

# CHRONOPHOBIA

Katie Paine

c3 Contemporary Art Space  
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Reading this sentence has taken up a discrete unit of your time.

Not exactly scary, is it? The memory of the time you read that first sentence, then the follow up question (and now this sentence, I suppose), might stick with you a couple minutes, hours, days. Or it might not. Either way, all par for the course. Certainly nothing you'd spend any more time dwelling on, save from being prompted to by some reflexive art writing.

But then, maybe it's the very ubiquity of time - and through ubiquity, its invisibility - that means it might pose the most terrifying threat of all. Like *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, the cold-sweat inducing fear isn't the idea of an incoming invasion, but rather that it's already here, hidden in plain sight. Time has already infiltrated our society - it's on our wrists, in our pockets, sitting on our bedside tables. It governs how much we work, how much we sleep, and with statistical modeling we've ascertained our approximate life expectancies, and schedule our existential crises for "mid-life" accordingly. As a species, we've assimilated time so fully that it has become a load-bearing structure - propping up almost every aspect of society with the hope that it stays strong.

But what if we truly stopped and considered that time isn't something we can trust? That what we consider "fixed" history is a changing, swirling accumulation of archives, records, hearsay, folklore, Instagram updates and shards of ceramic pottery dug up by an archaeologist in khaki shorts.

That with the discovery of each new record of history, or the corruption of our existing records (through arson, malware, water damage, forgetfulness or, yes, simply the passing of time), our "fixed" past has now become something completely different.

It's this ever-shifting process of archival collage that artist, curator and writer Katie Paine draws on to pull us into her own alternate histories. Linear time is folded in on itself, an origami accordion that squeezes 1960s film stills against medical imaging technology, ancient marble statues against modern computer programming. Jarring slices of narrative hint to the alternate world of the Future Devonian Archive, The New Institute Of Kairos and a society where time's containment is a public health imperative, and its liberation might represent both the beginning and end of days.

The individual morsels of history are spread across the gallery wall, pinpointed along the intersections of a green grid, calling to mind a timeline that operates along both the x and y axes, albeit with a cryptic causality between them, challenging you to decipher it.

Some records are safely placed under perspex, as you would expect historical artefacts to be. Others are allowed to breathe in the open air. The lack of consistency in the presentation of these archived materials means that while they engage us, the tension between them makes it hard to completely fall for them. The hyper-reflective surface of the perspex forces the viewer to regard themselves as they regard these "properly displayed" pieces, and question why something as simple as perspex lends an air of historical legitimacy to particular items over others - and how these practices of the archive can be misappropriated in order to lead us into buying a narrative, any narrative, hook, line and sinker.

Individual images speak to histories that mix the familiar with the alien. A still from 1960s slide film captures a colonial tableaux: two wealthy white settlers pacing a village centre with the subtitle, 'The year that all lost things were found again, in the National Library of the Silenced Manuscripts', a reminder that history is almost always fortified by those in power, and that it's near impossible to 'find' a relic without someone else losing it.

An alarming crimson photograph draws the eye into its rugged topography - an extraterrestrial orb that calls to mind an alien planet, or a gestating creature unknown to humanity. In fact, it's a simple cell, and the image a product of electron microscopy. An intriguing record, and indeed, an image that exists only as a record, composited from data as electrons are fired against an unfathomably microscopic surface. No one has truly seen it, or possibly could see it - only the archived assembly of our data points approximating it.

Janus, the ancient Roman god of bridges, is a recurring figure within *Chronophobia*; he emblazons artefacts and false currencies, recognisable by his two faces - one facing the past, the other facing the future. While he may originally have been associated with bridges, gates, transitions, it's his dual gaze in either temporal direction that has caused him to become synonymous with time itself in contemporary society. Indeed, what else is life if not the bridge we cross from our birth to our

death? What else is time, except the bridge we all cross, from where it all began to where it will all inevitably end?

Much like Janus, Katie Paine's practice exists on the bridge - the bridge between artist and writer, writer and curator, curator and artist. *Chronophobia* is fiction embodied, through text and through material, refusing to exist neatly as either short story, art, curated collection or set design. There's an irony in her resistance to easy taxonomy - unlike the artefacts and archives she feasts on to create her work, she's difficult to put in a jar, label, place on a particular shelf among a particular group of peers, and retrieve when needed.

The more you look, the more you'll see Janus' image appears throughout the installation, always keeping watch in a way those of us cursed with one face can never match. But if you do spot him, see if you can tell which face is looking to the past and which to the future. As you spend more time in the slippery temporal capsule of *Chronophobia*, you'll begin to find that distinction matters less and less, and each snapshot, record or footage speaks as easily to a revisionist history as it does a speculative future.

That's the truly unsettling thing about the archive - it can be seductive with its promise of permanence and historical stasis. But depending how you cut and collage it, its meaning can be flipped, unfurled, rejigged and imploded from one viewer to the next. And if our history, our sense of time and place, is as much a collage of these fickle records as *Chronophobia*, then time stops being as safe as we hoped it might be.

If we truly stopped to consider that it isn't just the present that changes with every passing second, but the past as well, how long before the firm ground beneath our feet turns to shifting sand? How long before the shifting sand of an hourglass turns to quicksand? And how quickly does quicksand have to be able to drown you, for it to still be "quick"? Time will tell.

*Alistair Baldwin is a screenwriter, satirist and arts writer whose work couples humour, narrative, and visual concision to craft work that entertains as much as it dissects.*