

ONE TAKE

The Last Resort



Above and following pages
Moon Dust, 2014,
video stills

All images courtesy
the artist, 356 S. Mission Road,
Los Angeles, The Green Gallery,
Milwaukee, Kavi Gupta

Dan Fox explores handcrafted futures and the automated present in Scott Reeder's new sci-fi film *Moon Dust*

'In space no one can hear you scream' was, of course, the famous tagline to *Alien* (1979). In space no one can hear you laugh, either. Why are the futuristic and fantastical seldom funny? Perhaps it's because science fiction has so often been a spin on the self-consciously serious action-adventure, thriller or war genres. (When was the last time you read a romance set in space, or saw a musical about life on other planets?) It could be because futurology is so often a reflection of present anxieties, and not everyone finds the threat of nuclear annihilation, ecological catastrophe, global war, totalitarianism or the breakdown of civil society to be terribly comical. In cinema, until the 1970s, there had only been a handful of humorous science-fiction films. Then along came Woody Allen's *Sleeper* (1973), John Carpenter's *Dark Star* (1974) and Douglas Adams's BBC radio serial *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1978, later adapted for television and turned into a series of novels), which all teleported cerebral satire and adult humour into the genre. *Dark Star* depicted deep space as deeply dull: a place of drudge jobs, bored workers and talking thermonuclear bombs. Carpenter didn't deck his spacecraft out in shiny chrome or brightly coloured, mid-century-modern interiors like the sci-fi films of the 1950s and '60s. He made them cramped and grubby, like intergalactic oil rigs or container ships. Space was not a place to wear figure-hugging jumpsuits and commune with sexy extra-terrestrials. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* used science fiction to poke fun at philosophy and theology, and brought the pathos of the space opera crashing down to Earth with depressed robots, themed restaurants at the end of the universe, and information about how many pints of lager need to be drunk in order to survive a jump into hyperspace.

The goofy and imaginative *Moon Dust* (2014) could easily have arrived with us from that *Dark Star* era through a wormhole in time. A feature-length film made over the course of 11 years by Chicago- and Detroit-based artist Scott Reeder (developed closely with his brother, Tyson Reeder, and John Hime), *Moon Dust* brings the banality of humanity to a decrepit lunar holiday resort whose staff and visitors alike seem consumed with ennui. Reeder's film is set in a future where all the human foibles and minor irritations of our present remain happily intact;

no matter how far out into space we might get, Reeder suggests, people will still take holidays, flirt, fall in love, act like assholes, be kind, feel lonely, bully each other at work, feel nostalgic, listen to music, have accidents, get stoned and wear ridiculous fashions. *Moon Dust* reminds us that the future never remains futuristic for long: it is always in the process of becoming out of date, shabby, superseded by something sleeker and (temporarily) more advanced.

