

The image of a ship is never singular. It evokes the previous arrivals and departures of other vessels in time, bearing a cargo of cultural references recurrent in history, myth and prophecy. For Michel Foucault, the ship articulated a space of difference, a *heterotopia*, a mirror of our world, yet one paradoxically external to our conventional space and time: the vessel is a floating microcosm, dislocated from any particular site.¹ The ship and its contents shift continually from port to port, caught in a perpetual state of transformation. Because its itineraries change constantly, the ship's image implies often-conflicting possibilities, ranging from fortune and discovery to loss and cultural annihilation. It is no wonder that the vessel has served, as Foucault argued, as a "reservoir for the imagination" since the epochal advent of European expansion.



(Fig. 1) Mathis Gasser, *Inhabitants*, oil on canvas, 2017



(Fig. 2) Mathis Gasser, *Inhabitants*, plaster sculpture, 2017



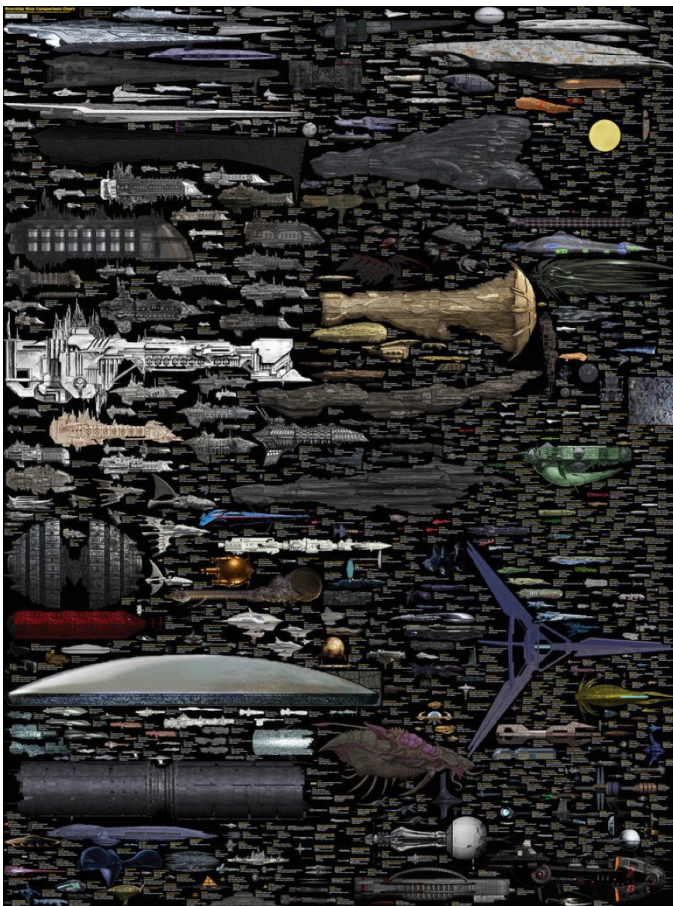
(Fig. 3) *Inhabitants* (detail)

Canvas and sculpture reverberate against each other, awakening layered visions of the vessel from different fictional spaces and historical epochs. By their very title, *Inhabitants* point to the travellers of manifold locales, from land to sea to cosmos. The ship itself is a threshold between worlds, a contact zone for communities across time. Thus the vessel is not the repository for one imagination, but many. The ship's image always carries multiple histories; hopes and desires mingle with catastrophe and annihilation, shifting within different periods and cultures. Gasser's montage of two mediums—sculpture and painting—places us at the crossroads of these perspectives. He exposes the ship's inhabitants and its beholders to the risk and reward of the traveling craft.

