

Where we've been, where we're going, why

Lego is a surprisingly effective medium for contemporary art. It is capable of infinite transformation; it oscillates between a state of rubble and formal structure; and it never loses either its clean lines, or its redolence of imaginative childhood play. While its blocky aesthetic might preclude more organic forms, quite a number of artists have explored Lego's capacity for plasticity within formal boundaries. Few however are able to move the works beyond virtuosic realist constructions (often teetering on kitsch) or (perhaps most successfully) interactive installations that invite viewers to explore their own creativity and indulge their nostalgia.

What Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy have managed in their latest body of work is rather unique: to paint, rather than sculpt, with Lego. They use the tiny blocks like pointillist brushstrokes, in a way that also brings to mind the four colour CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, key) printing process, as well as the RGB (red, green, blue) system used in TVs and computer monitors. The works hence span a range of contexts: they sit within a modernist continuum, grounded in intuitive decisions about colour and perception; but they also belong in a digital context where such decisions are pre-programmed, and in a realm of mass-broadcast and consumed electronic images. They could be landscapes or computer static. This playful indeterminacy is enhanced by the shadows these textured 'canvases' cast on their own surfaces and the way they change according to the viewer's physical location.

Yet the works become even more intriguing when we discover the subject matter the artists have chosen to represent in this medium, namely the disintegrating Space Shuttle *Challenger*, which was launched in 1986 at the height of President Ronald Reagan's late Cold War 'star wars' rhetoric. It symbolised a new era in exploration that was to pave the way for a greater and more regular US presence in space. While the key aims underpinning the mission were of a strategic defence nature, NASA sought a broad mandate for its astronomically expensive venture and garnered public legitimacy in an unprecedented way: it offered to train an 'everyman' recruited through an open competition

to render the dream of space travel 'accessible to all'. The successful applicant was schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe. During the mission, she planned to conduct various experiments and lessons to be beamed into classrooms around the US, including one about the benefits of space travel called 'Where we've been, where we're going, why' (the title of this exhibition). With the inaugural 'Teacher in Space' on board, Challenger became a focal point for American schoolchildren, and a vessel ripe for ideas about the links between US technological might, democratic ideals and optimism about the future.

Seventy-three seconds into its flight, however, the shuttle broke apart, killing its seven crew members and creating a mesmerising spectacle for the millions watching the launch live on TV. It is this footage that forms the raw material for Cordeiro and Healy's Lego paintings; each is titled according to the time elapsed after lift-off at 11.38 am EST on 28 January 1986: T + 10, T + 64, T + 84... Even in original photographic form, the stills fray into abstraction, but the pixillating effect of the Lego blocks takes this even further. And yet, among the strange forms emerge images burnt into the retina of the contemporary public, most memorably the distinctive forked tail of the deflagration. These freeze frames became iconic of the loss of faith in the power of science and technology to deliver progress by bending the cosmos to human will, and by association, redolent of the failure of US hegemony.

Cordeiro and Healy's works are poignant and playful; they bring together the hubris inherent in grand technological ambition, and the humility of simple ingenuity and openness to imagination at the heart of childhood play. Of course, there is also here (perhaps necessarily so) a self-reflexive reference to the process of art making itself, a process that often struggles to access the creative energy and belief inherent to both megalomaniacal and humble modes of relating to the world. Indeed, the exhibition title could very well refer to the artists themselves as they adapt their peripatetic practice to their new personal circumstances, namely parenthood, with its demand for deep roots to place. Whatever adjustments may be necessary, these artists are still travelling light, exploring the potential of everyday, at-hand materials to offer formal and conceptual insights.

