

## Why Are UFOs Everywhere in Contemporary Art?

Right now in New York, two exhibitions reveal artists' fascination with the unexplained.



Hortensia Mi Kafchin, *Gyroscopic spacecraft* (2025). Courtesy of Hortensia Mi Kafchin and P.P.O.W, New York. © Hortensia Mi Kafchin. Photo: Ian Edquist.

by **J. Cabelle Ahn** • December 11, 2025

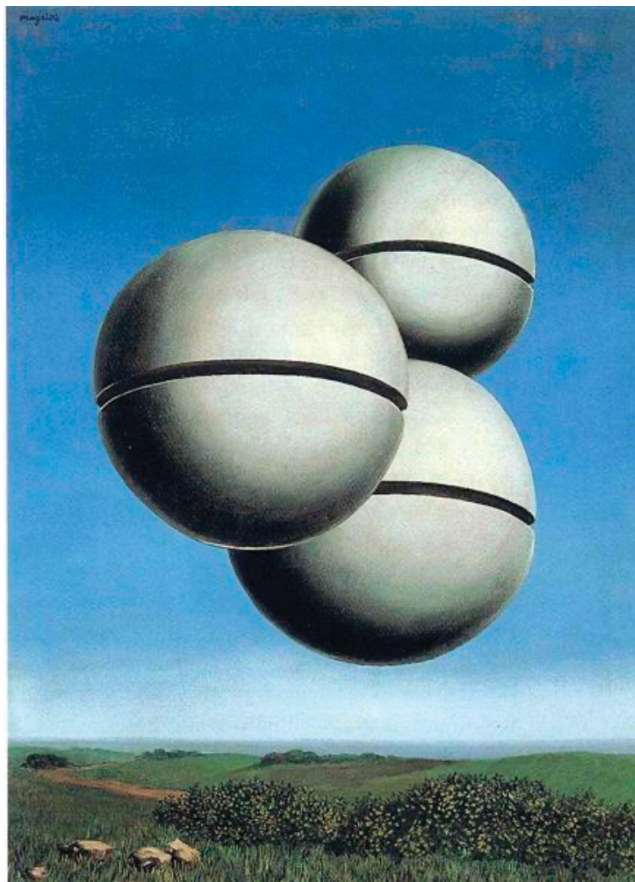
Modern science and technology have done little to tamp down the public's long-held fascination with UFOs, unexplained phenomena, and the possibility of life beyond Earth. If anything, this millennia-old obsession has only accelerated in recent years, as the Pentagon has declassified files on strange objects seen from Navy cockpits and Silicon Valley giants have spent billions of dollars chasing their own interplanetary ambitions.

The mysteries of the galaxy still vastly outweigh the knowns, and two shows in New York this winter tap into this perennial puzzle. "[Voice of Space: UFOs and Paranormal Phenomena](#)" at the Drawing Center (on view through February 1, 2026) gathers some three dozen works by artists ranging from René Magritte to Isa Genzken. "[Paintings Made for Aliens Above](#)" at P.P.O.W (on view through December 20, 2025), a solo exhibition of new paintings by Romanian artist Hortensia Mi Kafchin, probes the promises and failures of technofuturism.

Together, these exhibitions show how the allure of unidentified phenomena and the technology that might propel them are bound up with our own shifting belief systems—as well as how the cosmic can open a space to explore queerness, speculative worlds, and flashes of utopia glimpsed through dystopia.

## Channeling UFOs

Unidentified objects in the sky have riveted artists since antiquity, with irregular planetary movements, meteor showers, and comets often treated as divine omens. On April 14, 1561, for example, people in Nuremberg famously reported seeing an aerial clash of mysterious globes, rods, and crosses. A blood-red aurora over Britain on March 6, 1716, was read as a celestial war between supernatural soldiers. Newtonian physics has since explained some of these phenomena—for instance, Halley's Comet is now a known quantity with a predictable return date rather than a bizarre nocturnal anomaly heralding the fall of empires—but the skies have remained charged with artistic inspiration nonetheless.



René Magritte, *Voice of Space* (1931), Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York) © 2025 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

One classic example is René Magritte's *Voice of Space* (1931), on loan from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. Last exhibited in New York in 1965, the painting is the conceptual lodestar of the Drawing Center's show of the same name. Described by the curator Olivia Shao as "the Mona Lisa of UFO paintings," the canvas features three oversized silver orbs floating over a bucolic landscape, their smooth metallic forms eerily foretelling the countless visualizations of alien spacecraft that followed.

