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STORY BY
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Rik Allen's exhibit "Innersphere" certainly benefits from a perfect alignment (or conjunction, in astronomical terms). The show is located inside a museum devoted to science fiction and literally under the shadow of Seattle's iconic Space Needle.

Indeed, Allen's latest Spacecraft series deals with the futuristic imagery of interplanetary space exploration. The 15 pieces in the show resemble landing or hovering vehicles with typical elements such as glass containment vessels and fabricated metal support structures. Functionality is important only as a design feature, such as the "landing" armatures that are borrowed from neoclassical furniture as much as from aeronautical wings and gantry structures.

Two thematic types of vessels are present—smaller and rather clumsy looking works placed in wall niches or on pedestals, and sleeker freestanding vertical forms with elongated fins or fairings as supports. Allen refers to the "futuristic antiquity" inherent in these works, which is especially reflected in the smaller pieces. *Tudor SEV*, 2003, with its clunky ovoid body, portholes and seemingly bendable leg supports, has an aged patina on its opaque metallic surface achieved through an acid-stain technique called scavo ("excavated" in Italian). This craft looks rather bathyspheric, as if meant to land in a watery alien world.

Allen pairs the fragility of glass with the solidity of metal. However, only a few of the pieces actually highlight this tension. In

Minus Module, 2006, the tripod supports are connected to the dish-like chassis with clear glass globes. Under its glass dome, a smaller transparent red glass ball is suspended over the interior of the dish that glows radioactively. The corroded appearance of the vessel and whatever half-life of the energized matter contained makes this seem perilous and of indeterminate age.

Retro-modern is an apt description of *Azazel*, 2007, another work in which glass is given a structural role. Borrowing from Art Nouveau motifs, the steel bracket-and-wire assemblies support tubular glass columns that in turn support the central container. Behind a scrim of variegated bubble glass stands a framework tower with globe that aligns with a tubular glass ring on the outside. While not identical to it, this configuration certainly echoes a certain space-age-inspired feature of the Seattle skyline.

An etched plaque attached to the (real) spacecraft Pioneer 10, on its way to becoming the first human-built object to escape the solar system, features some pictographic information about earthlings and our place in the universe. Even here, facing eternity, we humans look like 1970s-era young Americans. Allen has cunningly framed a similar issue from his vantage of "futuristic antiquity" in the work *Franklin IV*, 2006. The Louis XV style leg supports are a visual and chronological key—as is an actual skeleton key centered inside the onion-dome shape—to the famous 1752 flight of Ben

Franklin's kite in a lightning storm. One suspects the kite-and-globe apparatus inside this transporter houses a vestigial spark on the tautly suspended skeleton key, vintage the mid-18th century.

One of the major paradoxes about the sci-fi spacecraft theme, and of actual space exploration, for that matter, is its utter isolation with regard to us sentient beings. The show has a foreboding edge in that these vessels metaphorically reflect the absolute emptiness of the cosmos and the fragile shelters we create in order to inhabit space. Though the title of the piece *Voyeur's Ark*, 2007, gives the work a leering presence, the opposite seems true. The towering glass enclosure on tall stilt-like supports suggests the surveillance abode of an aloof superior being; it is as cold and lonely as the world it surveys.

Although Allen's exhibition is inside a science fiction museum, it is not an optimum venue for presentation. His 2007 show at the Traver Gallery in Seattle featured many of these pieces, with some illuminated by low raked lighting that accentuated the stark contrast of light and dark in silhouettes captured on low gallery platforms. Science fiction is a convenient connection, but the true ambience is highlighted in the vacuum of real space. ✦

A 36-page paperback catalog is \$10 from the museum, www.empsfm.org, and the Traver Gallery, www.travergallery.com.