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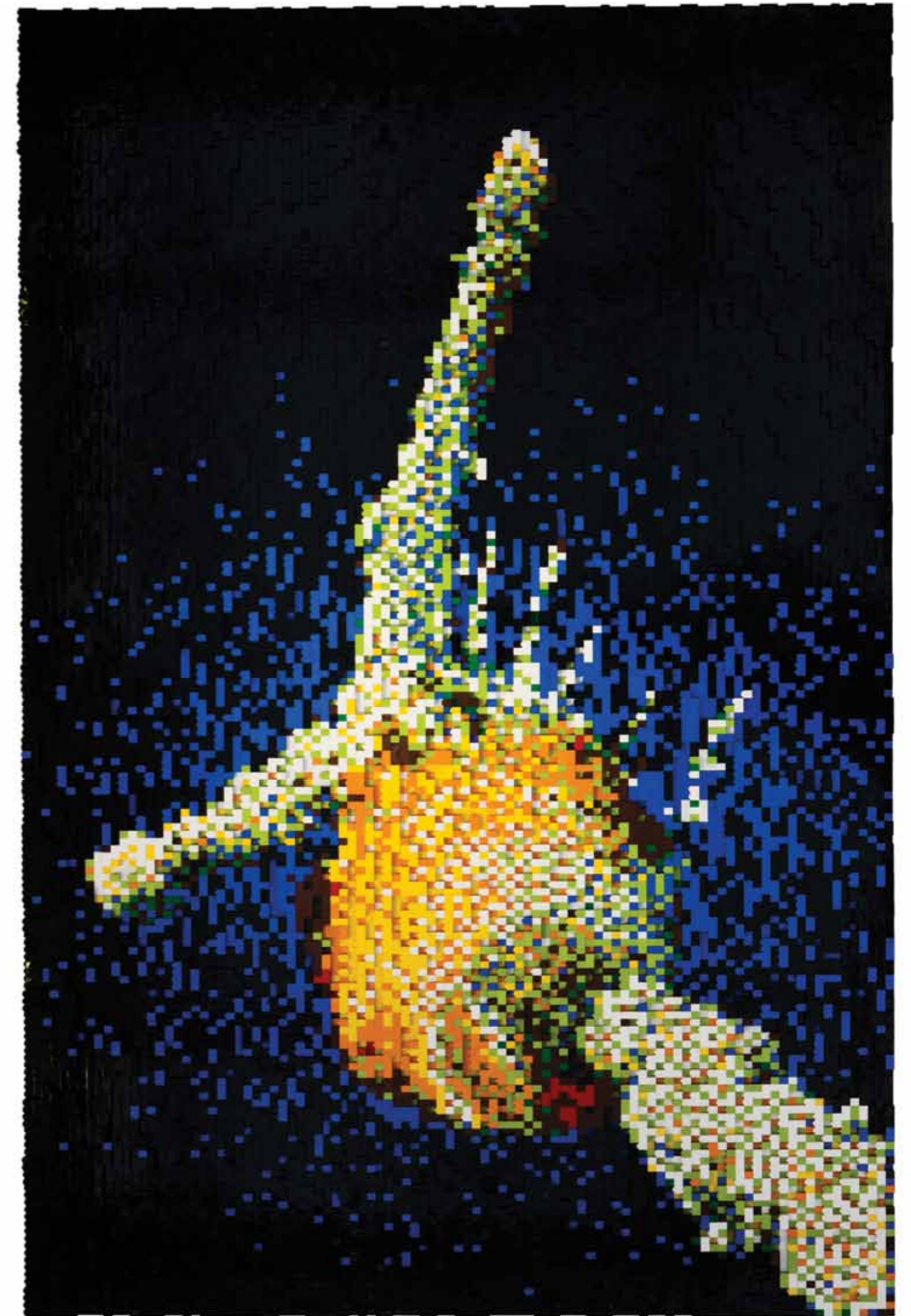
Front: T+79_black, 2010, 96 x 143.5 cm, LEGO, photo: Ryuchi Maruo.
Above: T+10_green, 2010, 122.5 x 81 cm, LEGO, photo: Ryuchi Maruo.