Although Magritte never described the work as being about aliens—he said the forms were inspired by the crotal bells common on horse-drawn vehicles of the period—other artists in the show embrace far more direct encounters with cosmic visitors. One such example is the 20th-century artist Paulina Peavy, whose multimedia works combine enigmatic figures and abstraction in the style of Italian futurism. Peavy's works are often dually credited to her and Lacamo, a personal UFO that Peavy claimed to have met after attending a séance in 1932. Peavy, who died in 1998, even made bejeweled “trance masks” to better channel her extraterrestrial collaborator, while her multidimensional cosmology became a way to imagine a post-gender utopia far from the conservative reality of mid-century America.

More contemporary works eschew the channeling of possibilities for the visualization of present-day thinking. Also on view at the Drawing Center are two collages by Char Jeré, whose works interrogate the presumed worldview behind technology and consumerism. In an email, Jeré describes a potential unidentified encounter at a reservoir in upstate New York in 2001 as a partial inspiration.

The resulting collages feature everyday objects ranging from sandpaper and balloons to emergency medication and more. Jeré (who uses they/them pronouns) describes the works as “maps and incantations” ultimately intended to decolonize the present. “Like Gil Scott Heron points out in his anthem ‘Whitey on the Moon,’ we suffer in order for technological spectacle and scientific triumph to exist,” they say. “These collages resist the ‘wait your turn’ detritus that so often gets thrown at Black people, queer people, [and] people who have been marginalized.”

## **Cultivating the Unconsciousness**

Elsewhere in the Drawing Center's show, UFOs stand in for faith and expanded consciousness rather than literal flying saucers. “It's also about transhistorical human experience, belief systems, cybernetics, and AI,” Shao says of the exhibition. “It's an attempt to map where we are in the world.”

This convergence crystallizes in three pieces by Adam Putnam from his ongoing *Visualization* series (2021–), which now spans more than 650 small works on paper drawn from dreams and meditation. Describing the project as “an ever-expanding deck of tarot cards,” he considers its construction and expansion a way of “cultivating a connection to the unconscious or the super conscious mind.”

The backstory behind the addition of his works to the show reveals an almost supernatural intervention. “I let Olivia shuffle through a stack and pick whatever spoke to her,” he recalled. “One of the *Visualizations* [#59, 2021–22] she chose was quite remarkable because it came from a dream I had about UFOs... There is no indication of this outwardly, as it is a fairly abstract work, but something in it must have resonated with [her].”

This conception of the unconscious as an outer-dimensional force slots into a longer lineage. Putnam's visualizations sit alongside drawings by Sigmar Polke, who in the late 1960s spoke of receiving “commands” from “higher beings.” Included in the show is his 1968 ballpoint drawing of a wavelength, *Command of 28.8.68*, with its title marking the date of “transmission.” For Polke, those higher beings could be seen as psychedelic, divine, or even extraterrestrial—an elastic category that let him tap into the era's UFO fever to skewer West Germany's consumer culture. His wavering signal supposedly arriving from the cosmos is, in the end, actually a conduit through which he could address terrestrial desires.

## **Paintings for Aliens**

Four blocks south of the Drawing Center, a series of paintings by Kafchin at P.P.O.W. similarly examines how preoccupations with aliens sometimes represent distinctly earthly tensions. “The title ‘Paintings Made for Aliens Above’ itself is a political and social commentary about the hierarchy of our world and cultural context,” she says.

Kafchin's paintings raid multiple eras of art history, with her reference points ranging from Salvator Rosa and Francisco Goya to Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst. The works feature a rotating cast of

characters that includes, in her words, “Aliens (representing the unknown, the Celestial Strangers), A.I. learning from our madness... and the long impossible distances between the stars that separate different civilizations.”

This eclectic ensemble is informed by her personal history. “Born in 1986, I opened my eyes at a time when technology was synonymous with the future,” she recalls, noting that her father told her stories from Jules Verne, Issac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and other sci-fi giants.

Kafchin’s works register the gap between that techno-utopian promise and the entangled realities of the present, to which her trans identity remains central. “We are people who think outside the box; it’s in our nature to vibe with magic, fantasy, tech, divination, and so on,” she says. “I need to be validated by a bigger power than anything we have on Earth, like, for example, the Intergalactic Federation or some more advanced neighbors.”

The paintings intentionally blur conspiracy and fact, aspiration, and invention. Kafchin cites “hyperstition,” the philosopher Nick Land’s theory that a fiction shared widely enough can bring a new reality into being. “There is a borderline between hyperstition and conspiracy, like an unknown force that is training or harvesting our perception of reality or collective consciousness,” she notes. “It’s funny how UFOs and the image of aliens are in concordance with our times.”

In this register, UFOs become less about contact and more about cosmology—a way to reframe what it means to be human at all. As Jeré puts it, “If war, AI, and money can change the world, then art should also take on that same responsibility, or at least the challenge of refusing the world as it is.”



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