

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro

PSYCHOPOMP

Samstag Museum of Art
16 October—5 December 2025



SECONDARY EXHIBITION GUIDE

PSYCHOPOMP

Science versus art. Science versus spirituality. Why is it that we always position science in opposition to anything that requires us to use our imaginations or suspend disbelief when, in reality, scientists are experts at imagining the unknown. Scientific discovery and invention are not possible without the ability to imagine something that does not yet exist. Science may be based on fact but it is full of unseen possibilities.

Artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro have brought the scientific, the spiritual, and the artistic together in one bold, bright and boisterous new work: *Psychopomp*. This large-scale installation draws attention to the threads of spirituality that exist within the history of rocket science. Referencing the American National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Apollo, Gemini and Mercury missions, the Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival) held in Thailand and Laos each year, and the occult spiritual beliefs of pioneer rocket scientist Jack Parsons — *Psychopomp* illustrates the coexistence of art, science and spirituality to in one magnificent explosion of colour, movement and sound.

Psychopomp is an immersive installation in which we find ourselves entering a D.I.Y. mission control centre — in fact, it is easy to imagine that two very resourceful children have just been playing an epic game of 'make-believe I'm an astronaut'. The work features a series of control desks inspired by images of NASA's mission control rooms from the 1960s and 1970s. It was during this period of time that NASA launched the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo human spaceflight programs. The names of these programs referenced entities from Greek and Roman mythology and were chosen for their symbolic meanings:

Mercury was a Roman god. He was responsible for many domains including being the god of travellers and transporters of goods. During Classical antiquity (the period between ancient times and the rise of Christianity — roughly the 8th century BCE to the 5th century CE), Roman people prayed to Mercury for safe travel and transportation. He was also the Roman messenger god who wore a winged cap and winged sandals to help him move swiftly when delivering important messages between the mortal world and divine realms. In honour of this history, NASA's first attempts at sending a human into space was named Project Mercury. Mercury's movement between the human world and the realms of the Gods was considered symbolic of the journey NASA astronauts were about to take between Earth and space. The name Project Mercury also reflected the hope that the astronauts would make a safe and successful journey into space and then back to Earth again.

Gemini is the Latin word for 'twins' and was the name given to a constellation (group of stars) that is thought to look like two figures in the night sky. In Greek and Roman mythology, the Gemini constellation is associated with twins Castor and Pollux (also known as the Dioscuri). Castor and Pollux were protectors of sailors and sea voyages. After Project Mercury, NASA began developing equipment and techniques that would allow them to send astronauts to the Moon. In order to test these new developments, they approved a spaceflight program that involved two vehicles, each carrying two men. Once again, NASA turned to Greco-Roman mythology and named this program Project Gemini. Gemini, or the Twins, was chosen to symbolise the two astronauts that would man each spacecraft and the two spacecrafts that would attempt to 'rendevous' (the use of orbital manoeuvres to bring two spacecrafts into the same orbit at very close proximity) and dock (connect).

Project **Apollo** was NASA's mission to land the first humans on the Moon. NASA Director of Space Flight Development, Abe Silverstein, suggested that they give this mission the name 'Apollo' because the myth of Greco-Roman god Apollo — who pulled the sun across the sky each day behind his golden, horse-drawn

chariot — matched the grand scale of attempting to land a man on the Moon. It is important to note that the role of raising the sun in the sky each day is traditionally associated with the Greek sun god Helios. However, some versions of this story claim that this responsibility was later handed down from Helios to Apollo.

On each desk in the *Psychopomp* installation is a monitor displaying footage of a lively festival taking place. Film of this festival is also projected on the wall in front of the desks to simulate the three large screens that NASA use to monitor the trajectory of each spaceflight mission. This festival is called **Bun Bang Fai** (Rocket Festival) and is held each year in many locations across north-eastern Thailand (Isan), and Laos. According to the beliefs of the people who live in this region, the rain is controlled by a deity called Phaya Thaen. Bun Bang Fai is held to honour Phaya Thaen in the hope that he will send enough rain to grow healthy crops that will feed the region's population. The festival is held each May, just before the monsoon season, and features cultural performances, dance, music, parties, parades and processions all culminating in a rocket launching competition. In preparation for the festival, teams of local people assemble home-made rockets out of bamboo or PVC pipe. At the end of the festival, the rockets are launched into the air and judged on their beauty, how long they stay in the air and how far they travel. Everyone gathers to see the rocket competition and pray for plentiful rainfall.

