

Whiddington, Richard. "Is Anybody Out There? A New Show Interrogates Earthlings' Obsessions With Extraterrestrials," *Artnet*, 8 October 2023.

Is Anybody Out There? A New Show Interrogates Earthlings' Obsession With Extraterrestrials

20 artists bring their visions of alien life to Sun Valley Center for the Arts.

**Richard Whiddington**, October 8, 2023



Robyn O'Neil, *Ultralight Beam Terzetto*, 2016. Image: courtesy the artist and Western Exhibitions, Chicago.

Among the more perverse consequences of America's COVID-19 lockdowns over the past few years was a surge in reported UFO activity. Sightings rose by more than 1,000 nationwide between 2019 and 2020, the Pentagon formed a new office to investigate reports from the public, and in July Congress held a hearing on UFOs.

Idaho has emerged as something of an UFO epicenter, boasting more sightings per capita than any other state in the country.

It's a fact that resonated with Courtney Gilbert, the curator at the Sun Valley Center for the Arts (SVMoA) in the Rocky Mountains city of Ketchum. The result is "Sightings," an exhibition set to run through December 2, in which 20 artists explore how the pandemic revived our fascination with the night sky and the possibility of extraterrestrial life lurking somewhere in the great beyond.

"During the pandemic, we were all longing for connection," Gilbert said, "the idea there might be another form of life or intelligence out in the universe appealed to so many." Ventures into the wilderness were all the more thrilling in Gilbert's corner of Idaho, given Ketchum abuts the Central Idaho Dark Sky Reserve which restricts artificial light pollution.

The show's title is borrowed from Seattle-based artist Cable Griffith's 2015 paintings. These reworked hand-drawn reports of unidentified aerial phenomena into scenes from 19th-century landscape paintings. At SVMoA's prompting, Griffith has revisited the series, now framing his scenes with darkened windows that recall the confinement of the pandemic's stay-at-home orders.

Although "Sightings" is more interested in what motivates the search for extraterrestrials than the veracity of the claims themselves, commissioned work by artist Deb Sokolow delves deep into local lore. Large-scale drawings splice together images, interview quotes, and archival material taken from her 2022 residency in Wood River Valley. Of particular intrigue is Milton Haar, a Methodist minister who bought up the town of Triumph in the early 1960s and claimed it as place where vortexes collided and, as such, a site for recurrent UFO landings.

Other works take a more personal approach. Esther Pearl Watson visits the story of her father building a flying saucer he hoped to sell to NASA in brightly colored paintings of bucolic American life. Timothy Wyllie offers pencil impressions of his own encounters with UFOs, often set against amid the rugged canyons of the country's west. Ionel Talpazan, the late Romanian artist, is presented in the form of dense paper pieces that combine personal writings with fantastical architectural drawings.

Elsewhere, there are cryptic tapestry works from Karla Knight and sparse graphite drawings by Robyn O'Neil.

"I tried to curate an exhibition that would offer viewers lots of routes into the topic," Gilbert said, "[one to] generate questions and conversation that will extend beyond the walls of the Museum."