

## Scott Reeder

TALKS ABOUT *MOON DUST*, 2014



View of "Scott Reeder," 2014, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White.

*MOON DUST*, the first feature-length film by painter Scott Reeder, comes with no shortage of surprises. But the biggest surprise is that it is nearly done. Shot sporadically over the past eleven years, the project was slipped in between gallery exhibitions and a bevy of extracurricular events. Looking back on the process, Reeder gives the impression that the making of *Moon Dust* might well have stretched on indefinitely. Fortunately, an invitation to show at 356 S. Mission Rd. in Los Angeles this past winter prompted the artist to finish filming—and to make new paintings to display alongside his Minimalism-inspired movie sets, which evoke a kind of astral Marfa and circulate through and around the film's space opera, staged in a démodé lunar hotel.

This wasn't the first time Reeder has put *Moon Dust* in orbit around his expanded painting practice. At Gallery 400 in Chicago in 2003, he exhibited a film set and green screen that were both functional and available for viewing on their own between shoots. Two years later, at Midway Contemporary Art in Minneapolis, he created prop-like paintings and sculptures for a show *en abyme* that doubles as the "Moon Museum" in the movie's constructed future. Still, the large-scale roller paintings made this year in LA—and inspired by the lack of intentional composition on the side of a half-painted plywood set—are the first discrete works to come out of the filmmaking process. The decorative tableaux hanging against Reeder's monochromatic backdrops had previously accented the mundane workplace drama at the center of *Moon Dust*. At 356 S. Mission Rd., the canvases stepped out of the cinematic frame and—in the case of new 2014 works featuring handwritten lists in oil pastel, such as *More Alternative Titles for Recent Exhibitions I've Seen* and *Ideas for a TV Show Episode or a Painting*, the latter of which was installed in a primary-yellow laboratory heavily featured in the film—actively commented on the project's narrative conceit.

Reeder's attentiveness to the slippage between the autonomy of objects and the inflection of a specific context runs even deeper. Along with his brother, painter Tyson Reeder, he strained vision and commerce with the *Dark Fair*, first held at the Swiss Institute in New York in 2008, which invited galleries to show work in a space lit only by candles and flashlights. For the brothers' always popular "Drunk vs. Stoned" summer shows at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, the pair likewise employed a high-concept curatorial approach to alter perceptions of each individual piece by posing the question, Is this work tipsy or high art? Such a preoccupation with out-of-joint institutional frameworks can be traced back to the artist's very first solo exhibition, at Milwaukee's Hermetic Gallery in 1998, which presented generically shaped monochrome canvases in primary colors with hay bales for seating. And this, in turn, elicited an invitation from gallerist Pat Hearn to show them at her New York space "next door to Ellsworth Kelly," as the artist

recalls her saying. The presentation of large-scale paintings alongside room-like sets, some of which featured video monitors playing footage shot on-site, punctuated the spaces of painting, sculpture, and screen—heralding the fantastically animated, cross-genre compositional exercise of Reeder's long-awaited film.

—Ben Carlson



Scott Reeder, *Moon Dust*, 2014, video, color, sound, 88 minutes. Production still. Foreground: Jenn Kirk.

**I'VE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN** things that are made by people who don't know what they're doing. Like a song by the Shaggs, a film by the Kuchar brothers, or a house made of driftwood by a stoned but ambitious hippie: Something always happens when people get in over their heads. I like to put myself in this position on purpose. I might create an artificial constraint that always puts me back at square one, like "From now on I'm only going to make paintings using pasta," or set myself a near-impossible task, like "I'm going to make a feature film in my spare time with no money."

