

Reverence for the Unknown

By Dina Jezdić

Since the beginning, we have tilted our heads back and looked up—toward stars, toward weather, and the mysterious and ungraspable space. To look skyward is to inhabit a kind of ancient longing: for guidance, connection, and for explanation. It is where we once placed our gods and where we now launch our satellites. We climb mountains not only to be closer to that horizon, but to widen our view, to feel the hush that arrives when the world stretches out around us. The sky has always offered both scale and solace. And yet, some things seen there are not easily named. They flicker at the edge of vision—too fleeting for fact, too persistent for fiction. UFOs dwell in the territory where wonder resists certainty and belief is a kind of bravery. *Close Encounters* lives here too. Curated and inhabited by two artists—Caryline Boreham and Oleg Polounine—the show presents as a meditation on ambiguity, on longing, on the spaces where perception, storytelling, and memory converge. It is about UFOs, yes—but more so, it is about us. It's about why we keep looking up. About the ache beneath curiosity. About how meaning flickers in the distance—and how art, like sky-gazing, is often an act towards understanding, and necessity to believe.

The show is about a spark of shared curiosity and like many great collaborations, it began with the question: what if? What if the UFO is not just an object or event, but a lens? What if belief itself is a kind of technology—an engine that powers myth and memory, fear and faith? What if looking up is another way of looking inward? What if these objects, these images, these stories were not simply fringe phenomena but lenses through which to examine how we assign meaning to the unexplained? What if, instead of laughing off UFO sightings, we looked at them as powerful metaphors for how people navigate the boundaries of truth and the taboo? What if the artist's studio could become a kind of observatory and a destination of our deepest collective projections?

For Caryline Boreham, whose work is rooted in documentary photography, the show marks a bending of genre without a betrayal of intent. Her contribution traces a line between two distinct eras in New Zealand's relationship with unidentified aerial phenomena. On one side: the Kaikōura lights, a 1978 sighting that included radar returns, film footage, and multiple eyewitness accounts. On the other: contemporary sightings reimaged through the strange and glitchy filters of artificial intelligence. What emerges are testimonies drawn from a national archive of unease and a meditation on how we interpret—and distort—what we see .

The Kaikōura sighting remains one of the more compelling footnotes in Aotearoa's cultural memory - a story that flickered briefly across the national consciousness and then receded into the half-light where mysteries dwell. In Caryline Boreham's hands, that moment is reanimated: twelve stills from the original 16mm footage, once used to measure brightness for defence records, are looped into a flickering data GIF. Information becomes rhythm, and through repetition, something of the original awe is

restored—not the clarity of explanation, but the intimacy of encounter. Her AI-generated images are less interested in clarity than in contradiction. Eyewitness accounts, fed into machine-learning models, emerge shaped less by what was seen than by the biases of the internet’s visual archive. The result is an eerie distortion, a visual echo chamber. But in that resistance to clarity, these works remind us that mystery itself is a kind of truth—that not knowing is sometimes the most honest position we can take. By returning to the sites of sightings, standing where others once did, looking to the same skies—Caryline Boreham has unearthed a new frontier of our shared cultural place. These are New Zealand stories, shaped by the quiet, sometimes sceptical reserve of the people who tell them.

Where Boreham catalogues, Polounine improvises. His practice leans into speculation, into the unstable terrain where dream-logic meets the jittery aesthetic of UFO footage. From this space emerges a faceted icosahedron—a sculptural object, drawn from a fleeting form in a UFO video. Originally imagined as a performance prop, it resisted that fate. It grew too heavy, too stubborn. Like belief itself, it became unyielding—refusing to be dragged, spun, or easily contained. And so, Polounine turned to play. His works carry the energy of pushback and the joy of invention. They are awkward and full of delightful tension, as if they’re forever on the verge of taking off or falling apart.

There is humour here, certainly, but it’s tethered to something more reverent—a curiosity that takes even the absurd seriously. In *Pareidolia*, a short film of a weather balloon caught in the air, Polounine captures the precise moment when the eye insists on meaning. It’s a familiar feeling—like watching that drifting plastic bag in *American Beauty*, animated by nothing and yet full of emotion, absurdly beautiful. The balloon flickers between play and poignancy, an echo of our deep-seated impulse to name, to interpret, to assign intention to the randomness around us. It is a portrait of perception itself—of how we reach toward recognition, even (or especially) when what we’re seeing isn’t there.

This is the delicate line the artists walk. UFOs come with baggage—tin foil hats, YouTube spirals, tabloid sensationalism. To explore this territory sincerely is to navigate ridicule, to wade through disinformation in search of something more elemental. The work becomes a curation beyond facts, with a focus on feelings and sincerity. What links them is the ethics of wonder and a refusal to scoff. To leave things unresolved—not out of laziness, but out of reverence for the unknown. In a time that prizes hot takes and instant explanations, that is a radical act. Together, Boreham and Polounine offer us a proposition. If art is a technology for seeing and understanding—then this exhibition is a quiet recalibration. It asks not *what* UFOs are, but *why* we keep turning to them. What they unlock in us. What they help us imagine.

In the end, maybe the question was never really about aliens. Maybe the real mystery is here, on Earth. Maybe what we’re searching for, again and again, through cloud and static and dream, is each other.