

Lifework

by Chris Villars

An artist's bid for fame.

1.

On the yellow wall of the living room of Apartment 37, Module 9, Lunar Colony 1, hung a group of colour photographs in rectangular silver frames. Two showed artists of the twentieth century; Jackson Pollock, the Abstract Expressionist, photographed from a low angle through a sheet of glass on which he was creating one of his characteristic action paintings, and Christo, the Environmental Artist, shown striding across his "Ocean Front" project, for which he had wrapped a bay on the North American coastline in white polythene sheeting.

Alongside these two photographs, three others showed works by the Apartment's artist tenant, Marcus Clifford. In the first, "Blue Trees" of 2065, two small trees on the escarpment of the Grand Canyon, Arizona, had been painted a vivid sky blue. The blue, twisted branches of the trees contrasted sharply with the red walls of the canyon. "Space Rainbow", of 2074, in the second frame, was a work from a period when the artist worked as a Maintenance Officer on the Earth Orbiter III space station. Against a black sky, a set of multicoloured cables, red, orange, yellow, green and blue, splayed out from a fixture on the outer wall of the Orbiter. Under the rainbow of cables, the white crescent of the distant moon could be seen.

"Space Rainbow" had been rigged-up and photographed secretly, without the authorities knowing. The artist kept the record of this work secret until after his next major work. This was "Painted Shuttle", of 2075, shown in the last photograph on his apartment wall. For this, after using his position as a Maintenance Officer to gain access to the reserve shuttle-craft, he had sprayed the shuttle all over with irregular blotches and streaks in brilliant red, yellow and green paint. The photograph showed the painted shuttle in the maintenance hangar, shining under a glare of arc lights.

The painted shuttle never flew. Marcus was dismissed and returned to Earth. Soon after, he published a manifesto entitled "Space Art" and simultaneously announced that "Painted Shuttle" would be his last work. The negative attitude of the authorities, he declared, made it impossible for him to realise any further projects.

Each of the other walls of the room in Apartment 37 was painted a different primary colour; blue, red and green, respectively. The floor was white and the ceiling black. The only furniture in the room was a low, rectangular, glass-topped table in the centre, and, scattered around the walls, large cushions each of a contrasting bright colour; purple, yellow, green, red and orange. Two books lay open on the table. "Who's Who in the Arts, 2081" lay open at the entry for Marcus Clifford. The entry ended with the sentence: "2075: Gave up artistic activity after failure of project, Painted Shuttle." The other book, a textbook on rocket propulsion, open at a chapter on coolant injection systems, revealed something of the artist's current preoccupations.

2.

It was the last day of lunar night in the Mare Crisium. In the blackness that still covered the surface, a craft of the Lunar Refuse Service sped to and fro. Keeping close to the surface, the large transporter moved with unusual speed. The usual two small rockets at the back had been replaced on this craft by four much larger rockets. As it sped through the darkness, the two outer rockets flashed on and off frequently, giving it an erratic, whirling trajectory. At the controls was Marcus Clifford, now a pilot with the Lunar Refuse Service. Months of preparation, during which he had studied rocket mechanics and worked long hours alone in the maintenance hangar converting a refuse transporter to suit his purpose, were over. What had begun as a scheduled flight to take refuse from Colony 1 to the dump site in the North East of Mare Crisium, had turned into the realisation of his most ambitious Space Art project to date. He called this project, "Painted Moon".

For a whole day and into the lunar dawn the refuse transporter criss-crossed the surface of the Mare at great speed, whirling in great arches and loops from one side to the other, covering in time almost the entire surface. In the imagination of Marcus Clifford, the transporter was the tip of a gigantic paintbrush with which he was splashing and spilling paint onto the lunar canvas. In his mind's eye, the transporter moved across the surface with the same rhythmic urgency as the paintbrush of his childhood hero, Jackson Pollock.

