

Myths of the Near Future – Andrew Cattanach

During a short interview with Craig Coulthard ahead of his solo exhibition *Magical Thinking* at Sierra Metro, Edinburgh, the artist discussed his process, influences and source material. The conversation centred on the images sub-titled 'Magical Thinking', which reference Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and Pictish stones, and how, through specific techniques – some graphic and some painterly – Coulthard combines disparate subject matter (17th to 19th-century Japanese popular art and ancient monumental stones from Scotland) in a way that is both sympathetic and disjunctive.

Employing the playfulness of surrealism and the straight-talking candour of pop art, Coulthard has created what he describes as something 'between diagram and dream'. They are diagrams in the sense they are graphically direct, and yet, like dreams, they are mysterious. The objects in the paintings traverse time and space: Pictish stones materialise in the Japanese countryside, implicated in the drama of their new surroundings – forest fires, an ominous mist, a vacated campfire.

One can't help but draw parallels with Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film's mysterious black monolith, which first appears in the movie's opening sequence, is similarly implicated in the dramatic changes of its newfound environment. After materialising in a prehistoric landscape, the monolith seems to initiate, or at least inspire, human evolution. We never meet the monolith's makers or discover their motives; we only know of their influence – their ability to change the world and put humankind on course for discovering the magic of the universe.

Little is known of Pictish stones or the individuals who made them. The monuments, many of which are engraved with symbols, have been discovered mostly in Fife and North East Scotland. While some are clearly gravestones, others have no clear function and may be signifiers of status, territory and/or worship. The symbols likewise remain mysterious and often retain the descriptive names once given them by researchers, such as Z-rod, V-rod, triple disc and crescent.

Due to their obscurity, Pictish stones, like the monolith in *2001*, are abstract historical markers of human occupation on Earth. And as with all such monumental gestures, the stones point to a time beyond our stewardship. They will no doubt outlast our period on Earth.

The stones in Coulthard's *Magical Thinking* paintings occupy a world devoid of human life, mutely watching on as the Earth variously floods and burns: they appear from behind a sinister mist; they

narrowly escape a deluge; they are engulfed in the flames and smoke of blazing vegetation. If Kubrick's monolith marks a point of departure for humankind, Coulthard's stones reveal the end. As the artist puts it himself, the paintings represent 'a future space where only traces of humans remain'. The paintings, despite their historic source material, tell us nothing of beginnings and origins. They are myths of the near future.