

ARTFORUM

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Peter Stichbury

Tracy Williams, Ltd. New York

"In the afternoon of April 6, 1966, one of the most famous UFO cases in the world occurred over a school in Westall, Australia," begins a passage on a handout that accompanied "Anatomy of a Phenomenon," New Zealand painter Peter Stichbury's recent exhibition. "Pupils and teachers were told not to talk about what they had seen, and the chemistry teacher, Barbara Robbins, who had taken photos with her camera, was forced by authorities to hand it over." In Stichbury's portrait of the woman, Ms. Robbins is depicted as an oval-faced blonde with haunted, wide-set eyes that suggest the persistence of a traumatic memory-and give her something of an otherworldly appearance. This particular look is a longtime signature of the artist's, and in this exhibition, he explained it by asserting that those pictured were all "experiencers"-individuals who have supposedly had a close encounter with aliens or their craft.



Peter Stichbury, *Barbara Robbins*, 2014
Photo: Jason Mandella

At Tracy Williams, Ltd., Barbara Robbins, Westall High (all works 2014) was joined by four other portraits ranged along one wall. These faced off against five black-and-white paintings based on published photographs of UFOs, and a sixth such pair hung together in a separate space. Picturing mostly saucer-like shapes-and, in one case, the elongated inverted teardrop of a weather balloon-the UFO series made the exhibition's basis in the culture of sighting, encounter, and abduction visually explicit. The images' internal ambiguity-the geometric simplicity of their forms and near-featurelessness of their aerial backgrounds make them appear virtually abstract-not only established an effective contrast with the portraits but also sparks a dialogue around the nature of perception, representation, and reportage that extends far beyond the particularities of alien-spotting.

The portraits in Stichbury's previous exhibition at this gallery, 2012's "Superfluous Man," shared the current crop's slicked-back hair and smooth skin, symmetrical features, and glazed expressions; on that earlier occasion, the artist linked his subjects' apparent torpor to the existential angst associated with the nineteenth-century Russian literary archetype from which the show borrowed its title. And two years before that, in "The Proteus Effect," he tethered the unreality of his steely, Lempicka-esque visages to the robotic idealization of digital avatars. Although his style remains consistent from project to project, this continual thematic reinvention has allowed the artist's oeuvre to gradually accumulate an absorbing breadth and complexity.

Perhaps Stichbury's work is linked, however, not only via explanation but also via continuing mystery. Just as the UFO phenomenon is shrouded in layers of disinformation, conspiracy theory, and myth that no amount of investigative reporting or academic debunking seems able to conclusively penetrate, so too do Stichbury's portraits depict the citizens of an alternate reality that hovers just out of reach, visible but partially suppressed. The stony-faced likes of Milton Torres, a military pilot who was ordered to open fire on a UFO over England, and Gordon Cooper, an astronaut and repeat experiencer, confront the viewer with a seeming candor that ultimately repels helpful analysis. The photo paintings too are self-consciously frustrating, offering only tantalizing glimpses, never the longed-for head-on view. The UFO phenomenon is real in the sense that it continues to generate reportage and debate (not to mention entertainment), but, as with the "phenomenon" of art, its interpretation is unfixed, perhaps unfixable. It is, like the photographs on Barbara Robbins's government-confiscated camera, removed from common view.

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