***weep not for the future*: the photographs of Sam Davis**

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Critical Essay by Elizabeth Howie

Sam Davis's work, in particular images from his portfolios *Tragic Heroes*, *Rocketships*, and *Tin*, consists of a variety of approaches to exploring our longstanding fascination with outer space. Utilizing such devices as pinhole, medium format and 4x5 cameras, as well as processing ranging from daguerreotypes to tintypes, silver gelatin, and Chromira C-prints, Davis shows us our memories, dreams, and fantasies about our hopes and fears of the universe around us.

Tragic Heroes, consisting almost entirely of panoramic shots, brings us into the proximity of solitary moon-suit clad figures. They are reminiscent of spacemen of cinema and television, such as the 1939 *Buck Rogers* movie serial, the 1952 serial *Commando Cody*, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* of 1956, 1959's *When Worlds Collide*, or the all-too-earnest space travelers of the original *Star Trek*, which ran from 1966-69. The gadgets and spacecraft (also made by Davis) evoke even earlier examples, such as ray-guns from the 1936 film *Flash Gordon*. The above classic early sci-fi vehicles utilized special effects, which now appear quite clunky, to try to demonstrate the wonders and threats of the future.[1] Despite their retro stylings, Davis's heroes have arrived in that future, and strangely, things have not advanced all that much.

But some things are definitely different. Countering the myth of the NASA astronaut as idealized he-man, someone who possesses "the right stuff,"[2] Davis's figures—and perhaps" spacemen" is a better word than "astronauts," to suggest their relation to science fiction—demonstrate instead a kind of wistful vulnerability we would never have been permitted to observe in the Apollo age. Would they have even passed the rigorous testing required of aspiring astronauts?

And what of those first spacemen? We have just passed the 50th anniversary of Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin's historic 108-minute orbital flight which, on April 12, 1961, made him the first man in space. Alarmed by the USSR's accomplishments (including successfully launching Sputnik in 1957), the US set out to catch up and surpass the Soviets. In December 1968, Apollo astronauts orbited the moon for the first time, fortunate enough to have a Hasselblad camera on board, which they used to take the iconic "Earthrise" photograph of the earth seeming to rise over the moon.[3] And on July 20, 1969, the Apollo 11 astronauts finally landed on the moon. But today, as a recent *New York Times* article tells us, the heroic, romantic era of moon exploration is past. The space shuttle program is winding down, and NASA has terminated its human spaceflight program.[4] Without humans (well, men)[5] in outer space to vicariously experience for us the wonders of the universe—as well as that of earth seen from a distance—we don't react with quite the same fervor as we did in 1969, when all the world was glued to the television to watch footage of the first manned moon landing.[6]

Today's astronauts are facing the fact that the likelihood of their once again soaring out into the void—at least as far as the space station—is a dream they must put to rest. The larger-

than-life figure of the Apollo-era astronaut (now charmingly infantilized in the *Toy Story* character "Buzz Lightyear") is a relic of the Cold-War Space Age. While we still know very little about the universe around us, our comprehension of it is now fed by data gathered and transmitted by robotic rovers, which do not come out with compelling statements like Neil Armstrong's famous "That's one small step for (a) man; one giant leap for mankind."[7]

And was it really only a small step? Who can forget those alarmingly fragile and unwieldy puffed-up moon suits, whose giant boots seemed to spend more time off the lunar surface than on it thanks to the moon's low gravity? And perhaps that is one of the most telling images of the moon walks—the silver clad astronauts bounding slowly across the dusty, bleak surface of our satellite, joyously experiencing weightlessness, any regular movement magically transformed to slow-mo. In stark contrast, Davis's space men seem forsaken and heavily weighted down by gravity—all too earthbound in their desolate landscapes. Yet perhaps they have arrived in a more hospitable atmosphere, one they can breathe.

Even the dismal vistas Davis captures are strongly reminiscent of the foreign worlds of popular culture. The original *Star Trek* was filmed in wastelands conveniently close to LA, such as the Vasquez Rocks Natural Area Park in Agua Dulce.[8] Going back further, the territories in which these spacemen find, or lose, themselves, bring to mind the prairie frontiers of mythological cowboy days; and as we know from the dramatically intoned introduction of *Star Trek*, space is the final frontier.

