

FANTOPIA – A state of impossible perfection. Or, how to live with perfect people (and not kill them)

IAN BURNS | RUTH CLAXTON | ALEANA EGAN | RODNEY GRAHAM | LOCKY MORRIS | MAIREAD O'HEOCHA | FRANCESCO SIMETI | BOYD WEBB

4 March – 11 April 2009

"Here all shadows are forbidden; only light is admitted. No trace of dualism: utopia is by essence anti-Manichean. Hostile to anomaly, to deformity, to irregularity, it tends to the affirmation of the homogeneous, of the typical, of repetition and orthodoxy. But life is rupture, a schismatic heresy; the totality of sleeping monsters."

E. M. Cioran, from *History and Utopia*

The principle title of this curated group exhibition, **Fantopia**, is a linguistic corruption of the idea of 'Utopia', or more specifically a collision of the perennial desire for the utopian dream with the accompanying innate knowledge of its fantastical impossibility. The cited origins of Utopia as an embodiment of an ideal community are plentiful, but a number of things are beyond question: Thomas More's 1516 novel, *Utopia*, describes a fictional island somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean that possesses a seemingly perfect socio-political system. Subsequently, the term has been widely used to describe both intentional communities that attempt to create an ideal society and fictional societies portrayed in literature and art. Accordingly, the descriptor "utopian" is also commonly used pejoratively about impossible or unrealistic ideals. As Cioran indicates, actual life is "rupture" and thus the notion of utopia – with a subtle implication that Utopia is a dull place – has of course spawned an evil, sexier, twin concept, dystopia. The weight of writings and related art works since More's novel have, tellingly, tended towards this darker probability rather than the purer, more luminous possibility.

In one sense, a search for utopia is quite simple. More's fictional island aside, there are five real locations worldwide named Utopia, including one in Queens, NY. Oddly, it is also the name of a common typeface. More metaphysically, in many cultures and cosmogonies there frequently exist some myths or 'memories' of a distant past when humankind lived in a primitive and simple state of perfect happiness and fulfillment in instinctive harmony with nature. Humanity's needs were few, their desires limited and both were easily satisfied by an abundance provided by nature. Consequently, there were no motives for war or oppression, nor a need for hard and painful work. Humans were simple and pious, and felt themselves close to the gods. The quest for utopian myths appears to be an ongoing expression of the hope that the proposed state of idyllic affairs is not irrevocably lost to mankind, that it can be regained, retrieved or restored in some way, either for real in the future, or retained in perpetual present of the human imagination, through art, literature or pure ideas. The utopian idealist is therefore a regular time traveller, as this state of impossible perfection tends to occur either in descriptions of mythic pasts or dreams of science-fiction futures. Interestingly, mythical or religious utopian archetypes resurge with particular vitality when humanity finds itself in the grips of difficult and critical times, forging an inextricable link between socio-political decay and dreams of perfect societal health – the darker the times the brighter the dream.

Utopia's evil twin, Dystopia, is characterised by conditions of utter misery: poverty, oppression, violence, disease, global pollution and natural disaster. However, there are particularised distinctions between anti-utopian and dystopian states, despite the fact that one tends to grow out of the other. As in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – perhaps the most famous of fictional dystopian societies – it does not pretend to be utopian. An anti-utopian society or state might appear to be utopian, or have intended to be so, but a crucial fatal flaw has twisted the intended utopian project. Again, as Cioran indicates, dystopian societies emphasise the pressure to conform, in terms of the requirement to not excel and the denial of individualism. The dystopian society is ruthlessly egalitarian, in which ability and accomplishment are stigmatised as forms of inequality. Hence bad things happen to good people who try and effect change or simply stand above the parapet.

If there is a defining mood to **Fantopia** it is a sense of comic duality or paradox. It intends a diverse exploration of the poetically beautiful but inherently doomed notion of utopia. While some works engage directly with Bob Dylan's beautiful description of the Manichean paradox, "There's no success like failure, and failure is no success at all", others eschew this in favour of head-on assaults on the realities of daily life, or, more perversely, indulge in complete and fantastic denial. A key belief in Manichaeism is that there is no omnipotent good power but rather two inherently equal and opposite powers. The human is seen as a battleground for these powers, the good part being the soul,

composed of light, and the bad part the body composed of dark earth. This battleground is moved backwards and forwards in time between an idealised past and the possibility of a perfect future populated by perfect people, both of which book-end the realities of our imperfect present.