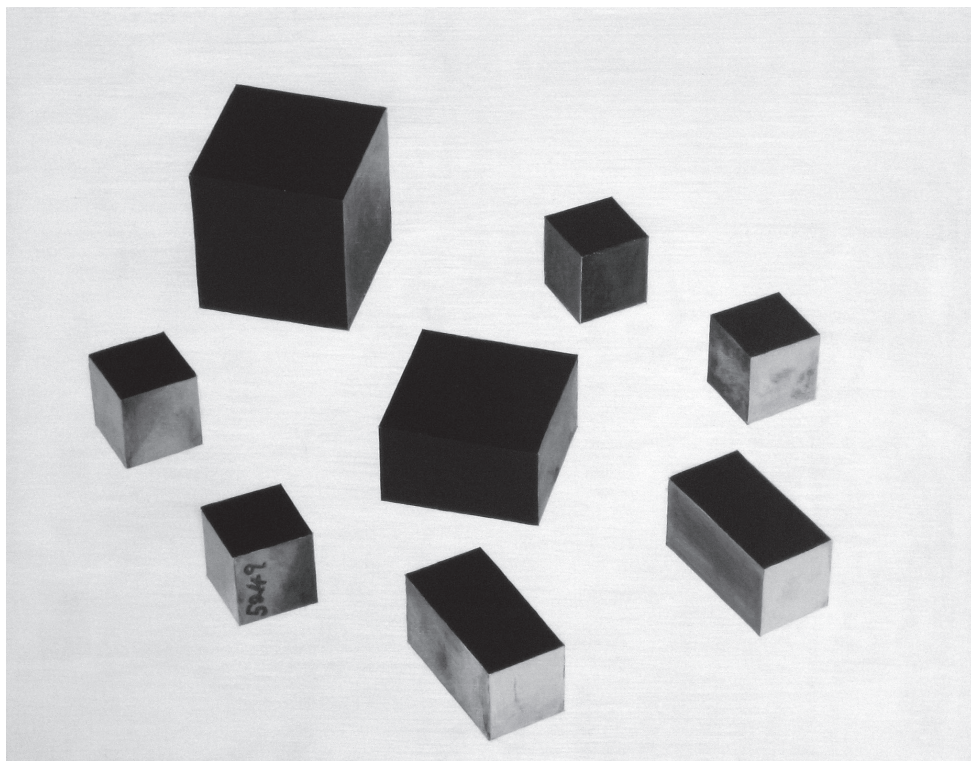


# BIG SCIENCE



ADAM NORTON

## ADAM NORTON: A MAVERICK WHO MIGHT SURVIVE

Adam Norton does not believe in official histories. He is in fact 'fed up with believing the official lines on things' and this sentiment informs almost all of the work he produces. His work often refers to the wide-eyed technological innocence of the 1950s to the 1970s—a period of pioneering investigations, of Big Science<sup>1</sup>, during which sights were set firmly on the remaining boundaries of the known universe. With all land above sea level discovered and colonised, curiosity mounted, progress gained pace and man proved beyond (most) doubt that he could survive a trip through space to the moon.

The advances of science did not however reveal the black hole in which the 'unexplained' remained hiding. Some people took comfort in the idea that we may not be alone. That the void left by diminished religious belief might yet be filled with a new race, and unknown worlds full of advanced sciences and higher consciousnesses. Despite conventional science rejecting the concept of life in outer space, perhaps there are philosophical parallels between the two discourses. It is interesting to compare the paths we forge in science, alongside the civilisations we envisage on the 'other side'. How often do we work towards the same levels of harmony or expansiveness in our earthbound lives that we project onto anonymous alien civilisations? In some ways, both the cult of UFOlogy, and the shape of science we create are both 'leaps of the imagination', and Norton suggests that 'maybe they are a sort of key into how the imagination works'. That being the case, what does this say about where we allow our aspirations to wander? Why does our progress not mirror the imagined utopia of other worlds? And how is it that the ravages of modernism are already worming their way into outer space in the form of war, pollution and commercialisation?<sup>2</sup>

One of the ways Norton approaches the hallowed and seemingly impenetrable halls of science is to look for the human element in these situations. He locates glitches in the products and ideologies of science, drawing out the humour or the real-life implications of science alongside domesticity. After all, 'Big Science is an inevitable stage in the development of science and, for better or worse, it is here to stay. What we must do is learn to live with Big Science.'<sup>3</sup>

Science, in turn, is not immune to the trends and cycles of popular culture and mythology. It is in fact a work of fantasy which is considered the first serious scientific treatise on lunar astronomy<sup>4</sup>, and concurrently the first sci-fi story. Johannes Kepler's *Somnium*, published in 1634, sees the story's protagonist transported to the moon by supernatural forces and describes the view looking back to earth. Norton also points out that sci-fi folklore often acts as a precursor for real-life exploration and research, as scientists conduct government experiments into teleportation and time travel, while UFOlogists claim 'reverse engineering' from alien crafts stored secretly in 'Area 51' is being used to refine earthbound technology. UFOlogy is largely dismissed by mainstream science, but who can say how many closet believers reside behind NASA's streamlined space services: they named the first Space Shuttle the *Enterprise*, and gleefully played the *Star Trek* theme tune during its launch ceremony.

Norton makes work about rockets and meteorites, improbable crop circles, retro nuclear technology and how to survive in the event of finding oneself in an inhospitable situation. He can teach us—in the event of the world gone mad or technology turned bad—how to make suitcases float, how to live for a fortnight within a wardrobe, and how to hide in the foothills of Everest, the sandy enclave of Cronulla Beach or the pages of a lined A4 sheet. His work is comforting, it is useful and it comes from a genuine and beguiling paranoia. He doesn't believe us to be safe, or 'alone' and he will continue stocking supplies, stitching the camo and reversing the heels of his shoes in readiness for the invasion.

Clare Lewis, 2008

Clare Lewis is a Sydney-based writer and curator. She co-founded *Terminus Projects* ([www.terminusprojects.org](http://www.terminusprojects.org)) a site-specific arts organisation and works as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

1. A phrase coined by Alvin M. Weinberg in 'Impact of Large-Scale Science on the United States', *Science*, 21 July 1961, vol.134, no. 3473, p.161.

2. China, and then subsequently America, flexed their military muscles by blowing up one of their own redundant satellites in orbit where plans are already underway to develop remote precision bombing to target any location for destruction within one hour. Space junk is now acknowledged as an aspect of pollution as generations of rocket and satellite fragments orbit the Earth. Meanwhile Richard Branson hopes to launch 'Virgin Galactic', the first commercial flights to space by 2009-10. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/14/science/14cnd-satellite.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/14/science/14cnd-satellite.html?_r=1&oref=slogin) > accessed 16 May 2008.

3. *op cit* Weinberg, p.162.

4. [www.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somnium_(Kepler)), <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somnium\\_\(Kepler\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somnium_(Kepler))> accessed 10 May 2008.

[www.adamnorton.net](http://www.adamnorton.net)

Cover image: Adam Norton, *Uranium*, 2008, acrylic on board, 38 x 49 cm