Despite the amount of time that has passed since NASA's victorious conquest of the moon, Apollo history remains sacrosanct. The astronauts are heroes to a man, despite evidence of human weakness, provided for example by Buzz Aldrin's autobiography.[9] But the first men to travel near the stars are not meant to be merely human; indeed, they are more astral beings than those of us tethered to the earth.

Far from celestial, and wearing spacesuits that appear to be either the type worn by high altitude test pilots flying experimental planes like the X-15, or Project Mercury suits,[10] Davis's figures are solitary. They lack the intense camaraderie that characterized the Apollo era, when being trapped in a tiny compartment with one or more fellow astronauts for days demanded cooperation and fraternity, and called forth at times surprising affection, captured in mission tape transcripts.[11] For these tragic heroes, there is no mission control to call on, with a voice scratchily transmitted by long distance radio, "Houston, we've had a problem," as the Apollo 13 astronauts did when an oxygen tank exploded, damaging the spacecraft's electrical system.[12] Davis's astronauts do not appear to have any backup. The angles Davis uses to photograph his heroes amplify the vastness of the barrenness surrounding them, and color shifts remind us of both vintage color television and rays of light warped by otherworldly atmospheres.

Yet despite their often beleaguered situations, Davis's *Heroes* have not forsaken hope. They look searchingly at the world around them, often into the soaring sky, never losing faith that there is something else out there, some other form of life, something that will make their travails worthwhile. In Stranded (Chromira C-print), our adventurer, beached on cracked, desiccated ground, looks skyward, stunned by something we cannot see. His horn-rimmed glasses can't protect his eyes from the blinding glare of whatever is above him, its light bright

enough to wash out the color of the earth around him. But even if he has been knocked off his feet, he looks up more in curiosity than alarm. *The Hunter* (gelatin silver print), marooned in a parched scrubland, has nevertheless summoned the courage to remove his glass-bubble helmet to inhale deeply from the cigarette in his gloved fingers. An interplanetary breeze ruffles his hair, and there he stands, a space-age dandy in a silver suit, taking advantage of the situation to enjoy the sunset over the blighted hills. Perhaps most surprising is courageous galactic knight of *Shark Attack* (gelatin silver print), perhaps abandoned by his ship as contrails shoot overhead, who with suit deflated but raygun defiantly held high faces the uncannily floating upside-down shark monster.[13]

In contrast to the breakdowns that seem to plague the *Tragic Heroes*, Davis's *Rocketships*, earthbound as they are, dream of a sleek future in space. Davis's ships (and by Davis's I mean that he sculpted the objects himself), transcend kitsch with their mini-monumentality. Clean lines and elegant proportions show the influence of German V-2 missiles, like many 50s sci-fi rockets. They reference classic science fiction spacecraft, for example the vessel designed to rescue a few humans from certain calamity in the 1951 film *When Worlds Collide*, but their stark simplicity and anthropomorphic quality makes them seem more like futuristic hybrid computer beings than what David Bowie referred to as "tin can[s]."[14] Shot from low angles, the tiny craft, as in *Rocketship, Untitled* (MDF, fiberglass, autopaint) and *Iron Rocket* (iron), stand tall and firm on their pointy legs, so different from the skeletal, frighteningly flimsy-looking struts upon which the Apollo landing module relied for its landing on the moon. Perhaps they are Leonardo-esque contraptions awaiting the proper fuel or mechanics to permit them to soar, prophetically designed before their time. Or, more likely, these cosmic travelers, dwarfed by the vastness around them, have encountered infinitely more immeasurable spaces, and wait stoically, for what, we know not.

The last group of images included in this exhibition come from a portfolio entitled *Tin*, in which the future truly meets the past: Davis has used antiquated photographic processes, including daguerreotypy, wetplate collodion, and tintype, to capture the images of primitive

robots lurching over an uneven surface, what we call UFOs soaring through the air, or pristine flying contraptions turned into specimens before the camera. What antiquarian wouldn't delight in finding such treasures in the back of a shoebox at a flea market? Referencing the blurry photographs that purport to provide evidence for flying saucers, Davis's work transcends a simple vintage aesthetic. Instead, in the case of the saucers captured hurtling through the air (*UFO 2* and *UFO 3*, both wetplate collodion), he creates images that these early media could not actually capture due to their long exposure times, which prohibited the registering of anything moving as quickly as a zippy spacecraft. And if one happened to hover for a few moments, what are the odds of even the most intrepid nineteenth-century photographer having tripod and camera set up and ready to capture such an oddity? He thus reminds us of how photography's apparent realism can play with our dreams. Photography's evident truthfulness makes it one of the best vehicles for creating compelling images of that which does not exist (as far as we know, depending on whom you ask.)

