

An Echo In Outer Space

Isobel Parker Philip journeys into space to discover the bold proclamations of **Adam Norton's** *Interplanetary Society*...

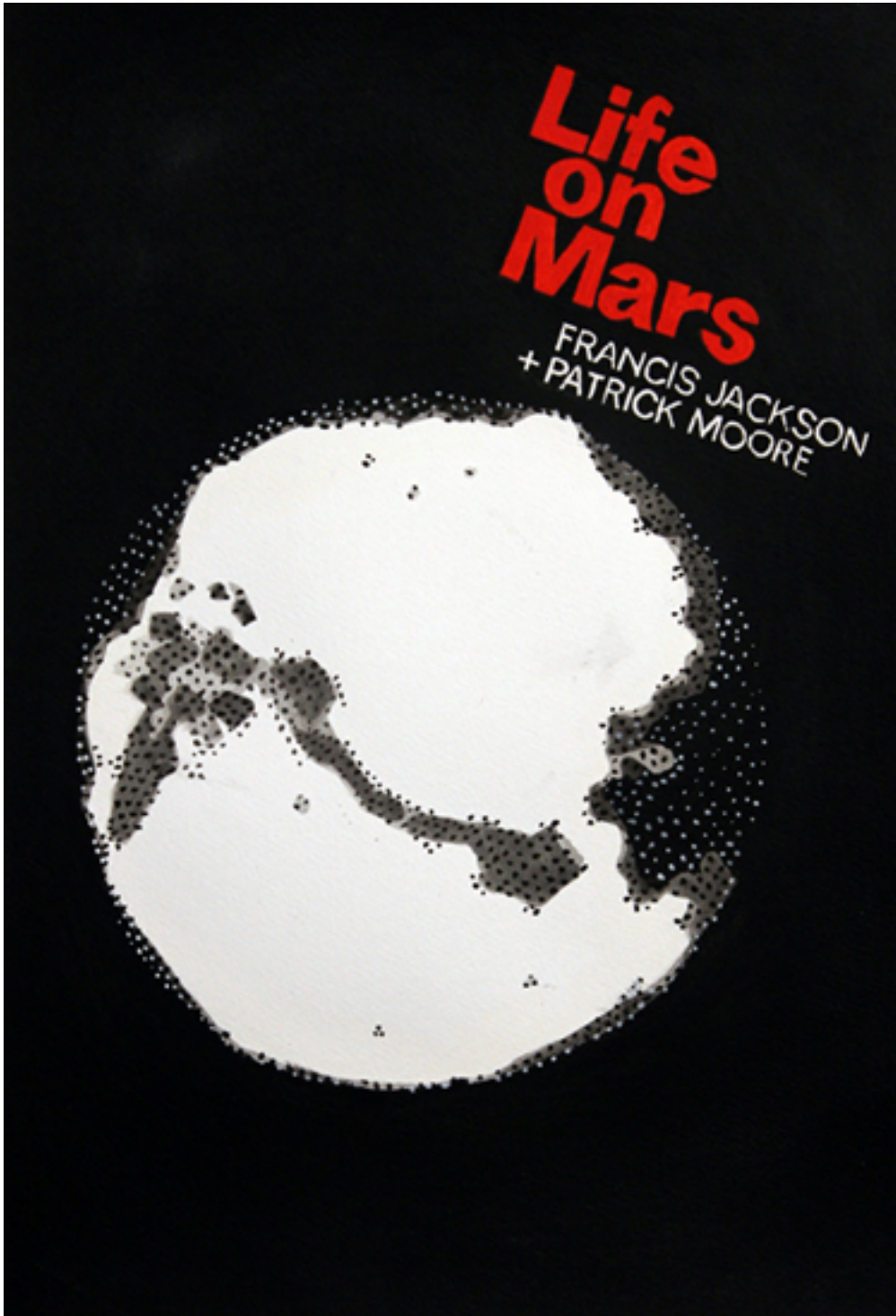
The phrase 'conquest of space' is repeated three times in **Adam Norton's** exhibition *Interplanetary Society* at Gallery 9. Making its initial appearance on a movie poster that has been meticulously reproduced and displayed alongside paintings of book covers in the first room, the phrase gives voice to Norton's thematic agenda. Announcing a preoccupation with the utopian fantasies of space travel and interplanetary empire building, it becomes a clarion call that reverberates throughout the entire show.



Adam Norton, *Conquest of Space*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 137 x 183 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery 9, Sydney.

The other titles in Norton's library of painted books and posters convey a similar sentiment, among them *The Flying Saucers Are Real*, *Man Made Moons*, *UFOs Key to the New Age* and *Das Marsprojekt*. Amassed from the archives of rocket science, pseudo-science and science fiction literature from the Cold War era, they feed off and memorialize the mythology of Outer Space. But all this is pure facadism. These 'books' have no text and are unable to substantiate the enthusiastic proclamations emblazoned across their covers. But is that the point? A confrontation with images that stand as empty promises, the residual traces of books that have been stripped of their innards and therefore their function?

Following the thread of the exhibition down the corridor and into the other rooms, one begins to realize that something else is going on here. The painted book covers have been enlarged. With these bigger works on canvas Norton does not sacrifice detail, going as far as including the 25¢ price mark on **Ray Bradbury's** *The Martian Chronicles*. Here, the playfulness of the first room is woven into a kind of authoritative, propagandistic rhetoric. The books have become billboards.



Adam Norton, *Life on Mars*, 2012, vinyl on paper, 50 x 34 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery 9

In the third and final section of the exhibition the book covers have been deconstructed. All that remains is the title. It is here that the phrase 'conquest of space' reappears in two

identical paintings of different dimensions. Plucked from its original context, but retaining its typographical identity, it transcends its connection with material reality to become pure message.

Norton has abstracted away from the real by transforming pre-existing fragments of text into free-standing manifestos. This transformation, carried out across the different rooms of the gallery, serves as the narrative arc of the exhibition. More important than the simple gesture of reproduction and simulation (itself a gentle yet calculated nod to that well trodden trope of the science fiction genre) is the movement – that threaded passage – from object to idea.

By isolating and enlarging these book titles, Norton allows them to reach beyond the confines of the dust jacket and participate in the mechanisms of myth making. They are animated, entrusted with the task of perpetuating the metaphysical curiosity and utopian imperatives of the Cold War space race. Relics of an ideological directive that has tapered off into little more than a whisper in recent years, they are caught in a temporal schism. They address the future with the language of the past.

It is with this in mind that we can understand the phrase 'conquest of space' as not so much a mantra, but an echo; the echo of an object but also the echo of a forgotten future. It is this trans-historical logic, coupled with Norton's masterful command of a borrowed aesthetic (specifically the typographic idiosyncrasies of mid-century graphic design), that charms and delights.

Isobel Parker Philip, March 5 2013