: “To the makers of music—all worlds, all times.”²

Perhaps even louder than any earthly sounds though, is the gesture itself; the record thrums with the innate human desire to know and to be known. The Golden Record represents a modest but noble gift, like sharing a favourite song with a friend and expecting nothing in return.

It is one of the greatest of human compulsions to seek connection, to share the narrative of one’s life with others. This is a sentiment felt acutely by painter Kate Kurucz, whose artistic oeuvre is deeply rooted in the origins of human connection, of impulse and desire. As with the Golden Record, these works are a gift, proffered up by the artist without certain hope of return or reciprocation.

Resembling Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* (c. 1508-1512), Kurucz paints two hands reaching longingly towards one another across a dark void interwoven with luminescent blue lines. These reference a Lissajous figure, a graphic representation created by a radio frequency machine. For Kurucz, this machine speaks of the optimism of retro futurism and is a suggestion that contact is simply just around the corner.

And indeed contact is closer than it seems in *Always a bridesmaid*. With a sardonic wit, Kurucz skews the narrative of an alien abduction by showing the UFO beaming up an unsuspecting bee and ignoring the reclining woman who looms in the foreground. Kurucz challenges our imagined self-importance, rupturing the narcissistic notion that we *must* be the sole object of extraterrestrial desire. The truth, that we are but specks in a vast cosmic arena, is revealed in sublime scale.

In the recent Netflix Documentary *John Was Trying to Contact Aliens*, John Shepherd chronicles his 30 year quest to connect with extraterrestrial life. Up until

¹ Agent Fox Mulder in *The X-Files*, Season 3, Episode 12. 4 minutes: 31 seconds.

² Timothy Ferris, ‘How the Voyager Golden Record was Made’, *The New Yorker*, Aug 20. 2017.

1998, Shepherd literally beamed music millions of miles into space from the front garden of his grand-parents' home.

“I was always seeking to explore, to look beyond what we have here. I pictured many alien worlds, imagining what it would be like to make contact. The moment of sharing extreme knowledge and thoughts and communication with another species... is just beyond anything most of us even imagine.”³

Growing up in rural Michigan during the 1960s, as a young gay man, John led an isolated life. Indeed, it is paradoxical to think that what John sought for so many years was connection and yet his search led him along a lonely life – until finding it with his partner, also named John.

As John Shepherd signs off in the 16 minute documentary, he talks about finally finding connection, albeit not a cosmic one: “I was one of the lucky ones. I feel I found it. Found it in John. So contact has been made”. It is this story of love and longing that manifests in Kurucz's work *Contact was made*, depicting a lovers embrace silhouetted by a window from which a UFO hovers in the distance.

Just like The Golden Record, this work has been painted on the very stable and durable medium of copper. Its preservation ensured by the copper, the warm tones also provide a gentle and otherworldly glow as in the painting *Curiosity*. The juxtaposition of fine detail and loose slippery brushstrokes creates a dazzling effect that slips fluidly between realism and obscurity.

When working on linen, however, she claims control of the narrative. The atmospheric aesthetic in *Always a bridesmaid* is slower to unfold, and new tonal qualities are able to be discovered through distance and long looking. The fields of tone shift into focus to create a sense of depth and the vastness of the natural world beyond only heightens this.

In *Somewhere, something* Kurucz creates an illusory space that we as viewers are invited to leap into, untethered. For if there is one certainty, it is that human beings are ceaseless in their pursuit to find connection. While they may not be a glimmering Record hurled into the depths of space, Kurucz's works give us a different form of communication, one that is rich with emotion. Perhaps one day in to the not-so-distant future, we will look back on this exhibition and say: “contact was made”.

References

Agent Fox Mulder in *The X-Files*, Season 3, Episode 12. 4 minutes: 31 seconds.

Conversation with the artist, Oct 25, 2021.

John Was Trying to Contact Aliens, 2020, Matthew Killip, 16 minutes, Netflix Original Documentary, US.

Timothy Ferris, 'How the Voyager Golden Record was Made', *The New Yorker*, Aug 20. 2017.

³ *John Was Trying to Contact Aliens*, 2020, Matthew Killip, 16 minutes, Netflix Original Documentary, US.

