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Spooky and Luscious: Aldo Tambellini at James Cohan

by David Brody

Aldo Tambellini: We Are the Primitives of a New Era: Paintings and Projections 1961-1989 at James Cohan Gallery

September 12 to October 19, 2013

533 West 26th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

New York City, 212.714.9500



Aldo Tambellini, *We Are the Primitives of a New Era*, from the *Manifesto Series*, 1961. Duco, acrylic, and pencil on paper, 25 x 30 inches. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery

Aldo Tambellini's show at James Cohan harkens a return of a prophet of the Space Age. An upcoming screening of his films at MoMA is eagerly anticipated and is prefigured in a revelatory way in this exhibition of restructured projections. The show, elegantly curated by Joseph Ketner, also includes single-minded cosmic abstractions on paper, old and recent. Tambellini was in the thick of pioneering efforts in the 1960s with cameraless film and total projection environments, and most originally, with video signals treated as dancing, self-immolating kinetic spirits. To achieve these last works — very new media at the time — Tambellini "prepared" cathode ray technology along the lines of a John Cage piano. On view, aside from real-time performances of these altered TVs preserved on video or film, is a remarkable set of unique electrostatic

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contact prints, which don't quite freeze the instant. These are genuinely spooky and luscious, almost in the way of Victor Hugo's or Roland Flexner's uncanny ink fantasias.

Multiple projections make for the central event here, a new assembly comprising films, videos, text and light pieces past and present, now spliced together with digital facility, and perhaps giving a taste of Tambellini as an impresario of downtown avant-garde cacophony in venues such as the Black Gate Theater in the mid-1960s. Here the main room's overall texture is like a rush-hour crowd in Times Square on a snowy winter evening: dark, teeming, and competitive, yet from a certain distance, statistical and atomic in its behavior. Tambellini's resolute palette of black and white, along with his obsession with cosmic expansion traced in short shamanic phrases and by the recurring form of the spiral, unify the competing voices to some degree; we might even notice how a historic audio clip of a rocket launch countdown is echoed by a 3-2-1 strip of film leader (equally the relic of another era).



Installation view: Aldo Tambellini, *We Are The Primitives Of A New Era* at James Cohan Gallery, 2013. Photographer: Bill Orcutt

Looking past the wry suspicions cast on spirals and mystic truths by Bruce Nauman in 1967 with his iconic neon sign, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*, Tambellini's revival may help us reconnect to a time neither nostalgic nor ironic. The advance of the Space Age was terrifying, yet full of potential. A key phrase of Tambellini's, "We Are The Primitives Of A New Era," serves for the show's title. Perhaps it can help us to imagine a more sublime destiny for mankind than the one that now muddles toward Bethlehem to be born.