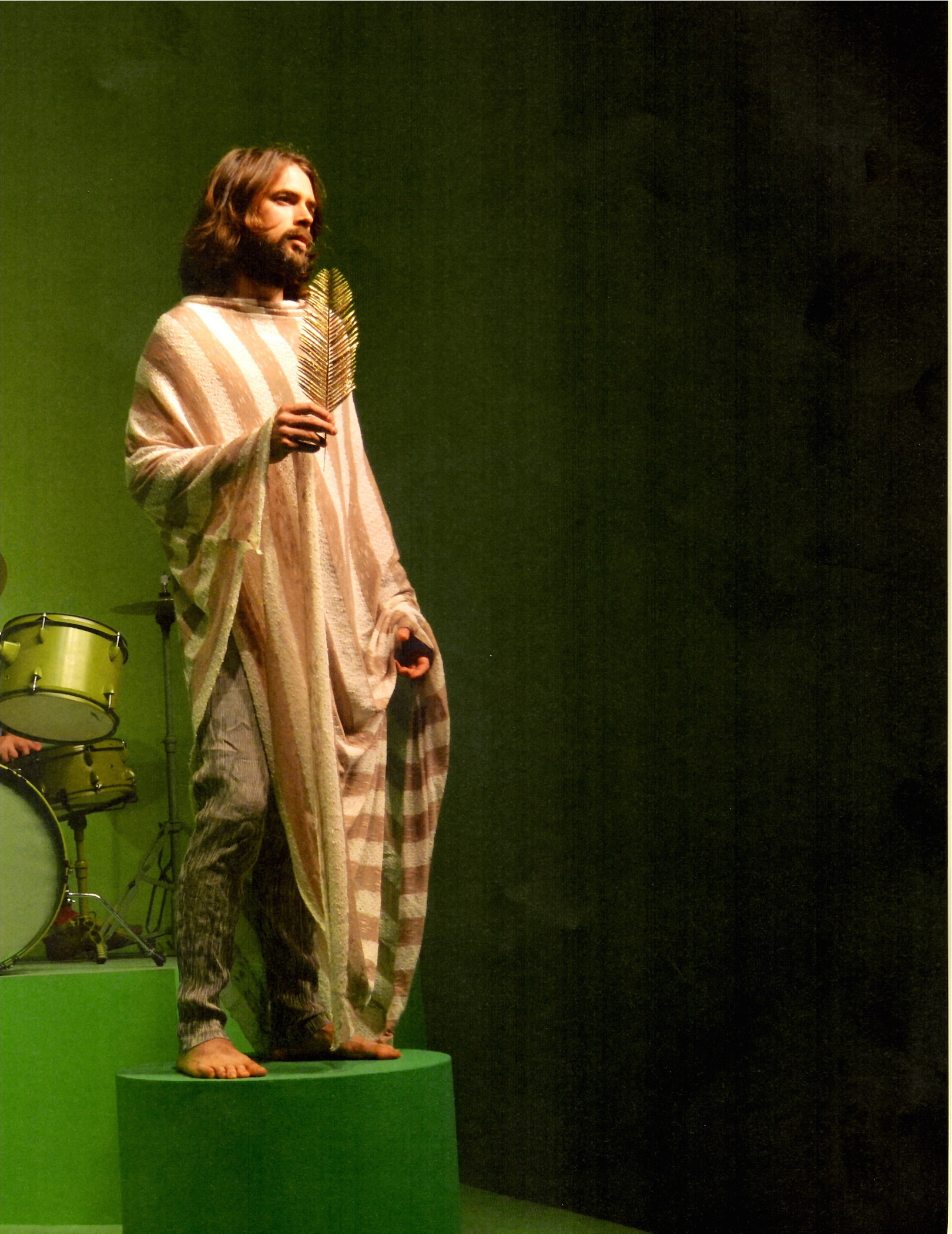
Like a low-budget Robert Altman film, *Moon Dust* uses an ensemble cast – mostly artists and friends of Reeder's from Chicago, Milwaukee and Los Angeles, where the film was shot – to weave together a number of narratives. Partly down to the improvised script and availability of its actors, *Moon Dust's* plot-lines drift in and out of focus, as if circling each other like weightless astronauts. Its story glides forwards then hits periods of languor, distracted by witty interstitial scenes describing life at the Moon World resort: the bubbling, New Age sounds of the cocktail bar band, for instance, or passengers arriving from Earth, welcomed by the rambling PA announcements of Roger Z (played by musician Ian Svenonius). 'People started coming to the Moon as a new-fangled health fad,' explains Z, '... thought it would help with cellulite [...] One thing you'll notice on the Moon is how big the vegetables are [...] Did you know you could get divorced for only five dollars?'

