

SPACE CRAFT



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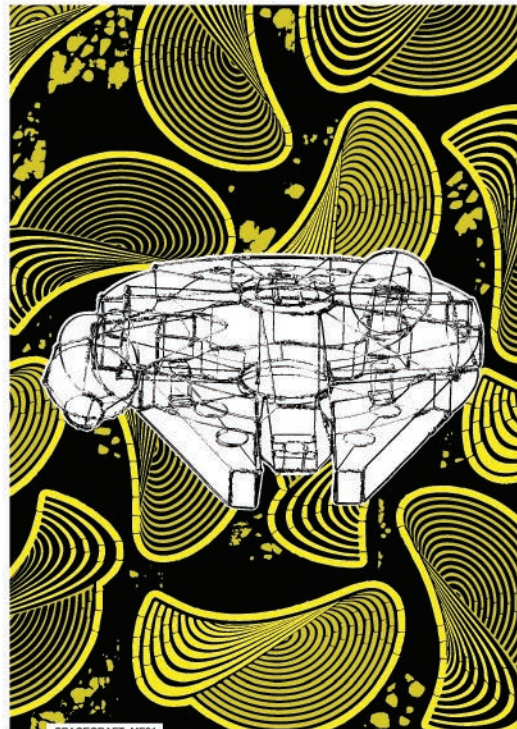


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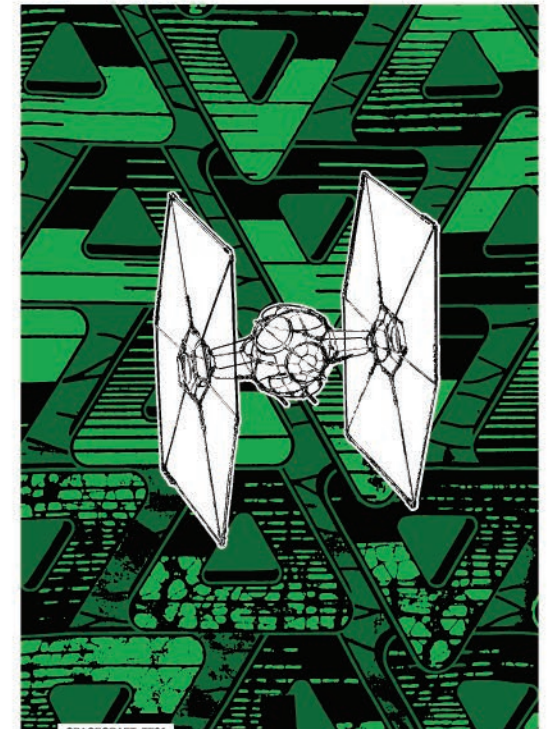




SPACECRAFT XW01



SPACECRAFT MF01



SPACECRAFT TF01

Screenprints

SPACECRAFT XW01, MF01 and TF01 2017

Ralph Borland

Screenprints on paper

Printed by Black River Studio

Editions of 25

66 x 51 cm each

These screenprints, produced with fine art master printmaker Wim Legrand at Black River Studio in Cape Town, South Africa, suspend graphic depictions of the wire-frame SPACECRAFT sculptures over psychedelic space backgrounds based on wax print fabric designs. Wax print fabrics are an exemplar of cultural diffusion - designed and made in Europe, and originally intended for an Asian market, they became popular in Africa where they have been adopted as a symbol of local identity and culture, and many versions proliferate.

Text accompanying the work for the exhibition *African Voices* at the Zimbabwe National Gallery in November 2017

SPACECRAFT is an intervention into street wire-art culture in South Africa and Zimbabwe, based around the production of wire frame sci-fi spaceships. The first three sculptures in the series are of iconic spaceships from the first *Star Wars* film series, depicted in a style reminiscent of 'old school' computer 3D. Designs for T-shirts, banners and silkscreen posters are derived from the sculptures.

The sculptures, produced as unlimited multiples, are intended as artworks in their own right and as prototypes for street-level production. In their form they evoke the early days of computer-generated 3D objects, particularly the early *Star Wars* arcade games of the 1980s, or the images seen on consoles within the original *Star Wars* movies. They play at the intersection between the way computers describe 3D objects, and how three-dimensional objects are described with wire through handcraft.

They play too on the existing practices of street wire artists in making items associated with popular movies, such as *Finding Nemo* clown fish or characters from the *Cars* movies. Where these items have been popular with the public, more and more wire artists have started to make and sell them. The project plays on this potential for catalytic intervention and viral spread of innovation in the street wire art scene, imagining their proliferation.

Alongside wire artists selling their original wire works in the street are other vendors selling knock-off merchandise such as stuffed-toy 'minions' from the *Despicable Me* series, imitation 'spinners' and the like. The extended graphical representation of the SPACECRAFT series borrows from both phenomena, presenting itself as a combination of a knock-off brand, and an original reimagining of and contribution to the *Star Wars* world.

Star Wars itself is famously an amalgam of influences, from scifi and Westerns to Japanese movies (most notably by Akira Kurosawa), comics and a range of mythological sources. It is also surrounded by fan production of artefacts from the movies, with adherents designing and making drones and robots and other sculptures and images from the movie's universe. In its appropriation and reimagining of global pop-cultural items SPACECRAFT recirculates these images and ideas back to source, following in the

subversive mode of Southern sites making and redistributing their own copies or remixes of Northern popular media, in an act of 'anthropophagy' – the consumption and creative incorporation of an external cultural influence.

The gesture of making versions for oneself of what one desires using available resources is the origin story of wire art in Africa. Wire artists tend to start as children, making their own cars and trucks in imitation of what they see around them and might desire to have. It is an art of necessity, and of observation and representation. The project's fictional frame extends to include this imagining, presenting the sculptures through websites, T-shirts, banners and prints as the products of wandering space hawkers depicting the vessels they see in their travels; 'space pirates' perhaps related to the 'Jawa', scrap dealing aliens in *Star Wars*.

The limited-edition silkscreen posters displayed here along with the sculptures show the spaceships in a psychedelic African space setting, against backdrops sampled from modified wax-print fabric designs. The well-known backstory of the 'African' wax-print is of a fabric designed and printed in Holland in the late 1800s, intended for the Indonesian market as a partially-mechanised imitation of their hand batik work. It wasn't well-received by its intended market, but was wildly popular when sold in West Africa, where the designs acquired their own local meanings.

Still today, the 'authentic' or original wax-prints by the company Vlisco are designed in the Netherlands and sold in West Africa. While Vlisco remains a status symbol and relatively expensive, imitation wax-prints with their own designs, some made in Africa and some in China, have been made since the 1950s. In this SPACECRAFT screenprint triptych, one design is based on a Vlisco print, while the other two are derived from lesser-known brands. The gesture here is the imitation of an imitation of an imitation.

SPACECRAFT is an offshoot of African Robots, a project to catalyse new forms of wire art, particularly involving electronic and mechanical components to create street-level automatons.

Ralph Borland, 2017

SPACECRAFT.AFRICA

@spacecraft.africa on Facebook and Instagram

spacecraft.africa@gmail.com