

## Time, Space, the Limitlessness of the Imagination—and Abs to Die for

Superannuated visions of the future—the covers and illustrations for old sci-fi pulps and paperbacks—are a prime American collectible, more plentiful than scrimshaw or old quilts, quaint as cigar boxes, full of anecdotal and associational interest, and priced to be competitive with comic books and baseball trading cards. Those who cannot afford the original art can at least amass cartons of old pulp magazines and paperbacks for which the Old Masters—Chesley Bonestell (1888–1986), Earle J. Bergey (1901–1952), Frank R. Paul (1884–1963), et al.—produced their cover paintings and interior line drawings.

The technical quality of this work ranges from sincere and primitive (Earle Bergey’s babes-in-brass-bras covers for *Startling Stories* in the forties), to the chaste astronomical landscapes of Chesley Bonestell, to the lowbrow, high-definition erotic cheesecake of contemporary artists like Boris Vallejo and Frank Frazetta. As collectibles, the better work of Bergey, Bonestell, and Vallejo occupies the same general range—\$7,000 to \$15,000. A Frazetta—the most popular and priciest sci-fi artist—can command \$30,000 and upward (his cover art for a *Vampirella* comic book was auctioned for \$70,000 in 1990), but sci-fi art rarely carries price tags comparable to those found at even mid-level galleries.

In some artists this has provoked a simple and understandable chip-on-the-shoulder resentment. The more confident, like Di Fate himself, the author of *Infinite Worlds*, usually shrug off the chip, but a few develop a kind of compensatory megalomania similar to that of those sf writers who dismiss all other writing but sf as “mundane” and lacking the transcendental value of space opera. Ray Bradbury’s foreword to *Infinite Worlds* is a prime specimen of this form of denial, as Bradbury, the Eternal American Boy, recounts his reaction to a Jasper Johns retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art:

I left with fewer brains than when I arrived. How an artist can be born to live in one of the great centuries of electric-visual-audiosensual

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Review of *Infinite Worlds: The Fantastic Visions of Science Fiction Art*, by Vincent Di Fate.

metaphor and have not even one two-cent stamp of optical surprise stick to his retina flabbers one's gast. I felt as if I had made a lunatic turn into a time alley where the graffiti never knew that Freud, Apple Computer or Carl Sagan were ever born. . . . Suffering bends from lack of some fresh-air image, I fled MOMA and hurled myself into the nearest poster gallery to refill on rockets, marshmallow-suited astronauts, and Mèlès's Moon. . . .

Such confident philistinism has become increasingly rare fun in our era of universal college education, but Bradbury is probably correct in supposing that he speaks (or sees) for the majority, who admire any picture in proportion as it is a magic window offering a high-resolution view of something for which they feel fondness, curiosity, or reverence. The sense of wonder is what sf fandom claims as the genre's special territory, and this corresponds in the visual arts to the Sublime, for which in painting there have been two main channels, eye-popping landscapes and heroic nudes. These continue to be the wares offered by the artists whom Di Fate celebrates.

However, judging by his brief account of the history of sf art, Di Fate is as innocent of earlier versions of the Sublime—indeed, of anything painted before 1930—as any American third-grader. He's heard rumors of da Vinci, seen some reproductions of Bosch, and that's about it for the past, until the premiere of *Rocketship X-M* in 1950. In his own way, he (and most of the artists whose work his book reproduces) seems as authentic a primitive as Grandma Moses or the Siennese of the thirteenth century.

Like those artists, the sf illustrators were perpetuating traditions of imagery and craftsmanship they had inherited from a vanished civilization. Behind the fantastic landscapes of artists like James Gurney (of *Dinotopia* fame) or the outer-space panoramas of John Berkey loom the Babylonian dioramas of John Martin (1789–1854), whose work probably did not impinge on American illustrators except through Martin's influence on Gustave Doré and the set designer of Griffith's *Intolerance*. Time and again, sf artists (and writers) have reinvented the wheel (or cannily infringed on the patent), and an interesting book might be written on that subject. This is not that book.

Like most coffee table books, this is simply a picture album, showing a sampling of the work of a goodly number of sf artists, presented in alphabetical order. There is no information as to the size, medium, date, or present provenance of the works reproduced, and the brief bios of the artists read like the flattest PR boilerplate, as in this numb appreciation of James E. Bama:

Bama's commercial art career encompassed a variety of subjects, and he is regarded as a major figure in the illustration mainstream. His extraordinary ability to paint figures and to render textures influenced dozens of other artists, and the impact of his work is still felt today, many years after his retirement from the field.

Di Fate makes no odious comparisons and creates no invidious distinctions. Everyone on view is like Howard V. Brown (1878-?): "a versatile, highly skilled artist," who emerged as one of the most talented and popular artists in the genre, though from the six *Astounding* covers reproduced, Brown would seem to be a hack of minimal technical competence, derivative ideas, and zero flair.

Despite Di Fate's intransigent blandness, it is possible to wrinkle out some interesting data from the assembled bios—how the more foresightful artists of the genre, like Jim Burns and David Mattingly, were regularly co-opted by Hollywood and thereby ceased to produce collectible art, since the studios owned all they produced; how often, today as in the Renaissance, careers in illustration are a family business carried on by fathers and sons, husbands and wives. But of the dollars-and-cents realities of these artists' lives Di Fate has almost nothing to say.

It might have been interesting to see what the artists themselves look like, but that is a pleasure we are allowed only in the case of Boris Vallejo. The text glosses a Vallejo painting of a lucite figure with Schwarzenegger biceps and torso as the artist himself, posed as a robotic deity for a painting that speaks of time, space, and the limitlessness of the imagination. Well, why not? Things quite as grandiose and no less silly have often been said of Vallejo's great-great-role-model Michelangelo. Painters are not the best spokesmen for their own art, which is why poets and other underemployed writers are hired to hype them in places like *ArtNews*.

An honest appraisal of the pleasures and embarrassments to be obtained from the non-lunar-rock side of sf art would have to take into account the degree to which the artist equivocates or luxuriates in the pornographic element of his art. Frazetta and Vallejo have been commendably up-front in this regard, and their prices among collectors reflect that. But the most audacious and successful of sf illustrators is represented in *Infinite Worlds* only by one postcard-sized reproduction depicting a monster with a head more blatantly phallic than that of Joe Camel. This is the work of an artist not given exhibition space in the book, and one of the few artists about whom Di Fate is snide, the Swiss H. R. Giger. Giger did not illustrate other people's stories, but was the inventor of his own nightmarish fancies, a designer of aliens (including

the *Alien* of cinematic fame) whose every bone and internal organ is a pornographic pun. Giger's vagina-dentata monsters of the 1970s and 1980s are unveilings of the id meaning of the bug-eyed monster of the earlier pulp magazines, and a book of sf art without a selection of Giger's images is like a book about Dutch art with no mention of Rembrandt.

Giger's absence may well be his own choice and not Di Fate's. It's not as though there were an argument being pursued in this book or a historical overview being advanced. There are simply a lot of pictures, clearly reproduced, many on the same scale as when they first served as covers for *Astounding Stories* or illustrations in *Omni*. There are enough prime specimens and ho-hum hackwork in all categories—ancient camp, lunar landscapes, gruesome monsters, soft-core porn, gaga gore, and lyric whimsy—to make me wish that someday someone might write the text that should have been part of the package.