

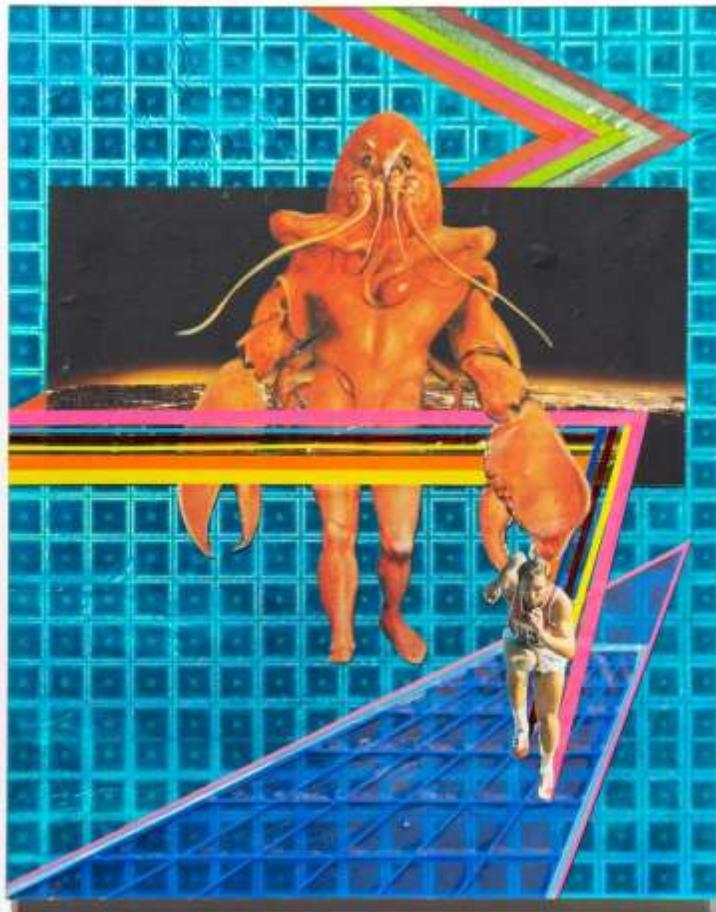
# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Kitschy Iconography Pulled from the Depths of Pop Culture

Delano Dunn caps off his Project for Empty Space residency with the multi-layered, mixed-media exhibition, *Dreams of Fire and Starshine* filled with delightfully saccharine, pulpy, images of smashed and smelted pop culture data.

[Kurt McVey](#) August 1, 2018



Delano Dunn, "The Lonely Run (Remember Why You Left)" (2017), vinyl, tape, cellophane, and paper on plexiglass, 15 x 12 inches (all images courtesy of Project for Empty Space)

“When you’re in it, you can’t really see the *full picture*,” says the Los Angeles-born [Delano Dunn](#), who is capping off a year-long artist-in-residence program at New Jersey’s crowning contemporary art jewel, [Project For Empty Space](#) (PES), with the stellar, maddeningly layered exhibition, *Dreams of Fire & Starshine*.



*Dreams of Fire & Starshine* installation view

Dunn is talking about his show, but more specifically about the elusive through line that unites its three distinct chapters: “Jane Crow,” “Everlasting Twilight,” and “Where Neon Bends.” But this musing on perspective (or its lack) can also be experienced glitching through a manic episode initiated by contemplating one’s size with respect to the infinite vastness of the known multiverse. Over the last year in his studio, Dunn, who is candid about his struggles with depression, has filled his head with literary treasures, historical cheat codes and pulpy, pop culture junk. He has cracked his skull open like a piñata to make delightfully saccharine, mixed-media works with the scattered, scooped-up, smashed, and smelted intellectual data.



Delano Dunn, "Stanton v. Stanton" (2018), wallpaper, spray paint, and plexi glass on board, 48 x 48 inches

"Right before the show opened (May 30), I realized I was communicating a lot of information, and it just wasn't really connecting," says Dunn. To be fair, when an artist strives for something considerably more "full picture" — fatherhood, childhood, quantum realities, the ever-evolving law of the land, art, music, film, nostalgia — as opposed to, let's say, a visual essay on intersectional blackness, there's plenty of room for self-doubt and confusion. "When the show gets hung, it's almost like the film editing process, when you actually discover that all the threads do in fact connect."

In February 2017, Dunn put on a show called [No One Can Be This Tomorrow](#) at the now defunct, but once excellent Long Gallery in Harlem. Though the exhibition dealt with the difficult subject matter of slavery and a series of scarring false promises given to the African-American community after the Emancipation Proclamation, its message was still a bit easier to grasp — or expected. That show’s curator, Jasmine Wahi, a founder and co-director of PES, disagreed with [the swaggerific](#) and haunting decree put forth in that previous show’s title. She thought that Dunn, or at least an incarnation of his future-self, could be that greater man of tomorrow.



Delano Dunn, “Last of The New Wave Riders” (2017)

“I had a concern that people wouldn’t want to see this work,” says Dunn, who has instead focused on kitschy pop iconography culled from the depths of his subconscious, despite PES’s penchant for work that addresses pertinent socio-political issues. “This has more of a feminist tone, and very few images of African Americans. It’s more about women. It was a transition.”