The floats and costumes created for the Bun Bang Fai parades are usually made from whatever materials people have at their disposal, including food products and reused packaging. As a result, the festival takes on a distinct D.I.Y. aesthetic. To meld together the different scientific and spiritual elements of their installation, the artists have adopted a similar aesthetic in the creation of their mission control centre. Control desks have been clad in reused cardboard and decorated with colourful push pins, festive tape, fly swatters, string and plastic food. If you watch the moving image (film) components closely, you may even see something that very much resembles the audio trailer that fills the installation with sound.

This rusty, blue trailer, fitted out with old stereo and bullhorn speakers, references the Bun Bang Fai festivities while also evoking a third example of coexistence between the scientific and the spiritual. The speakers on the trailer broadcast a poem that was very important to American rocket scientist and chemist, **Jack Parsons** (1914–1952). As co-founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), Parsons played a significant role in the development of rocket technology and missile systems during the 1930s and 1940s. In the late 1930s, Parsons and his wife joined a new religion called Thelema — a form of occult spiritualism founded by Aleister Crowley (English occultist, 1875–1947). Parsons had always been interested in mythology, science-fiction and the occult, and was attracted to Crowley's beliefs. One of the rituals of this group was to recite Crowley's poem *Hymn to Pan* and Parsons began reciting the poem before rocket tests. In *Psychopomp*, *Hymn to Pan* has been translated from English to Thai and is performed to the accompaniment of traditional Thai instruments — drawing parallels between the divine prayers symbolised by the rockets of the Bun Bang Fai and Parson's invocation of occult spiritualism as he sought to reach the skies.

Rockets as science, rockets as religion. Cordeiro and Healy weave these threads together into a cohesive visual expression of the porous relationship between the spiritual and the scientific — of the human desire to understand and give meaning our existence and place within the universe.

1 Helen T. Wells, Susan H. Whiteley, and Carrie E. Karegeannes, *Origins of NASA names* (Washington, D.C: Scientific and Technical Information Office, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1976): 99, <https://www.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/sp-4402.pdf?linkId=858602815>.

REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

DISCUSSION POINTS

- The word 'psychopomp' comes from the Greek word ψυχοπομπός (*psychopompós*). *Psyche* translates to 'a soul', while *pompós* means 'a guide'. Together, *psychopompós* translates as 'guide of souls'. The title of psychopomp is given to entities in many different religions to denote their role as a guide from Earth to the afterlife — for example, in Roman mythology, Mercury was the psychopomp that would escort souls of the recently deceased to the Underworld.

Carl Jung (1875–1961) a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist, also used the term 'psychopomp' to refer to the link between our conscious and unconscious mind.

Given these associations, why do you think the artists may have used the term 'psychopomp' for the title of their installation?

- Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro have explored three examples of the relationship between rocket technology and spirituality (NASA, Bun Bang Fai, and Jack Parsons). Can you discover more occasions where rocket science and religious groups have borrowed ideas from one another? What is the symbolic relationship between rockets and religion — why do you think humans tend to associate these two concepts?
- The artists have used a D.I.Y. aesthetic using recycled and found materials, as a way to connect all three conceptual elements of this installation (NASA, Bun Bang Fai, and Jack Parsons). What difference do you think it would have made if the mission control desks had been made from more realistic materials and the audio component had been projected through invisible speakers? Do you think it would be more or less successful as an artwork? Why / why not?

Year 7/8

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Year 9/10

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REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

ACTIVITY

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro have created an installation that engages its audience through multiple senses — visual (moving image and sculpture), sound (audio recording of a poem being recited to music), and touch (interactive elements including buttons that can be pressed and folders that can be flipped through). As a result, *Psychopomp* becomes an immersive experience — the artwork functions as an environment that audience members can enter into and interact with. Immersive artworks can be very powerful, as they allow the audience to engage with the themes and ideas in a more personal, authentic way.