Moon World has seen better days: visiting there is the interplanetary equivalent of holidaying in Niagara Falls or Bognor Regis. The fashionable and the moneyed now spend their vacations at a seven-star resort on Mars, to which Moon World staff aspire for promotion. Budget-conscious hipsters in search of a good time frequent Moon World's pastel-coloured rooms and entertainment zones. Cool bands on tour play the resort, such as The Snails, whose lead singer looks like Jesus and weeps into a gold palm leaf instead of a microphone. We join the film as the resort's management is carrying out an inspection, led by the frosty Arugula Geode (Annie Killelea), who is measuring the alpha waves, or happiness levels, of visitors. At the sharp end of the inspection are the staff of the Kaleidoscope Room, a once state-of-the-art, virtual-reality technology through which users could experience immersive scenarios with names such as 'Memory Lane Extreme',

'Ancient Jazz', 'Jokes from Earth' and 'When Things Still Grew'. Now the machine is as quaint as Pong or Pac-Man; 'I don't trust those guys,' says Geode to her assistant. The Kaleidoscope Room operators are led by the earnest Sherman Flute (played by Hime, owner of the most bizarre fake Scottish accent ever heard). Flute hires onto his team Inch Monroe (Didier Leplae), an awkward but talented salesman from Moon World's Ye Olde Cheese Shoppe (part of the resort's retro Yesterdayland zone), just as the unpleasant Tyrone Egg threatens his department with closure. Played by Reeder, who proves to be an excellent comic performer, Egg is a mercurial and dissolute member of senior management who snorts psychotropic powder mined from Halley's Comet and, when he's not throwing food at them, sadistically tests illegal drugs on abducted resort employees. Elsewhere, an accident-prone food worker called Dennis Dribble (John Riepenhoff) gets trapped on Moon World's service conveyor belts, circuiting the resort before embarking on a brief and tragic affair with his co-worker Ginger Loufah (Ashley Jenke). The Snails play a gig that brings their fans first to tears and then to unconsciousness. A shy janitor hopes in vain to join the Kaleidoscope Room crew, and a rapidly multiplying cluster of mutant pink spiders eats away at the structural fabric of Moon World, accelerating its eventual destruction.

Moon Dust's New York premiere, at Anthology Film Archives in November 2014, gave viewers the sense of watching a ready-made cult movie. For a film that looks as much at painterly issues of light, colour and form as it does holidays in the cosmos, it's the kind of feature best seen with friends, sat in a cinema chair drinking beer and eating popcorn, rather than on a hard wooden bench in a gallery. In a recent interview with *W* magazine, Reeder observed: 'For a movie, it's pretty artsy, and for art, it's a lot like a movie,' which is another way of saying: 'File *Moon Dust* under "Uncategorized".'¹ *Moon Dust* will not make Reeder the next artist-turned-Oscar-winning film director; it glories in idiosyncrasies that often get compromised by big budgets. ('I'm sorry Scott, we're going to have to lose the scene with the lunar drug dealer and extra-terrestrial cross-dressers: it didn't test well with audiences in Minnesota.') Wobbly sets and a charming analogue





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synth soundtrack make it easy to read the movie as a boyish and nostalgic homage to vintage sci-fi: the cult TV serials of *Star Trek* (1966–69) and *Dr Who* (1963–ongoing), say, or the plastic-fantastic worlds imagined in movies such as *Barbarella* (1968), *Logan's Run* (1976) and *Flash Gordon* (1980). It would also be easy to interpret the lo-fi sensibility of *Moon Dust* as a reaction to giddy technophilic tendencies in contemporary art – all those works in a hurry to jump the internet zeitgeist. (A surefire way to ensure your art looks dated within ten years.) *Moon Dust* may speak to both midnight movie fans and the techno-averse (Reeder persisted in using the same camera he first started shooting on over a decade ago, even though most phones today carry superior video hardware) but only because classic sci-fi and the handmade are corollaries of Reeder's artistic interest in colour and form.