Dunn was able to step out of his tumultuous head with the support of his wife, the award-winning photographer and SVA educator, [Anna Ogier-Bloomer](#), and their five-year-old daughter, Violet, whose birth placed the weight of our volatile world right on her father’s sensitive shoulders. Luckily, Wahi (who also teaches at

SVA) and PES co-founder Rebecca Jampol delighted in providing the time, space, resources, and guidance to facilitate Dunn's exhibition.



*Dreams of Fire & Starshine installation view*

“Rebecca and I are both floored by the level of openness and vulnerability in this particular show,” says the fan-wielding Wahi. “Delano exposed himself to a public audience in a way that is antithetical to our stereotypical expectation of men’s emotional openness. I think that this exhibition is one of the most conceptually complex, cerebral, and personally insightful that we’ve presented.”

In the section, “Jane Crow,” Dunn leans on the emergent cultural hero, associate Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the ACLU, and the Women’s Rights Initiative to illustrate legal precedents throughout history that have, as he says, “leveled the playing field.” Dunn constructs thick, totemic, glimmering assemblages (sculpture meets collage) bathed in layers of resin. Each work represents a landmark court case that advanced women’s rights in the United States. “I wanted to make them the same way I made court cases in the past, but I became enamored by Ginsberg’s process, that they couldn’t be flat,” says Dunn. “Her approach was so dynamic. It was about three-dimensional thinking.”



*Dreams of Fire & Starshine* installation shot

“Everlasting Twilight” touches on what Dunn considers his biggest failure, “...thinking that I, for some ridiculous reason, could change the world and my daughter wouldn’t have to face the same old bullshit, that she wouldn’t get sexually harassed or held back simply by her gender.” This series reconsiders the notion of “a crisis in masculinity” and repackages it as a welcome intervention and an appeal for conscious adaptation.

[Naomi Alderman](#)’s 2017 bestseller [The Power](#) served as a major thematic reference. In the book, women evolve to shoot projectile energy out of their hands and become the physically dominant sex. “This leads to men scrambling over what their new place is, which includes a lot of hostility towards women,” says Dunn. “It also showed me that power inevitably corrupts. It’s not about the gender.”



Delano Dunn, "Then It Was a Summer Night" (2018), paper, vinyl, tape, spray paint, and cellophane on plexiglass 35 x 24 inches

The last series, "Where Neon Bends," "... is me now trying to materialize this idea that women come from the future," Dunn explains. Each work is an illuminating moment. "Spreading this joy, this new beginning, this empowerment," he continues, "as I start to make them, however, they slowly start to get more sinister, which led me to read [Animal Farm](#), which is just about power."

Dunn read ten books in total during his residency, but also spent a lot of time listening to a specific playlist built on a foundation of Pink Floyd, The Eagles, and Donald Fagen, one of the founding members of Steely Dan. The show's title, *Dreams of Fire & Starshine*, is a line from Fagen's "True Companion," a song that was also featured on the soundtrack for the trippy, adult, animated film [Heavy Metal](#). "Just beyond the troubled skyways young men dream of fire and starshine," Fagen croons.



*Dreams of Fire & Starshine* installation shot

“When I listen to ‘Hotel California,’ it depicts this distinct moment in the late ‘70s, early ‘80s that reminds me of LA,” claims Dunn. “It’s bubbly, but dark under there.” In *The Nightfly*, Fagen’s first solo album, Dunn claims the musician is “... talking about a 1950s vision of what the future could be, but as the album goes on, you realize none of this stuff was going to happen. He got it totally wrong. It was too optimistic and utopian.”

Dunn even thought of calling his show “Can You Feel It?” after the classic Jackson 5 video, reimagining them as an all-women group with a tyrannical matriarch. Dunn even turned PES’s in-house gift shop into an immersive, experiential installation he’s calling “The Last of the New Wave Riders,” which is based on a song of the same title by [Todd Rundgren](#)’s band [Utopia](#) (ironically enough). The pulsating, red-light-saturated room, which recalls [The Masque of the Red Death](#), looms ominously while The Eagles’ “The Last Resort” and Pink Floyd’s “Have a Cigar” play on a loop. Dunn explains,

The room is the end of hope and the first sign of the “bounce back,” a theory in quantum mechanics that claims the universe is a result of a bounce back from a rapid contraction of a [Planck star](#)/black hole, rather than a big bang. It’s the signal that the revolution is over, and the grand design is not what was hoped for.



*Dreams of Fire & Starshine* installation shot

As you can probably tell, there's quite a bit to chew on in this excellent show. It's an invitation into the mind of a man, an artist, a father, an African-American contemplating his role in the universe and bucking up against Black male tropes and expectations: what music to listen to, what to read, how to act, what to wear, what to make. This exhibition is a reminder that at least since the emergence of Homo sapiens, men and women have needed and wanted each other to function and thrive. To survive has meant sharing power and responsibility within this cosmic miracle. *Dreams of Fire & Starshine*, though more harrowing and controversial than its vibrant neon aesthetics would lead you to believe, is not at all what you'd ask from an artist, but is certainly everything he could possibly give you.

[Dreams of Fire & Starshine](#) is on display at *Project for Empty Space* (2 Gateway Center, Newark, NJ) through August 10.

McVey, Kurt. "Kitchy Iconography Pulled From the Depths of Pop Culture." *Hyperallergic*, 1 August, 2018. [online]