Continuing on with the artists' rocket theme, imagine that you are in outer space (you may like to choose a specific planet or constellation to focus on):

- *What do you think it would look, sound, feel (physically and emotionally), smell and/or taste like?*
Create a chart and brainstorm some ideas for each of the five senses.
- *How could you represent each of these sensory responses?*
Look through your brainstorm chart and note down different ways that you could creatively express some of your ideas — you might like to think about materials, media (painting, audio, film, sculpture etc.), imagery, textures, different ways of creating sounds, found objects, recycled materials, natural materials, patterns, colours, forms, scents...

For example, if you wanted to express the feeling of being cold, you could use cool colours, metallic surfaces that feel cool to touch, or an audio recording of someone shivering.

- Develop a plan for an immersive installation that communicates two or three of the ideas from your brainstorming. You could sketch your plan or make a 3D model. You may even like to work as a class to develop and create your installation in the classroom.

Year 7/8

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Year 9/10

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Claire HEALY and Sean CORDEIRO, *Psychopomp*, 2025. Installation view at Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2025. Photography by Sia Duff.



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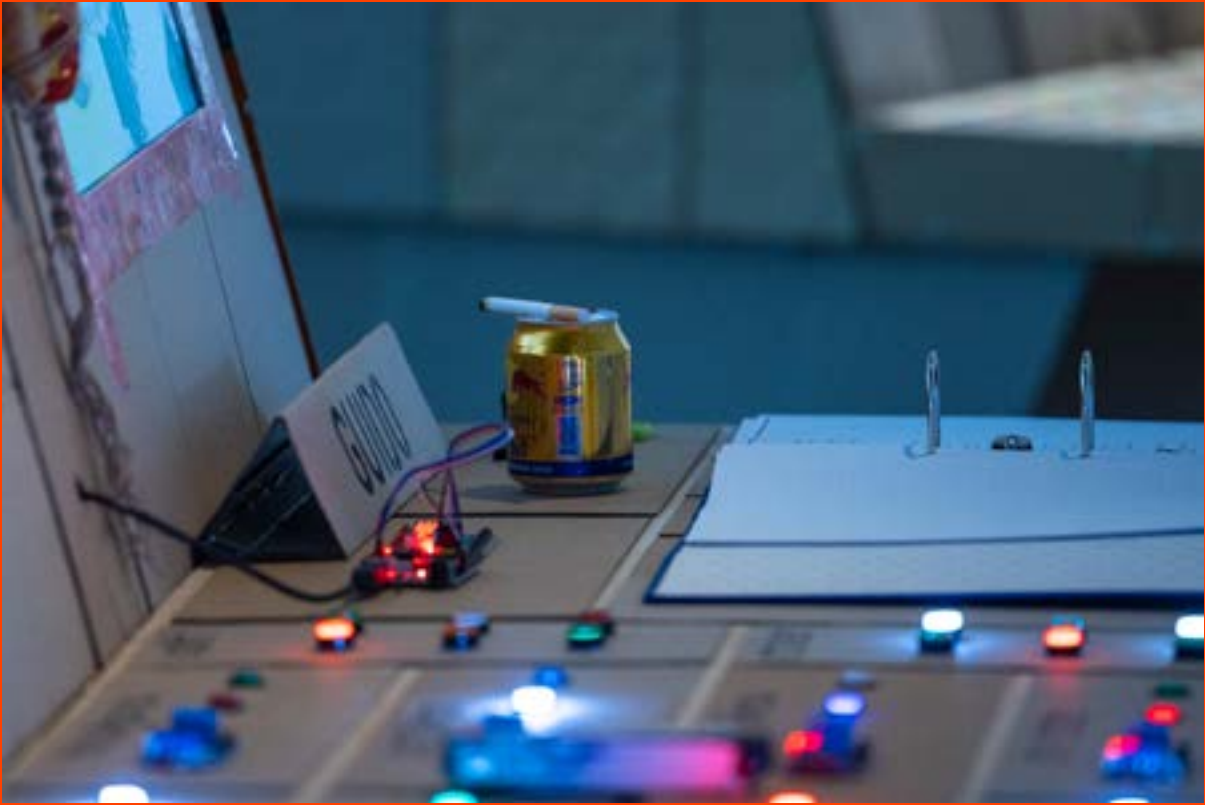
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