

Zach Sokol, *The Portraitist Who Paints Alien Abductees for a Living*, VICE Magazine, 24 February 2015



When New Zealand artist Peter Stichbury was seven, he thought he saw something shoot across the sky in broad daylight. Though he no longer believes that the object was anything out of the ordinary, the moment was a creative sucker punch for the portraitist: At 46, Stichbury is as enraptured by UFOs as ever and devotes his work to them. His recent show at Tracy Williams, Ltd., in New York, titled *Anatomy of a Phenomenon*, featured paintings of people who claim to have had a UFO-related encounter, extraterrestrial-related or not.

A painting of a young blonde girl with downcast eyes was inspired by the time John E. Mack, a psychiatrist and Harvard professor, traveled to Zimbabwe after 62 children reported seeing a flying saucer and "strange beings" during recess. Rather than depicting the girl in utter terror, Stichbury chose a vacant facial expression to prevent the work from being one-dimensional. He thought about how such an event "would have changed the psychology of a witness over time," and how "experiencers" (as Dr. Mack called UFO witnesses) tend to talk about these phenomena with a multitude of emotions other than fear.

Aside from the strange happenings themselves, the artist has found the lore of ufology fascinating because of its "cast of complex characters, intrigue, and infighting," as well as the inherent factual contradictions of paranormal occurrences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his earlier work revolved around the empty, glossy expressions of models and actresses.

"The UFO phenomenon is utterly confounding and, on the surface, ridiculous," Stichbury said. The easiest thing to do is ridicule and marginalize people when they challenge consensus reality. I think some of the phenomena are inexplicable in terms of our current and conventional understanding of physics and the universe.

"The underdog is such a rich archetype and interesting position to explore," he said. "It has a kind of objectivity that is completely autonomous from the groupthink or broader social collective." Tellingly, one of his favorite quotations is from Roswell researcher Stanton Friedman: "Don't bother me with the facts, my mind is already made up."

Stichbury's subjects come from a variety of sources, including UFO documentaries, paranormal-themed podcasts, and research compiled by scientists and journalists. He shared with us two of the strangest UFO-encounter stories he's come across—tales that have inspired his idiosyncratic portraits.

#### THE SIGHTINGS IN COLARES, BRAZIL

"The sightings occurred over a period of months in 1977 on the Brazilian island of Colares," Stichbury told us. "Beams of light shot down from the sky, burning villagers and leaving small puncture marks on their bodies. For me, the most interesting thing about this case is that the Brazilian Air Force eventually formed Operation Saucer to investigate and document the ongoing incidents, and interviewed witnesses from the region. There are almost no other cases like this that leave a trail of meticulously collected evidence, and most of the formerly classified government documentation connected with this case has been released to the public, including photographs of the aerial phenomena and military drawings. It's plausible that this was a military exercise, some sort of psychological warfare, or a new weapon being tested on the hapless villagers. The UFO photographs are some of the best ever recorded."

#### JAPAN AIRLINES FLIGHT 1628

"This is, in my view, one of the best pilot sightings," Stichbury said. "In November 1986, Japan Airlines flight 1628, a cargo plane flown by Captain Kenju Terauchi, encountered a giant, walnut-shaped UFO in the skies above Alaska. Two smaller objects were also seen flanking the plane. Terauchi said in an interview, 'The thing

was flying as if there was no such thing as gravity. It sped up, then stopped, then flew at our speed, in our direction, so that to us it [appeared to be] standing still. The next instant it changed course. In other words, the flying object had overcome gravity.'

"The UFOs were tracked by ground radar, and a target was picked up by nearby Elmendorf Air Force Base. A whistle-blower at the FAA released the radar data to the public. The FAA dismissed the case as an 'equipment malfunction.' Captain Terauchi was grounded by Japan Airlines for several years before being allowed to fly again."