Vaporwave art makes the coffee table book of your dreams

This year's best art book so far, *Dreamscapes & Artificial Architecture* is all about spaces with no people.

Historians will look back at the 2010s and early 2020 as a time before man and nature went to war. From that period, pop culture scholars may wonder what was the last great album and last great movie before the world changed irrevocably.

Dare I say it, but the answers will be easy ones: for the former, Tame Impala's ***The Slow Rush*** LP, released on Valentine's Day 2020, and the latter, Bong Joon-ho's ***Parasite***, which stole all those awards and hearts around the exact same time.

We already remember *Parasite* for so many things: its biting class parable, the 'Jessica Jingle', but it's the beguiling house at the centre of its tale which perhaps haunts and enchants us the most. Of course, most of the film's action takes place within its elaborate walls, but there's an unreal quality to the construction with its intimidatingly impeccable veneer above ground and sordid underbelly beneath. Many may not know

The meanwhile creates a home of its own, one where the people and objects have been replaced by sand, an appropriately psychedelic image for the band's blissed-out sounds. But while you may have seen that cover countless times on your Spotify, it's possible you may have missed the scene it takes its cues from. We're talking about a field of digital art where architecture meets Surrealism, as covered in new art book ***Dreamscapes & Artificial Architecture: Imagined Interior Design in Digital Art***.

“*The Slow Rush* came out right around the final stretch of production for *Dreamscapes*,” says Elli Stuhler, editor of the book for publisher **gestalten**. “I’d see posters of the album cover on my way to the office every morning. There definitely are similarities between the album art – bright colours, otherworldly light, a room mysteriously filled with sand – and the works in the book.”

We assume Elli no longer travels to the office, what with the world pandemic and all. Her building, like so many others, stands empty, similar to our city streets – and like the imagined rooms and structures gathered by the luscious release.

In over two hundred pages, one gets to hold in their hands all

those dreamy digital images that have dominated Instagram the last few years, collected for the first time in a tangible way that would’ve only been made possible if the artists had collaborated on, say, a batch of prints.

That would be an unlikely feat, though, considering these creatives come from all four corners of the globe, each carving out their own takes on these digital designs. *Dreamscapes & Artificial Architecture* features big names like Filip Hodas (below), whose pop culture dystopias we’ve featured before on the site. There are also more whimsical folk like Antoni Tudisco, perhaps best known for his strange street wear models and in-your-face loops.

Disparate talents making strangely parallel worlds, unified in vision to form a new scene, a modern genre. But what to call it? Is this basically Neo-Surrealism, the results of what would happen if Rene Magritte or Giorgio de Chirico experimented in 3D?

“Perhaps,” writes Elli. “Though I’d feel woefully under-qualified to be able to assert what kind of art Magritte or de Chirico would be making in 2020!”

“The strongest echo to me is the sense of illogic and the dream-like quality,” she continues. “Though here, that’s often more utopian. That sense of unease that you get from looking at a Dali painting has been flipped on its head in many of these works. I don’t necessarily look at one of his paintings and wish I was there, but I certainly get that feeling looking at works by Alexis Christodoulou or Paul Milinski (*below, left to right*).

“Many of these works instil an escapist desire that makes you want to participate in the scene, that you just wouldn’t experience with the bleaker outlook of the classic Surrealists.”

“I tend to refer to the digital homes and spaces quite simply as fictive interiors/architecture,” says , also featured in the book (below). “They sit more in the in-between of ‘reality’ and ‘dreamlike’ for me, something that could almost be, but not quite.

“I see them largely rooted in the actual, despite their far-fetched surreal landscape or impossible materiality.”

This same aesthetic can be seen across the memes and music artwork of vaporwave, an art form just as viral online as these fictive interiors. Could *Dreamscapes* possibly be the perfect coffee table book for vapor-heads?

“I am actually not very familiar with vaporwave at all, it has quite a strict aesthetic for me,” says Charlotte. “However, its initiative in popularising these imaged rooms and applying a very playful element to 3D may have had some influence in my current work.”

Like many others in the book, Charlotte has created dreamscapes for some big brands. For such an offbeat field, the art of artificial architecture sure seems to be big in advertising (most certainly before we all started staying at

home a lot more, anyway.)

“Digitally manipulated images in advertising is nothing new, so it feels like a logical next step to use imagery that has been created digitally from scratch,” Elli feels. “You have 100% control to show the product in the exact way you want it to be communicated, and that often means showing it outside of a reality that we know and understand.

“This works especially well for tech, but also fashion and furniture design. In Samsung’s case, for example, this move makes sense. A television set with 8K resolution is so much more vivid than anything you’d see in real life, so the collaboration with Six N. Five (below) feels like the perfect medium.

“This style also performs extremely well on social media. If your brand’s audience is active on Instagram, for instance, then it makes sense to position your product within an aesthetic that you know your audience is already positively responding to.”

Is there anybody out there?

Imaginary architecture, fictive interiors, a dreamlike logic; all these elements define the hardback and the scene as a whole, along with a curious lack of people and animals. Besides the flying birds in one Massimo Colonna piece, *Dreamscapes & Artificial Architecture* has a distinct lack of figures living and moving among these unreal scenes.

The word ‘utopian’ is often used with reference to this style, and I wonder whether there’s an ironic message behind it all, telling us that utopia is only possible if there are no people left on Earth.

“That’s certainly one way to look at it!” Elli says. “There were a few images that did feature people, where we were debating whether to include them or not. In most cases, we decided against it. As soon as you have the human form in this context, it shatters the illusion – at least it did to us. In turn, the absence of humans helps to reinforce the otherworldly experience of viewing this work.

“Filip Hodas is an interesting example, as it’s probably as far into the dystopian side of the spectrum that we dared to go for this title. Otherwise you end up in sci-fi territory and that’s a totally different can of worms.

“We included him for several reasons, chief amongst them being the way he plays with architectural forms. I love Hodas’s overgrown Brutalist structures emerging from the water.

“Back on the dreamier side of this spectrum, what makes some of these images feel so special is their escapist quality. In our increasingly crowded world – with overcrowded national parks and mass tourism – the experience of encountering a beautiful slice of paradise, full of crystal clear waters, soothing colours and not a soul to share it with becomes all the more powerful.”

Of course, we now live in a world that’s much less crowded than usual. A prescient feature of this art, making the book’s release a timely one.

I finish asking Charlotte the same question of where did all the people go in her dreamscapes.

“I wouldn’t say it is a particularly conscious choice rather than the long standing problem for architects,” she explains. “The building is at its most impressive and ideal when empty; the introduction of people and chaos is never quite as beautiful.

“Perhaps it’s more about capturing and displaying such landscapes, places and buildings in this perfect moment before being inhabited, preserving it without having the pain of seeing its stillness and untouched form adapt and/or deteriorate.

“I would say it’s more a question of an ideal moment rather than the necessity for the void of people completely.”

I have to agree with Charlotte. After all, isn’t the house in *Parasite* more beautiful when without its warring parasites?

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