

# BLOUIN modern painters

## REVIEWS

### SEATTLE

Kat Larson

Bridge Productions // 7–30 December, 2016



Kat Larson

*standing rock (they pray for the others to soften their hearts)* 2016. Archival inkjet print on moab paper, framed 25 x 37 inches

An alien falls to Earth and sees humanity's conventions for their absurdity, sadness, horror: the trope runs through a lot of sci-fi over the past century, such as *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984), Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), a bunch of stories by Kurt Vonnegut. It was also, at Bridge Productions in December, the basis of a new body of work by Kat Larson.

Larson's photo suite is complemented by a printed narrative and ricochets off the ongoing attrition between activists and authorities (private and public) at Standing Rock Indian Reservation, in North Dakota, where construction of a proposed oil pipeline has been delayed by protesters. Larson's series was produced in the Midwest last year, though her interests are more universal than that. In the story, a hippie-ish, pandrogynous alien from the planet Vega (a Vegan), dances and floats through the Universe before crashing on planet Earth. The Being, as the alien is known, mourns that "very often humans [can't] get out of their own way to recognize the multitude of creative solutions to their problems." The Vegan is depicted by various people, one man or one woman modeling it in each photo, signified by the person covered head to ankle, eyes and all, with a pink, psychedelically patterned

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covering—a sort of wooden antenna attached at the crown. The alien stands in archaic postures of appraisal and godliness. (Some recall Heaven’s Gate, going to meet their alien saviors, making their own eschatology.)

Most of the images are framed inkjet prints, though a few, such as *the ghost dance I* and *the ghost dance II*, are GIF-like videos the artist calls “painting loops,” displayed on smartphones mounted in handmade, wall-mounted boxes with multicolored woven cords trailing to a nearby outlet. Another was shown on a flat screen TV. The loops take their name from a political and religious movement among American Indian tribes of the West, starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which sought to revitalize communities and push out settlers. And like that syncretic practice, Larson’s images hash existing metaphysical forms—the numinous poses, the garb reminiscent of Sun Ra, the New Age homilies, technology, fetishized pre-modernism—and end up with something new.

The pictures are pretty, and though staged, have a documentary appeal. Although the Being is pictured at Standing Rock’s Oceti Sakowin camp, most of the images are from around the region, which is slowly dying in all kinds of ways, becoming merely a large side of production by drilling rigs, chicken coops, monoculture farming, and so on—its populace disappearing. The recent election pitted those people against their urban neighbors, and neither side seems to understand the other. The alien stands, perpetually isolated, before figments of Americana—a washateria in *ghost in tacoma*, a bridal store in *wedding rings*, dead sunflowers in *harvest II*—and it’s unclear if it’s a detached interloper or interrogator. A core of the fallen alien trope is mutualism: the alien intends to help humanity to heal enough that it might return home, here the Vegan needs to help people love one another so that their love can help propel the Vegan back home. But is the outer-space savior metaphor a useful dissociation, or is it alienation from a problem? It resembles a *deus ex machina*, a suggestion that humans are fucked/DOOMED? without the grace of an outside force. Isn’t that the same outsider fantasy we heard in the election? (How unfair is that analogy?) And how much are we letting ourselves off the ethical hook by waiting until a messiah lands?

The new president has vowed to increase pipeline construction, mining, and extraction. And in January, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists released a 2017 report on their Doomsday Clock, about which they’ve given periodic reports since 1947. With Trump’s erratic behavior, the clock, a metaphorical measure of our proximity to thermonuclear catastrophe, has been moved up to two-and-a-half minutes before midnight, the closest the group has estimated we’ve come since 1953, when the US and the USSR both tested hydrogen bombs. Maybe we do need something from outside humanity. We’re not doing so hot on our own.

—Noah Dillon