

## Russell Crotty's 'Remote and Curious Worlds'

Imaginary Properties on Real Exoplanets

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Looking for a new home? Although we tend to take this question to refer to existing properties located on this planet, there are plenty of people for whom the search for new habitations extends well beyond the surface of the earth, or even this solar system. In *Remote and Curious Worlds*, an exhibition of recent bio-resin collages now on view at the Porch Gallery in Ojai, artist Russell Crotty has found an intriguing answerable form for advertising imaginary properties on real exoplanets. Although some outliers get their own unique titles, the majority of the pieces are numbered elements in a series called "Skirting the Habitable Zone," the title a play on the scientific obsession with identifying heavenly bodies that could potentially support human life.

Each of the 26 works on display began as a standing form drawn with an ink-dipped stick on a sheet of paper. From there the artist builds these fanciful structures by adding amorphous colors as background and inserting intricate small drawings within the multiple chambers described by the initial form. The surface of the piece then gets an additional set of layers, the first made of clear plastic scraps salvaged from the recycle bin, and the second and subsequent layers provided by fiberglass mesh and bio-resin, an environmentally friendly, nontoxic clear substance derived from pine sap. The finished works hang on the wall like paintings, but their surfaces bubble and bulge in unexpected ways, the multiple clear layers at once protecting and distorting the images they reveal.

Crotty recently completed a multi-year stint as artist-in-residence at the Institute of Arts and Sciences at UC Santa Cruz, where he paired his own works based on extensive astronomical observations with objects from the collection of the Lick Observatory in an immersive show about astronomy and history called *Look Back in Time*. In *Remote and Curious Worlds*, his considerable visual knowledge of the universe tangos with his often humorous take on the range of responses evoked by visions of deep space and deep time.

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Skirting The Habitable by Russell Crotty

Courtesy Photo

Given this specific context for the work, it's important to recognize how little it resembles more conventional science fiction. The bio-resin finish has some of the gloss of a fine surfboard, but the images beneath have little to do with the hard-edged photorealism of cinematic space westerns. The color choices and compositional techniques at work in "The Type Zero Problem" (2018) or "Martian Paradox 24:3" (2018) are closer to Paul Klee than to George Lucas. In fact, Klee's 1922 painting "Twittering Machine," in which birds perch on a line that ends in an ominous hand crank suggests one of the recurring themes of the "Skirting the Habitable Zone" series, which is the complex interdependence and fusion of the natural and industrial worlds. Crotty's absurdist condos, with their landscape-like interiors, are as likely to contain puffing smokestacks as soothing nocturnes. What's outside is in and what's inside is out, these structures seem to say. What's more, the biomorphic appendages that occasionally sprout, bladder-like, from them imply mysterious and unavoidable excesses.

It's all very much by way of navigating between two monochromatic points of view on the future. On one side, there's what Crotty calls the "doomosphere," a techno-continuation of the great American jeremiad, a rhetorical genre in which this old world is perpetually in a hell of a fix. By contrast, this show might be seen as a smiling, slightly skeptical but still affectionate embrace of what Crotty calls the "hopium," an optimistic take on where we are headed as a species and a culture. In the meantime, poised between the two, we can enjoy these remarkable works of art, evidence that we continue to skirt the habitable zone from the habitable side.

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Russell Crotty's *Remote and Curious Worlds* runs through December 16 at Porch Gallery (310 Matilija St., Ojai). See [porchgalleryojai.com](http://porchgalleryojai.com).