

**this starry sky lights up because of you
new gigapan photomontages
james johnson-perkins**

**the university of nottingham
ningbo, china**

IMAGES

The Great Battle, After Canaletto, Venice, Italy, 7m x 2m, 2010-12

The Assembly of the Gods, Kathmandu, Nepal, 10m x 2m, 2012-13

A Hero (The Astronomer), Portrait of Sir Patrick Moore, Selsey, UK, 4m x 2m, 2011-13

Invader, Muscat, Oman, 9m x 2m, 2012-13

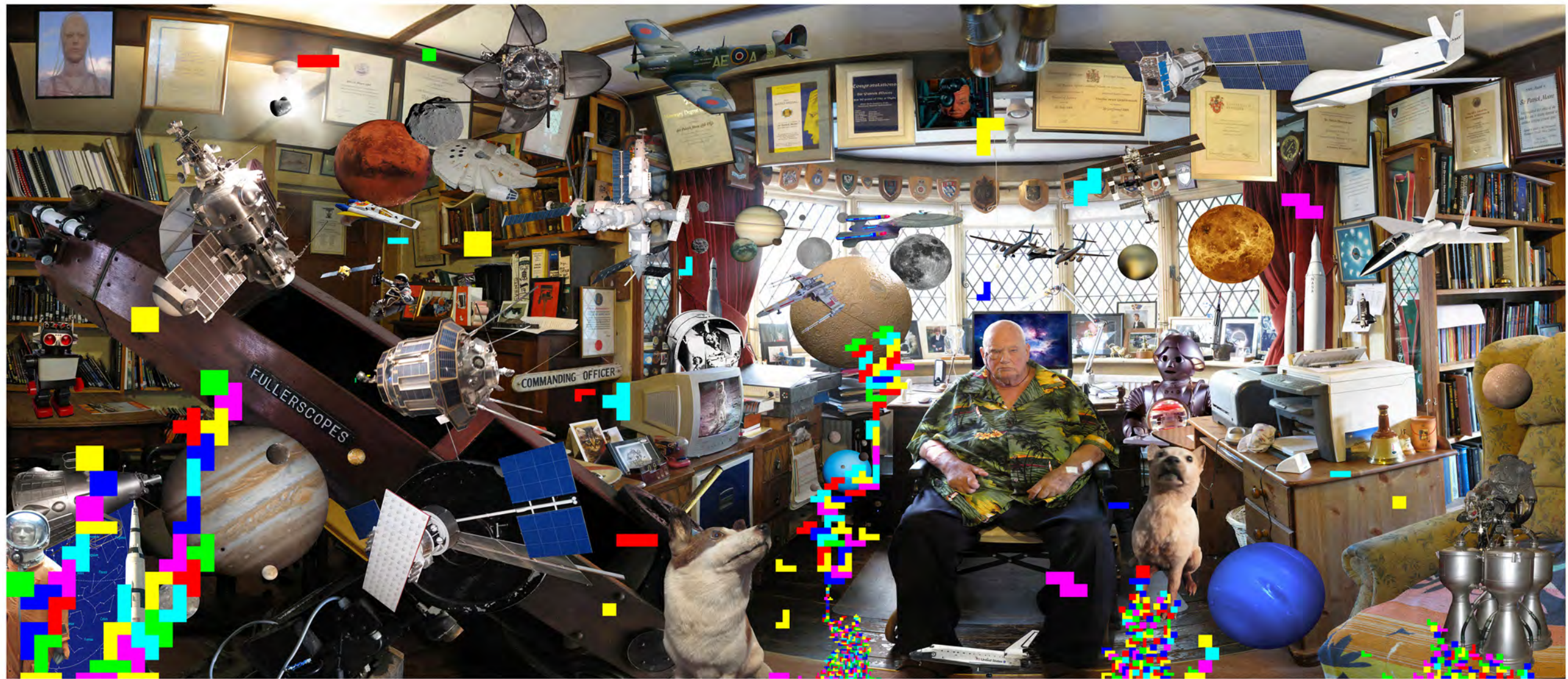
They Were Better Days, Moscow, Russia, 1.5m x 2m, 2013-14