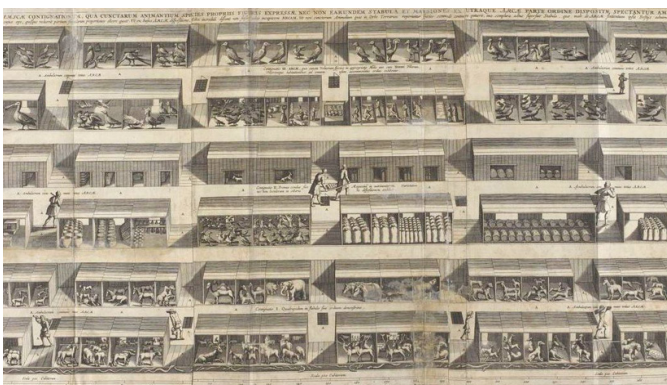
Gasser's painted canvas derives from a digital image, posted by the alias *DirkLoechel* on the website *DeviantArt* (fig. 4). The so-called *Starship Size Comparison Chart* diagrams interplanetary ships from different realms of the science fiction universe, including film, animation, role-play and video games. The Chart is itself the product of its online community, a kind of wiki built and edited according to users' posted feedback, cataloguing fictional vessels with measured accuracy. Each starship in the Chart appears in side-view, mimicking aeronautic and even biological overviews, accompanied by a label, which references its name, fictional universe as well as its possible metrical size. *DirkLoechel's* chart shows indeed an obsession with real-life scaling, indicating an equivalency between pixel and meter. The inclusion of the «real world» International spaceship ISS as a comparison for scale offers yet another bridge between fictional and real realms, reinforcing the incommensurability and immensity of other starships within the chart. *DirkLoechel's* project reflects the descriptive pleasure of sci-fi and utopian literature, applying

What is carried across these times and places? The moving vessel conceals the life forms traveling inside of it, delaying the exposure of identities and intentions that are sometimes utterly unknown. Bernhart Siegart has argued that the ship's image engenders a confluence of gazes: those of its occupants and those who behold it from afar.² Mathis Gasser's two works, both entitled *Inhabitants*, call forth the complex relationship between vessel and figure. His large oil-on-canvas painting features a colossal fleet of different starships (fig. 1), their side-views all meticulously ordered in taxonomic detail, crowding the black void. Meanwhile, his sculpted group of white-plaster women gaze upward,

standing upon a miniature town (fig. 2), its backside encompassing a small generic toy sailing ship (fig. 3). Canvas and sculpture reverberate against each other, awakening layered visions of the vessel from different fictional spaces and historical epochs. By their very title, *Inhabitants* point to the travellers of manifold locales, from land to sea to cosmos. The ship itself is a threshold between worlds, a contact zone for communities across time. Thus the vessel is not the repository for one imagination, but many. The ship's image always carries multiple histories; hopes and desires mingle with catastrophe and annihilation, shifting within different periods and cultures. Gasser's montage of two



(Fig. 4) DirkLoechel, *Starship Size Comparison Chart*, digital image, 2014-17



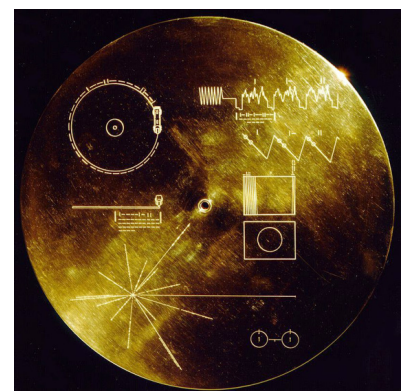
(Fig. 5) Athanasius Kircher, *Arca Noe* (1675)

an entire civilization, and the selective, hierarchizing procedure of what is recorded and what is left behind. The desire for deep-space exploration remains bound up with previous histories of violent expansion and the threat of obliteration—indeed, ten years prior to the Voyager’s launch, the 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibited colonization of the cosmos.

The small toy sailing ship at base of Gasser’s sculpture revives these memories of past travels. The image of the Western ship re-appears in different forms and sites during the first era of European expansion and colonization. A sixteenth-century Ivory salt-cellar from the British Museum made in Nigeria for Portuguese traders shows a boat resting upon a globe, supported by European soldiers bearing large Christian crosses (fig. 7). The Portuguese figures and vessel are portrayed as emerging from the realm of the dead within local iconographies; they are ghostly creatures transformed into powerful forces that bring about change in regimes of value, through conquest and trafficking. Nineteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints (fig. 8) depict American steam-powered warships as monstrous sea creatures, parodying and signalling the dangers of new, and potentially destructive, industrial technologies. Different my-

the parameters of the real to the fantastic. Attention to detail reaches nearly absurd lengths; the sheer number of ships and quantitative measurements make the chart almost impossible to grasp all at once. Gasser’s painting only reinforces this sense of unintelligibility, lacking the online chart’s descriptive labels to yield a heterogeneous fleet, floating against a dark ground. References blur, and depend solely upon the viewer’s previous knowledge of the fictional crafts. This mixture of starships of every possible size and shape—from slick mechanical geometry to biomorphic—stresses the challenge of picturing vessels according to our world’s parameters. Moreover, Gasser’s painting questions the strangeness of a community’s need to collect these fictional vessels, drawn from the domains of science fiction, onto a single surface.