'A lot of early films have this feeling of touch,' says Reeder, 'of a world built from scratch; where the filmmaker's ideas become evident through the sets and props as much as the actors and performances. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) is a great example of this. I also love Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) and Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) for this reason. Setting a story in the future especially lends itself to this kind of re-invention of the everyday. It's like playing the role of an architect or designer – everything needs to be constructed from the ground up.'²

The first sets for *Moon Dust* were built in Milwaukee, followed by two more constructed in Chicago. After years of slowly chiseling away at the film, Reeder finally built a number of larger sets in 2014 at artist Laura Owens's studio and exhibition space, 356 S. Mission Road, Los Angeles, using his solo painting exhibition there as an opportunity to complete the film. In an interview with Owens about the show, Reeder describes how 'there was a crazy blur between the painting production and the movie production. For a lot of shoots we were using these big blank stretchers as bounces for the lights [...] We also stretched a green-screen fabric over a painting since we needed a flat surface. We shot a group of people in front of it and that painting went on to become a different painting.'³

Scenes such as the one set in a bar in 'Pleasure World', in which patrons can get massages through the walls (hands push from behind what are clearly stretcher frames), underscore how *Moon Dust* is a painter's vision of the future. Colour defines the spaces in the film, and each set is dominated by one or two monochrome pastel hues offset

by contrasting or complimentary colours. (Reeder cites the Californian Light and Space movement as an inspiration for his scenography.) Simple geometric shapes and portals give the colour depth and direction but objects in the film do not appear to have any convincing sculptural weight. It's clearly a world made from cardboard and plywood, created for the eye rather than the hand. Reeder seems to be asking how much is just enough to maintain an illusion? What does it take to convince you to believe in the picture you are looking at?



Installation view at
356 S. Mission Road, 2014

Courtesy
the artist and 356 S. Mission
Road, Los Angeles;
photograph: Joshua White

And it is as a world of surfaces rather than volumes and densities that *Moon Dust* also expresses something altogether more serious about authority and labour. Reeder shows that the pleasures of the resort are enabled not by automation but by sweatshop labour. Moon World's employees live in tiny pods stacked tens of storeys high and socialize in cramped,

box-like bars. The immigration checkpoint on the Moon requires visitors to stick their finger into the top of an immaculately blank, curved desk in order for it to be read. What guests don't see is a young worker crouched inside the hollow desk, peering up at the wiggling fingers and checking each arrival against a printed passenger list. In each hotel room is a box into which visitors can insert their feet and receive a foot massage and pedicure. Hidden beneath each room is not a sophisticated set of hydraulic massage pads but a hot and claustrophobic room full of sweaty workers rubbing feet and painting toenails by hand. Moon World maintains its air of technological convenience through looks alone; so long as it appears smooth and seamless on the surface, it doesn't matter how the service in question actually works backstage.

The resort is constructed like the Mechanical Turk, the 18th-century, chess-playing automaton that hoaxed the great and good into thinking it was a machine, when hidden inside it all along was a human chess player. In this sense, *Moon Dust's* hipster holiday camp can be read as a satire of our own concierge culture of Uber cars, TaskRabbit jobs and outsourced Amazon Mechanical Turk labour; a tech-driven system that exploits others for the sake of adults who demand, like spoiled children, that their every need be satisfied immediately. You could say *Moon Dust* looks, on the surface, to be charmingly handmade; a cuddly confection. But so, too, do the cute names and we're-here-to-be-your-buddy interfaces of all those service apps on your smartphone. Behind many of those apps, there's a Tyrone Egg throwing food at an unpaid intern. Having taken over a decade to make, *Moon Dust* is a labour of love about labour; a film about the power of the handmade, and the exploitation of the hand. ♦♦

1 'Dusty Side of the Moon', interview with Allyson Shiffman, *W* magazine, 10 November 2014

2 Email to the author, December 2014

3 'Scott Reeder and Laura Owens in Conversation, 7 February 2014', 356mission.tumblr.com

Dan Fox is co-editor of frieze and lives in New York, USA. His book Pretentiousness: Why It Matters will be published this year by Fitzcarraldo Editions, London, UK.

Scott Reeder is an artist based in Chicago and Detroit, USA. In 2015, his work will be included in 'Laugh-In: Art, Comedy, Performance' at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, USA; 'Director's Choice,' College of Creative Studies, Detroit; and 'Occupational Therapy' at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, USA.