The illusion of the hovering spacecraft of *Tin* brings up another issue associated with space exploration, namely, the fierce and ongoing arguments that the moon landing itself was a hoax.[15] Which, perhaps, raises the question of where in relation to photography do we mark the line between the credible and the false? Or, more pertinently, can a staged photograph tell *a* truth, if not *the* truth? Playing around the stylish edges of vintage, retro, camp, and kitsch, Davis's work deftly avoids cliché by giving us images nostalgic enough that we are stirred by them and in so doing captures both the magical fantasy of outer space exploration that so compels children (even if they can no longer grow up to be astronauts) and perhaps, our earthbound adult disappointment that the magic may be out of reach. That they may be the last of their kind is the ultimate tragedy of Davis's *Heroes*.

[1.] Davis, however, does not; his images rely on no digital manipulation except to correct imperfections such as scratches.

[2.] I am referring, of course, to Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff (*New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), about the Project Mercury astronauts, as well as the 1983 film version.

[3.] I am indebted for this information, and much inspiration for this essay, to the work of Dr. Laura André and her brilliant dissertation *Lunar Nation: The Moon and American Visual Culture, 1957-1972* (Ph.D. diss., UNC-Chapel Hill, 2002), 38.

[4.] Kenneth Chang, "With 'Coolest Job Ever' Winding Down, Astronauts Seek Next Frontier," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2011, Section A, 1. Chang also points out an even sadder truth: the new spaceman will be a cosmic tourist wealthy enough to purchase a spot on one of the spacecraft being developed by private corporations such as Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic.

[5.] In actuality Kennedy-era NASA was notoriously sexist. See André, especially Chapter 3: "Space Suits and Go-Go Boots: Fashioning the Waxing and Waning Body," 107-157.

[6.] A toddler at the time, I nevertheless remember opening the screen door to step out onto the front porch with my father to look at the moon, quite confused because although I could see the astronauts on television, I could not see them from the earth.

[7.] I might add, grammatically incorrect: there should be a comma instead of a semicolon, but this is taken from http://history.nasa.gov/alsj/a11/a11.step.html. Another NASA site is makes the clauses into two separate sentences: http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/missions/index.html. I'm blaming the transcribers, not Commander Armstrong.

[8.] See Los Angeles County's Parks and Recreation site, http://parks.lacounty.info/Parkinfo.asp?URL=cms1_033383.asp&Title=Vasquez. This locale was the site of the fight between Captain Kirk and the Gorn, a humanoid lizard. That the popularity of the original series endures is suggested by the reenactment of this scene on Mythbusters, which debunked the possibility of Kirk's creation of a cannon from found materials in Season 1, Episode 18, entitled "Arena," first broadcast 1/19/1967; see http://www.startrek.com/database_article/arena. For *Mythbusters*: see videos: http://dsc.discovery.com/videos/mythbusters-gorn-cannon-high-speed.html. Aired Dec. 18, 2009. See also Film in America's list of specific episodes, http://www.filminamerica.com/Movies/StarTrek/TheOriginalSeries/.

[9.] See Aldrin, with Wayne Warga, *Return to Earth* (New York: Random House, 1973), in which Aldrin describes the struggles he faced in his post-Apollo life. Evidently Aldrin was not the only astronaut whose life and family were in some ways negatively affected by the entire moon experience. Cited in André, 90.

[10.] I would like to thank Professor John Philbeck of George Washington University for his insight into the props used in Davis's images.

[11.] For example the repeated use of the term "Babe" as a form of endearment, used by Pete Conrad and Dick Gordon on Gemini 11 and Apollo 12, and Tom Stafford and John Young on Apollo 10. See André, 92.

[12.] See http://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/pg2.htm for a transcript.

[13.] My Spring 11 ARTH 341 student LaToya Perkinson noted that it is perhaps appropriate here to recall Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1992, which consists of a shark floating in a tank of formaldehyde, the title of which could give insight into our *Hero*'s state of mind. It's hard too not to see the shark as one hanging from a hook on a pier next to which proud fishermen pose to prove the size of their catch for a photograph.

[14.] Referring of course to "Space Oddity," on the 1972 album of the same name. Major Tom, however, had Ground Control for support.

[15.] Just do a search on "Moon Hoax" on Amazon, and you will find more than 50 results.