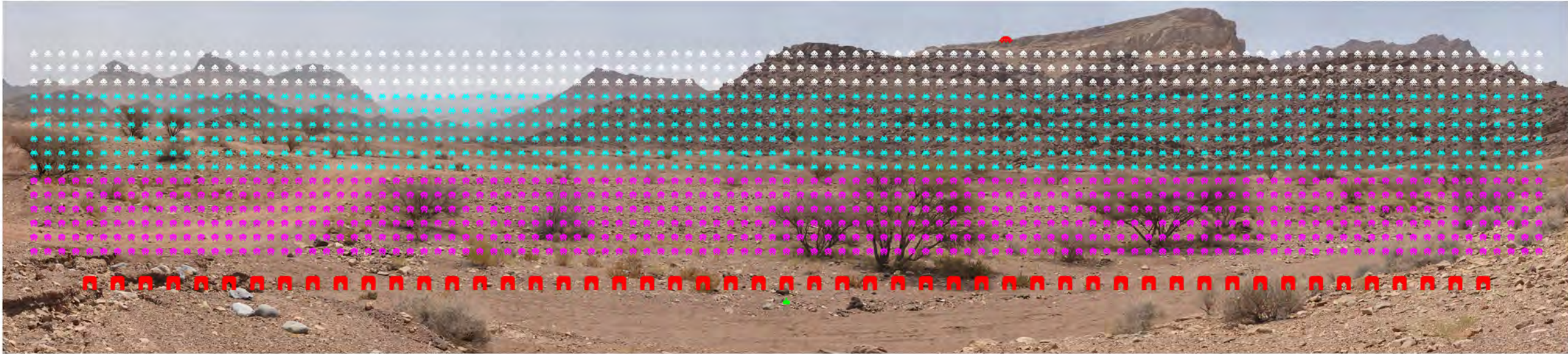
ESSAYS

**Ronan Kelly
David Holmes**











THIS STARRY SKY LIGHTS UP BECAUSE OF YOU

In November 2014 UNNC library opened an exhibition by the artist, James Johnson-Perkins.

In this ever shifting universe, where the rug is frequently pulled out from under our feet it is no surprise that some look for consolation to the heroes and icons who were conduits of our childhood adoration and sense of wonder. Johnson-Perkins' work unashamedly hinges on the theme of nostalgia and by degrees the viewer becomes a participant in his grandly realised backwards-looking vision. Hanging behind the library desk in all its 150cm x 530cm glory, the centrepiece of the exhibition, 'The Great Battle', depicts a confrontation between the forces of good and evil, superimposed onto the elegant backdrop of a Venetian scene inspired by Canaletto.

This apocalypse is strewn with iconic baddies- Godzilla, Jabba the Hut, the Marshmallow Man; as well as real-life villains like Myra Hindley and Al Capone. The good guys, Bruce Lee, Kenny Dalglish and Wonder woman are positioned on the right side of the giant work, offering hope of redemption. In this showdown victory for the righteous is far from assured, and literally must be snatched from the jaws of Jaws, with Spielberg's shark (itself a riff on Melville's monstrous white whale, Moby Dick) leaping majestically from the waters of the canal. Elsewhere, as a reminder of the demons within, Jack Nicholson's character from The Shining peers menacingly out from behind a Venetian blind on a shady backstreet corner- "Here's Johnny!". These super high-resolution Gigapan images are put together using source paintings and photographs, Photoshop and hi-tech rendering and imaging techniques; each one can take up to 1-2 years to compete. The Jaws example illustrates the painstaking attention to detail involved, with the shark and flying spray blended seamlessly into the waterway scene.

The Gigapan work with the most obvious connection to the 'starry eyed' title is the portrait of celebrated British astronomer Sir Patrick Moore. Johnson-Perkins photographed the one man cultural institution among his telescopes, books and trinkets after a fan letter from the artist (Moore had presented legendary BBC program The Sky at Night) led to an invitation from a then elderly Moore to come and visit him in his home. There is something gravity defying about the piece, with various aircraft, planets and Tetris blocks hanging suspended in the room. The detail is so well mapped, that in places it's difficult to know which objects were actually in the room at the time of photographing, and which were superimposed on afterwards. A modern silver TV set at an oblique angle carries an authentic looking image of the inauthentic looking moon landing, while Moore, dressed in Khaki's looks resolutely out at the viewer through his famous monocle.