*Moon Dust* is that film. It tells the story of a failing resort on the moon: The idea is that it's one hundred years in the future and space tourism is already in full swing. The moon has lost its standing as the go-to vacation destination; Mars is the new hot spot. At the Moon World resort, there are several run-down lunar attractions, including a virtual-reality machine called the Kaleidoscope Room. Its technology was cutting-edge when the resort first opened, but is now sadly obsolete. When a tourist enters the room, a mildly charismatic holographic figure comes and talks to them for a few minutes. But because the technology is only so advanced, a real person in a nearby room has to remotely control the hologram in real time, via manual labor. The film is mostly about the workers who control these holograms behind the scenes.

The idea for *Moon Dust* can be traced to the late 1990s, when I was working with a group of artists and filmmakers on a website called ZeroTV. It was a great experience, but it was also the worst possible time to try to put video content online—before YouTube or high-speed Internet. It was difficult for anyone to see what we were doing, because the technology wasn't there yet, but it was also a little unclear *why* we were doing it. It was the antithesis of the Facebook story: There was no money, no parties, and not a lot of activity on our message board. My brother Tyson and I produced a low-budget video soap opera for the site, called *Milwaukee*, that was loosely based on *Dallas*, but instead of revolving around an oil fortune it was about a beer fortune. We made forty or fifty episodes, all really short, usually three to five minutes.

After that, I began thinking of making a stripped-down sci-fi movie. I decided that it might be more rewarding to just make a movie, because at least I knew what a movie was—I'm still not sure what a webisode is. I love Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* [1972], but always thought it was a bit too long and not very funny. I wanted to do something that involved a dystopian future but had a sense of humor, like Jacques Tati's *Playtime* [1967], where the sets and props almost become characters themselves, or even Robert Breer's kinetic animations. For *Moon Dust*, I ended up using all nonactors, who had a hard time delivering wordy dialogue, and so there was a lot of improvisation: people intuitively responding to situations and the weird constructed environments in their own voices. As a painter, I was often more interested in how everyone looked and moved through the space than the specifics of what they were saying. But because I was shooting standard-definition video, cost wasn't an issue, and I could do multiple takes until something interesting or funny happened. So the dialogue would get more and more refined as we worked through the scenes.

Much of the film's plot is organized around a hierarchical, class-like structure. All the resort employees wear monochromatic color-coded uniforms that denote their rank. It's easy to tell who a scene is about and what their status is, because everything is clearly organized by color. It's like Albers meets the army. There's no makeup, and the special effects are pretty low-tech, so the grainy quality of the low-resolution video just smooths some of those things out; often a figure might sit very subtly against a ground because they're the same hue. As the film progresses, you're continually introduced to new colors and new characters.

Part of why the film took eleven years to complete is that I kept adding new scenes, subplots, and characters, all of which required building more sets. Two of the main actors moved out of town early on; I just kept shooting with whoever was around as well as casting new people. Eventually I cast myself, because I was always available.

My recent exhibition in LA allowed me to finally finish shooting all the scenes I'd wanted to shoot for years but had never had the time, space, or resources to realize. We created new sets like the "Active Zone," "Natural Wonders," and "Yesterdayland." We made a zoo with an (earth) dog and a cage that's empty except for some bones. There's a nightclub called the Five Seasons. And because 356 S. Mission Rd. is already such a social hub in the city, it worked as a kind of natural casting agency. (For example, Ian Svenonius, the front man of the Make-Up, organized a music event at the space and ended up in the movie.)

I wanted to set up something that could act as a magnet that attracts other things. During the show, one of the film sets was even used as the site of an ongoing weekly meditation workshop, completely independent of the film. I loved that this ridiculous set of giant purple geometric shapes could mean one thing in the context of the film and then mean something completely different to the mindfulness crowd. These moments mirrored an important theme in the film—the gap between a thing's intended function and its actual use. Or how that gap emerges over time.

There's a scene in David Lynch's *Eraserhead* [1977] where someone walks through a door, and when they come through the other side, a year and a half has passed between the two shots. *Moon Dust* is filled with things like that: characters aging, gaining and losing weight, changing hairstyles. My own character might be the most noticeable example, but it's hard to tell because I have a wig on—and it's on the moon, so who knows?