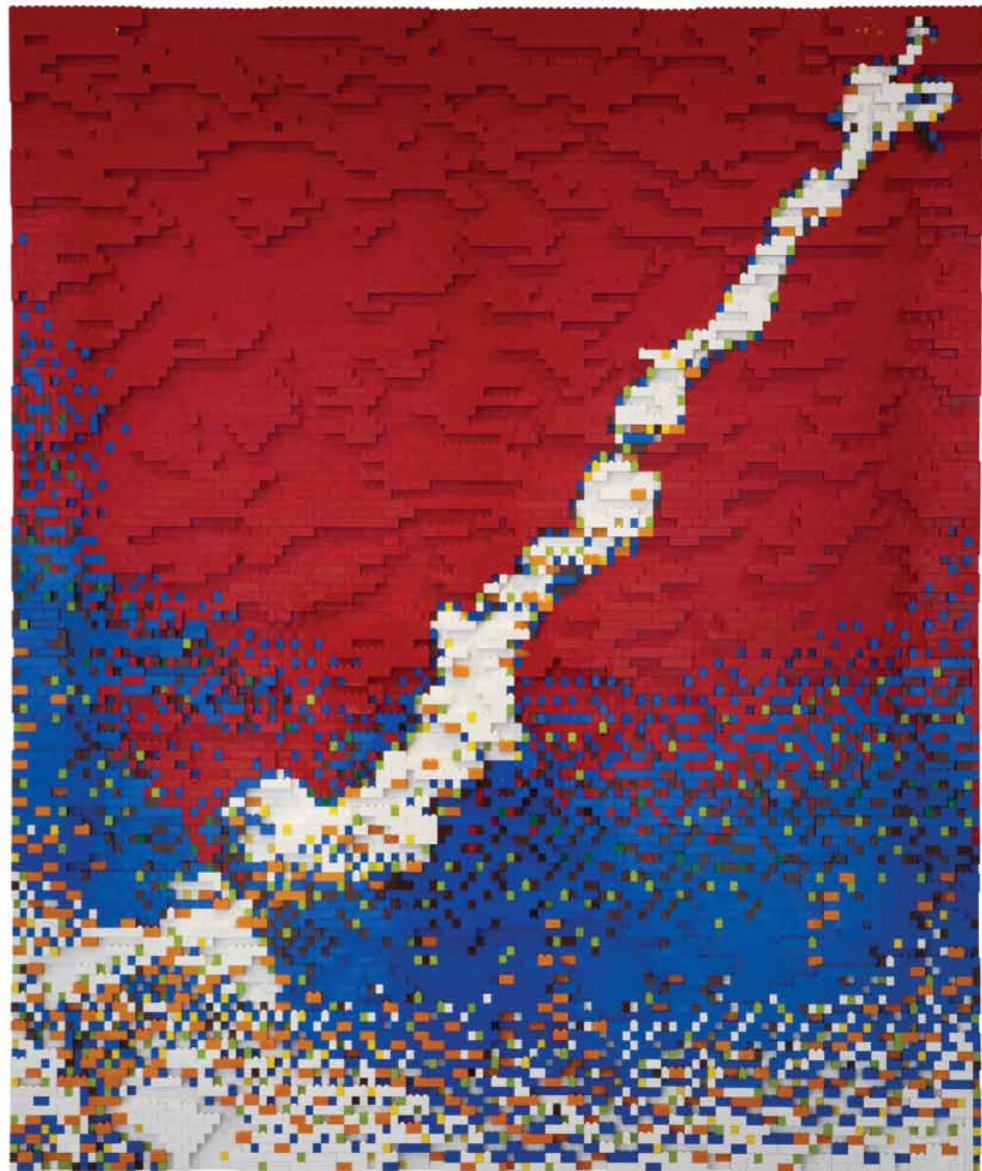
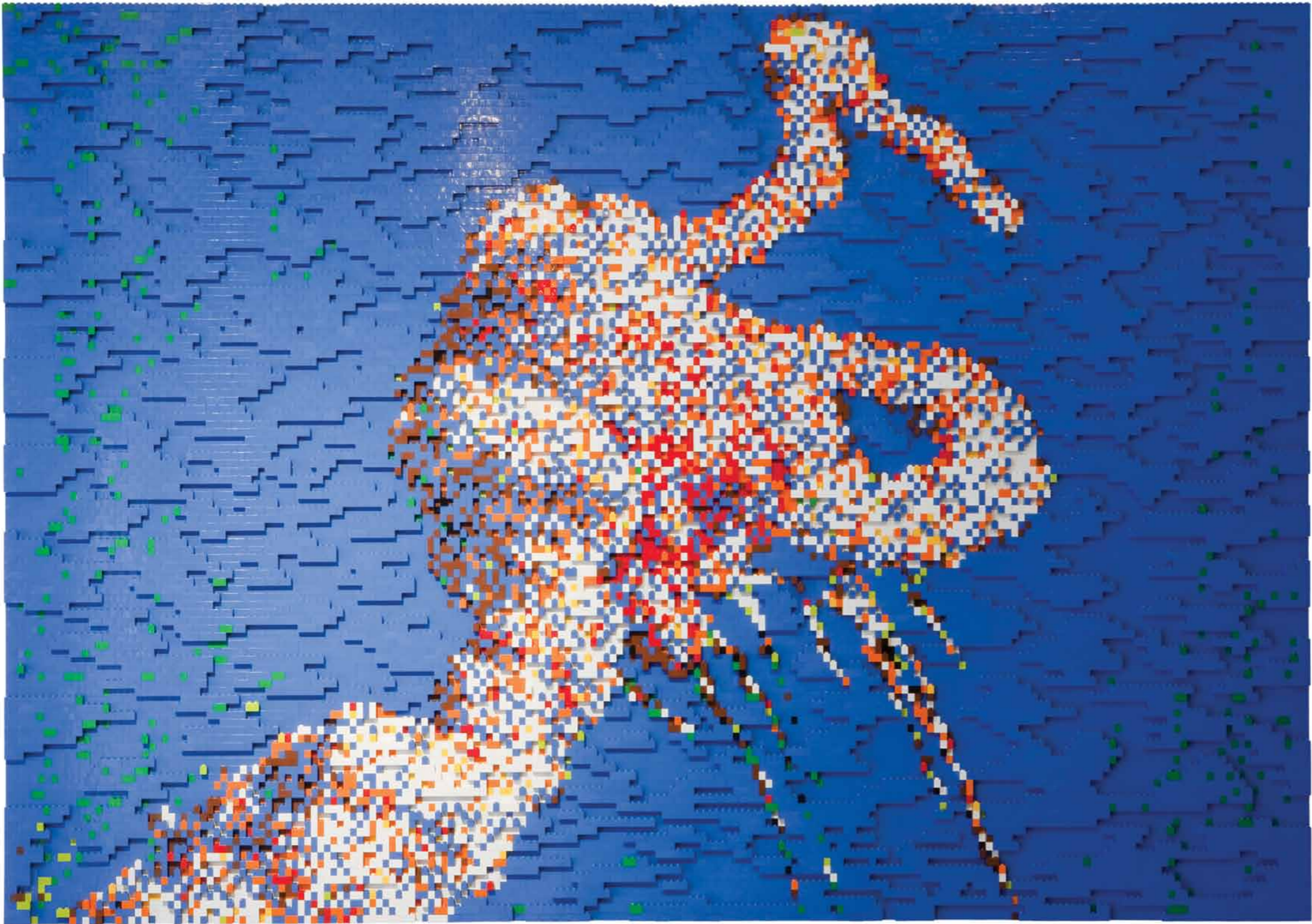
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Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro



Left: *T+85_blue*, 2010, 113 x 160.5 cm, LEGO, photo: Ryuchi Maruo.

Above: *T+85_red&blue*, 2010, 120 x 100 cm, LEGO, photo: Ryuchi Maruo.