Chaos and Awe was organized by Mark W. Scala, chief curator, Frist Art Museum
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Fig. 1

Instability has always been the mother of progress and innovation. The absence of clarity opens the door to the imagination, as creative people devise languages to describe precarious conditions that are more felt than seen.

Chaos and Awe features paintings by an international array of artists that induce sensations of disturbance, curiosity, and expansiveness. They visualize dark ideologies and virulent conflicts, the interweaving of physical reality and the digital realm, and the deepening of consciousness as limitations morph and dissolve.

Straddling the border between figuration and abstraction, works in the exhibition show how paint's chameleon-like properties can allude to powerful currents of globalization, political and ideological conflict and related wars and diasporas, and evolving technologies that seem limitless in their applications for good or for mischief. These often intangible influences may inspire fear at their immeasurable reach into our lives, or excitement at the promise of a previously unimaginable opening of possibilities. Strong emotions like these are associated with the sublime, a word that has often been used to describe the feeling of being terrified or overwhelmed by the unfathomable nature of God and the cosmos. Equating the sublime with the mystery of the human mind and its extensions into the world, Chaos and Awe provides visual analogies for the feelings of precarity that mark many people's experiences in the 21st century.

Organized into thematic sections, the exhibition begins with "No Place," featuring paintings that appear to map hidden mechanisms of urban existence, which may give rise to feelings of vulnerability and confusion. Evoking architectural schematics, Peter Halley compares the claustrophobic spaces of modern buildings to cells, connected only by conduits, which suggest electronic communication, plumbing, and other systems that function efficiently while enabling people to remain isolated from one another. Franz Ackermann's monumental *Untitled (yet)* envisions the swelter of systems that enable vast metropoles around the world to operate, from sewers to underground transportation and the electric grid. In this painting, these networks are torn up, exposing the vulnerability and even helplessness that accompany our reliance on technology.

Works in the section titled "Shadows of History" allude to deep currents of racial animus or extreme ideologies that sustain injustice, oppression, and conflict. The insidiousness of racism is the subject of Ellen Gallagher's *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* (fig. 1), which was inspired by the unethical medical experiments on African American men at the Tuskegee Institute, whose cases of syphilis were secretly studied over the course of decades. In *Untitled Anxious Audience*, Rashid Johnson illustrates the impact on people of color as racist attitudes have emerged from the shadows in recent years. Showing correlations between white supremacy and colonialism, Neo Rauch's *Waiting for the Barbarians* portrays the paranoia of a colonial outpost as it waits for an invasion by
Critical readings of colonial history appear in paintings by Jumana Emil Abboud, Mutu and Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga of the Democratic Republic of the Congo; they define a destabilizing interaction between native African traditions and the consumerism and militarism they have undergone. A bridge, a gate, an ocean (Fig. 3), 2007. Urethane on linen, 84 x 140 in. Collection Albright–Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Sarah Norton Goodyear Fund, 2010, 2014. Oil and ink on canvas, 94 x 120 x 2 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Matthew Ritchie

Throughout the exhibition, paintings function in a world that is at once increasingly shared and deeply fractured. Integrating disciplines devoted to broadening an understanding of the invisible universe.

The exhibition concludes with "Everything," in which paintings chart invisible energies and futuristic spaces to envision a larger sense of connectedness. Including works by Pedro Barbeito, Dean Byington, Anoka Faruqee, Guillermo Kuitca, Matthew Ritchie and futuristic spaces to envision a larger sense of connectedness. Including works by Pedro Barbeito, Dean Byington, Anoka Faruqee, Guillermo Kuitca, Matthew Ritchie

As humanity comes closer to understanding its myriad systems, banks of knowledge, and psychological and biological identities, will it be able to fold its own imperfections into a theory of everything?