In this exhibition space, along a narrow corridor in the library you find yourself (somewhat akin to a Tetris block) sandwiched between the portrait, with its carnival of astronomy and space-related imagery, and a much starker piece entitled 'Space Invaders'. The latter is a panoramic photograph of the Omani desert with rows of pixellated baddies from the iconic arcade game transposed over the desert landscape. The title of this exhibition, 'This Starry Sky Lights Up Because of You' draws on an English phrase that caught Johnson-Perkins' eye on the cover of a notebook at a local Chinese stationary outlet. Staying alive to the poeticism of his surroundings is a part of the artist's aesthetic. He explains to visitors craning their necks upwards at a screen mounted on the wall of the stairwell that the video piece on display, 'The Sturovo Super Hero Society' was the culmination of a separate project undertaken while Johnson-Perkins was at an Artist Residency in Slovakia. Working on the theme of guardians of a bridge, which separates Strurovo from the Hungarian town of Esztergom, the artist invited members of the local community to imagine their own superhero identities, collaborating with them to create masks and costumes.

This slice of film successfully captures the verve and energy of the inhabitants of the village as well as the creative power of the river meandering along in the background. Various masked figures were filmed engaging in bouts of spontaneous activity- folk dancing, musical performance, martial arts, or simply kicking a football around. The masks are scary and grotesque, but also latent with a kind of subversive humor characteristic of other of Johnson-Perkins' works, which art critic Malcolm Gee has found to "...mediate ironically between the forms of art and the fantasy of childhood play". The masked fiddler participant eking out a melodious yet slightly unhinged sound with manic movements of his bow is particularly memorable, visually recalling dreamlike images conjured from the brush of Chagall while his playing provides an atmospheric soundtrack to much of the short film.

On the second floor hangs Johnson-Perkins' 'The Assembly of the Gods', where around 150 Gods gather against a backdrop at a temple in Katmandu, Nepal. Attendees at the viewing have fun picking out the various Gods on show, working out which is which- from which religion, faith or mythology. Among Kali, Buddha and Christ we are arrested by a truly terrifying image from a work by Goya depicting the Greek God of time Saturn, quite horribly devouring one of his children from the head downwards. This is a reminder of our own mortality.

It was encouraging to see so many students of Nottingham's Chinese Campus responding to the Gigapan pieces in this exhibition, taking part in a dialogue based on the significance of these works of art. Johnson-Perkins' collaboration with the library and library staff, students and teaching staff on 'This Starry Sky Lights Up Because of You' can also be read as symbolic of a friendship of sorts and this event is indicative of enhanced curiosity and transfer of ideas across the cultural divide.

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THE GREAT BATTLE

The history and events of human kind is boundless in theme. To render this piece of work justice a refined taste is demanded, governed and guided by a cultivated intellect. Johnson-Perkins has placed before our eyes the history of the better half of mankind and the very worst. This work displays considerable learning and research which have been degenerated into pedantry. In the image before us the artist, most judiciously avoiding the larger and more ambitious duties of a historian, has occupied himself only with that portion of history, good versus evil, which is to be found in the scattered records which exist of the most famous and prominent figures in world history, and in pointing out the influence they exercised upon the politics, civil affairs, popular culture, religion, and civilization of humankind from the earliest dawn to the present day.

Johnson-Perkins diffuses much useful historical information to which the piece is devoted. In the work before us we must look for types of classes of people whose influence has been felt in different ages of the world's history, then for a vast gallery of portraits indiscriminately collected together from every nation and every period. The influence of Western women is more marked and in the delineation of her position Johnson-Perkins has a much larger amount of material at his disposal. The advancing civilization Rome like Greece appears too. The key to understanding this piece of work is the fact that its impulses are mainly derived from intense religious faiths. When I look at this picture, founded on spirit of the current era, I see religious or rather fanatical elements combined with military passions, which have throughout the course of history ultimately won despotic power.

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Written about 'The Great Battle' work, exhibited as part of the 'This Starry Sky Lights Up Because of You', The University of Nottingham Library, China, November 2014