Only two of the transporter's four rockets were controlling its motion. The inner two were releasing vast quantities of chemical crystals onto the lunar surface. Each of the coolant ducts to these inner rockets had connections to eight huge storage chambers which Marcus had constructed in the transporter's main hold. Each chamber contained a different, specially selected, chemical. By pressing appropriate buttons on the coolant control panel, Marcus could control which

chemical was being released and also the rate of flow, which ultimately determined the width of line on the surface. The whirling dance of the refuse transporter left, on the surface of the Mare, an invisible painting, composed of lines and splashes of as yet colourless compounds of Cobalt, Bismuth, Arsenic, Sodium and Chromium.

The Sun suddenly rising above the rim of a distant crater filled the control room with brilliant white light and roused Marcus as if from a dream. He switched in all four rockets and put the transporter into a steep climb, to achieve lunar orbit a few minutes later. Six hours later, his orbit brought him once again over the Mare Crisium and he saw the realisation of "Painted Moon" dominating the lunar landscape below. The Sun's heat had quickly raised the surface temperature from deep frozen levels to over the temperature of boiling water. This, coupled with the unfiltered ultra-violet radiation from the Sun, had caused the previously colourless crystals to melt and react with the surface layer of lunar dust to produce deposits of brightly coloured metal compounds. In the bright sunlight, the Mare Crisium was now covered by a vast abstract painting.

The composition was dominated by three broad red lines, running North-South. Around and across these, an intricate web of lines and loops in red, black, green, blue and yellow had been laid down. Red and black were the predominant colours, with the green, yellow and blue forming a skein of finer, contrasting lines. Scattered amongst the lines, isolated patches of brilliant yellow and green shone like drips and splashes on the vast canvas. The painting quickly slipped from view beneath the transporter, giving way to the familiar, barren lunar terrain. Marcus would have liked to complete another orbit, and pass over the transformed Mare once again, but the constant flicker of lights on the communications console told him that the authorities were trying to contact him. He lay back and fastened himself securely in his seat. A few seconds later, all four rockets fired together at full power.

3.

The inside of the transporter's control room was covered with photographs of "Painted Moon". Amongst these, Marcus Clifford was working to install a new instrument panel, part of the preparation for his next project. By now, the Earth and Moon were no more than bright stars. Ahead, the grey, cloud-covered disc of Venus grew larger and larger.

Marcus had gambled on not being pursued. The message he had left explaining the purpose of his flight would have been discovered long ago. The authorities knew that the transporter was unarmed and could see that its trajectory

presented no threat. He had calculated that the high cost and possible fruitlessness of pursuit would deter them. However, the continual flicker of lights on the main console showed that the authorities, possibly from Earth as well as the lunar colonies, had not yet given up hope of contacting him.

The grey disc of Venus suddenly eclipsed the Sun as the refuse transporter entered the planet's shadow. Marcus programmed the craft for a slow descent. The transporter had not been designed for use on planets with atmospheres and excessive frictional heating had to be avoided. After five revolutions, spiralling slowly towards the planet, the transporter entered an orbit just above the cloud layer. Here, the drag from the swirling, grey acid clouds below caused the underside of the transporter to glow dull red.

This orbit could not be maintained for long. After one more revolution, as the transporter was just emerging from the night side of the planet, Marcus pressed a button on the new instrument panel. One by one a series of massive silver canisters were released from the main hold of the ship and fell into the clouds below. Each canister exploded violently just below the surface of the clouds, spreading its chemical load over a wide area. As soon as the last canister was gone, Marcus put the transporter into a steep climb on a trajectory away from Venus towards the Sun. As the sunlit disc of the planet receded, he watched the gradual realisation of the project he entitled "Venusian Swirl".

The chemical catalysts released by the exploding canisters rapidly diffused through the upper cloud layers radically altering their chemical composition. This changed the light reflecting properties of the clouds. Their formerly greyish-white colour was transformed into deep shades of blue, green and purple. A fine wisp of blue appeared first, emerging from the South-Western limb of the planet. This was quickly followed by two other trails; one green, emerging slightly above the blue, and the other purple, appearing just below it. Carried by the natural currents of the Venusian atmosphere, the colours broadened into three wide parallel bands which slowly spread across the cloud surface, rising slightly towards the North, and disappearing near the Eastern equator. Eventually, the swirling colours completely encircled the planet. "Venusian Swirl" persisted for several hours, its deep blue, green and purple bands shining in the sunlight in brilliant contrast to the grey and white of the surrounding clouds. Marcus watched and photographed until the colours began to fade and mingle, and the composition slowly dispersed.

