

Sam Griffin

Sam Griffin's drawings are as he remarks, "intended as points of confluence, where liminal and contested belief systems intersect with language, architecture and memory". His most recent series of work, titled 'Oranur', re-creates esoteric historical scenarios, combining both arcane rituals with archaic language, and folklore or magic with scientific invention. Across the body of work, different scenarios are created where fact with myth become blurred or are seen as far from being mutually exclusive.

Reproduced here, the drawing 'Ankh-f-n-Khonsu' is concerned with competing concepts of Utopia. Specifically, Griffin's interest lies in how different societies across time and space have developed coherent belief structures which rationalise the desire to attain a state of grace, or to progress towards an ideal which is ultimately unattainable. The central motif of 'Ankh-f-n-Khonsu' is the Neolithic burial mound 'Maes Howe' in Orkney, built in 2800BC and one of the few remaining pre-historic works of architecture left on British soil. The site, as the artist notes, is also of special "psychogeographic resonance" having been central to Scottish folklore for centuries, and the site of varied divination rituals. However, rather than presenting the site reverently as a site of World Heritage Status listed by UNESCO, of primary interest to tourists or archaeologists, Griffin repositions it as "a site of primordial hedonism". The perspective the artist presents us with is of a frontal view looking towards the central aperture to the tomb, to the chamber inside. The chamber of which has long been known to function as an architectural calendar, as well as a site of transcendence: on the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year) the midwinter sunset illuminates the inner chamber along with the runic inscriptions inside.

The mythic qualities of the landscape are compounded by the artist's inclusion of references to the scientist, psychoanalyst and inventor Wilhelm Reich. Griffin's curiosity with forgotten ideologies, arcane rituals, and fantastical cosmologies find a particular focus in Reich's work. Crossing conventional boundaries of discipline, Reich's interests overlap between science, religion, psychoanalysis and utopian design. Reich's fame and notoriety rest upon his alleged discovery of 'orgone' energy – a supposed primordial cosmic force that permeates all living matter and is responsible for weather patterns, gravity, the formation of galaxies and animals' expressions of love and sexuality. Rather than merely being content to identify such chemical and biological structures, Reich attempted to create universal palliatives through modern design. Being part of Freud's progressive circle in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th century, Reich's over-riding aim might be seen as the amelioration of all problems, of uniting all humanity by alleviating psychic disorders. Reich became intentionally famous in the 1950s, having relocated to the USA, for his designs for devices to capture and store this invisible but universally present energy, for use for medicinal or climate-altering purposes. The 'orgone accumulator' and the 'cloudbuster' machines occupy a peculiar position between science and the occult, between progressive Enlightenment thought and prehistoric mythologies. The cloudbuster is, like Maes Howe, a device or machine to harness meteorological forces. In Reich's scheme, when pointed skywards the cloudbuster manipulates streams of invisible "orgone energy" present in the atmosphere, thus allowing an individual to prevent rain. By splicing Reich's works with those of Neolithic builders, Griffin queries what the relationship is between the built environment and deeper unconscious forces. For him, architecture is inextricably linked to ideology; it is a kind of fiction or repository of myth in which our imaginative impulses are given shape.

Griffin's subjects are not merely represented two-dimensionally, however; the installation of his works elaborate upon our reading of them. As well as presenting subjects of mythic power, Griffin's works are themselves intended to be both talismanic and yet pathetic – or as he remarks, "loitering on the cusp of being concrete and fantastic". The internal acoustics of Maes Howe have exhibited the ability to increase the psychological impact of the human voice in compliance with the principle of "Helmholtz Resonance" – the phenomenon of air resonance in a cavity linked to the production of beta-endorphins in the human brain. Griffin's drawings are similarly accompanied by a sonic experiment designed to make the gallery reverberate at a particular frequency: we encounter a single note at 111hz endlessly sustained. Theoretically at least, visitors should similarly experience both euphoria and have their cell regeneration stimulated. Here, Griffin's own work becomes a 'portal' to accessing primordial energy and a vehicle to transport consciousness to a state of grace or ecstasy. The gallery itself becomes a kind of Reichian energy-chamber to restore psychic equilibrium.

In another work in the series, 'Platform 10', Griffin proposes a resurrection of Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, a Brythonic tribe that resided in what is now East Anglia. Now seen as a folk hero, she led a revolt against the occupying Roman Forces who governed the province under the command of the emperor Nero. Having fought the forces of Governor General Seutonius Paulinus at the Battle of Watling Street in AD 61, legend has it that she took her own life by drinking from a poisoned chalice and is rumoured to be buried underneath platform 10 of King's Cross Station. 'Platform 10' exploits the farcical disparity between the historical canon that surrounds Boudica and the banality of her eventual resting place. The original indigenous leader of the anti-imperialist movement, Boudica now finds herself entombed under the ponderous footfall of London commuters. In 'Platform 10' Griffin uses symbols from the pre-historic Icenic or Oghams alphabet to call attention to Boudica's plight, constructing the runic pattern: 'She lies sleeping under the feet of slaves'.

'Ankh-f-n-Khonsu', pencil and gold leaf on paper, 2006, from the series 'Oranur'