From its inception, the idea of the starship has remained in symbiosis with the archive. In the 1920s, Russian rocket scientist Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky anticipated space travel’s long-haul potential by lodging comparisons with floating worlds, or “Noah’s Arks.”³ Tsiolkovsky’s mention of the Ark refers to previous imaginations of the “world as ship,” the primordial mythical vessel which past scholars, such as seventeenth-century scholar Athanasius Kircher, recreate minutely in numerous printed images (fig. 5). The concept of the starship emerges from past images of the Ark and its potential to classify and carry entire civilizations in an enclosed biosphere, to preserve and transport mobile cultural memory towards wider horizons. Thus, the ship can play the larger role as an avatar of a given community. More recently, it did these diplomatic and archival duties with the launch of the famous Golden Records on the Voyager spacecraft (fig. 6), condensing the sounds and sights of human culture into a space-traveling golden matrix. Yet behind this hope of contact and cultural self-preservation, the Golden Records also represent the impossible task of archiving



(Fig. 6) *Voyager 1*, Golden record Cover

thologies anchor each vessel's arrival, hearkening to prior legends and images associated with the traveling ship. Gasser's *Inhabitants* call for our awareness of those contemporary associations, which would come to frame future alien encounter. However, Gasser's title for the exhibition, *The Dark Forest*, suggests that the very desire for outer-space contact is a liability. It borrows from Chinese writer Cixin Liu's sci-fi novel of the same name, which describes the universe as a dark forest where every civilization grasps like a hunter for his own survival, and where interplanetary encounter promises conflict.

The white sculpture of women stands as a forgotten vestige. Found badly damaged outside the artist's studio and repaired for display as a piece, its female figures and townscape suggest a community bound to the earth by the weight of the sculptural medium, contrasting with the adjacent painting of airborne starships. The presence of women is not neutral. On the one hand, in the sci-fi context created by the nearby painting, the sculpture recalls recent controversies of gender discrimination in the gamer community. On the other, it conjures earlier historical personifications of land as female figures, like the famous *Discovery of America* by Jan Van de Straet (fig. 9). In the late sixteenth-century engraving depicts the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci making landfall from his ship, hovering over a reclining nude personification of America. Here the image of conquering vessel and figure become metaphors of sexual aggression, signaling the gendered constructions that persist within the ship's image. Furthermore, the scale of the women and the small toy sailing ship at the sculpture's base becomes a kind of inverted figurehead that once appeared in female form upon the ship's prow. Gasser's combination of vessels and figures speak to the problematic representation of who is contained, excluded or exposed in relation to the material structure of a ship. David Joselit has conceived as artwork's function as vessel, a carrier of meaning, monetary currencies but also cultural representations in the current state of ever-increasing circulation and cargo.⁴ It is a question of who yields the power of the vessel—as borders tighten, the vessel's image seems to address the constant-yet-dangerous desire for brave new worlds. Who will it leave ashore?

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Samuel Luterbacher is a PhD candidate in Art History at Yale University. His research focuses on early artistic contacts and trade of portable artifacts in the Indo-Pacific during the late sixteenth century, focusing primarily on exchanges between the Iberian empire and Japan.



(Fig. 7) *Salt-cellar*, ivory, Nigeria, c. 1500



(fig. 8) *American Warship*, Japanese woodblock print, 1854



(Fig. 9) Jan Van de Straet, *the Discovery of America*, 1588-1612

¹ Michel Foucault, "Des Espaces Autres," in *Dits et Ecrits 1976-1988, II* (1967; Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p.1574-5.

² Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 4.

³ Simone Caroti, *The Generation Starship in Science Fiction: A Critical History: 1934-2001* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 11.

⁴ David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2012, 1-24.