4.

Three days later, Marcus was awakened from a rest period by the harsh sound of the emergency klaxon. At first the viewscreen showed only the heavily filtered image of the sun, towards which the transporter was now heading. Then, suddenly, the Sun was eclipsed by another spacecraft. It was one of the enormous Mercury to Earth mineral transporters. These huge unmanned craft, twenty times the size of a refuse transporter, ferried mineral-rich ore from the inhospitable environment of Mercury to processing plants on Earth. The refuse transporter lacked any automatic avoidance mechanism and Marcus switched immediately to manual control. He chose a direction at random and fired all four engines. The force of the impulse reaction flung him violently from the console. He sprawled on the floor at the back of the control room, amid photographs of "Painted Moon" and "Venusian Swirl" and stray components from the makeshift control panel he had installed.

Thirty seconds later, the rockets cut out. There was complete silence. The danger had passed. Marcus got up and returned to the console. Fuel levels were now critically low. He would have to rely on the gravitational pull of the Sun to provide the extra momentum required to return to Earth. He used the on-board computer to calculate a new trajectory. The flight-path lay ahead, towards the Sun, passing round the Western limb near the equator, and then back out towards the Earth.

As the temperature inside the transporter steadily rose, Marcus alternately slept and worked on the preparations for the final project of the flight. In the control room, the new instrument panel needed to be repaired and adapted, and, in the main hold, the large silver sphere had to be manoeuvred into position. Marcus also spent time studying the photographs of "Painted Moon" and "Venusian Swirl". He felt that both projects had been entirely successful. Both were perfect examples of "Space Art" as he had defined it in his manifesto of 2076: "Art on an astronomical scale, which by its sheer audacity of conception commands the attention of all mankind."

The refuse transporter could not approach any closer to the Sun than the orbit of Mercury. When this limit was reached, Marcus released the silver sphere into the solar atmosphere. The sphere, eight metres in diameter, was packed with thermite, the heat resistant material which also provided the outer protective layer of the transporter itself. At the centre of the sphere was lodged a small thermonuclear device, which Marcus had constructed himself from components gradually assembled over the years. His hope was that the thermite would protect the device long enough for it to fall close to an active region of the Sun.

Then the thermonuclear explosion would stand a chance of triggering abnormal flare activity. This was to be his project, "Solar Flare".

Marcus watched through the filtered viewscreen as the sphere descended, a black dot moving slowly across the fiery solar background. Suddenly the black dot turned white, and momentarily shone like a brilliant star. Seconds later, shock waves shook the transporter violently. Marcus's elation at the successful explosion turned to horror. The unexpected shock waves caused the transporter to start spinning. When he tried to use the main engines to regain control, they only added to the effect, increasing the rate of spin. Then the fuel ran out, and the helplessly spinning transporter fell in towards the Sun.

Minutes later, the transporter disintegrated and the charred body of Marcus Clifford burned up in the solar atmosphere. At about the same time, a massive solar flare, triggered by his device, erupted in that region of the Sun. The effect was more spectacular than he had dared to hope. The flare was the brightest ever recorded. On Earth, towards sunset, it was even visible to the naked eye as a bright yellow spot on the Western limb of the reddened solar disc.

For several days following the realisation of "Solar flare" and the disintegration of the refuse transporter, the polar regions of Earth experienced unusually bright and spectacular auroras. Streams of charged particles, brought by the solar wind, produced a marvellous display of colours over both poles of the Earth. Amongst these streams of particles, there must have been some that had once belonged to the body of Marcus Clifford, Space Artist. Marcus Clifford, as they say in artistic circles, had arrived.

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