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# Frank Walter Escaped Racism and Violence by Looking to the Stars

By [Alex Greenberger](#) August 16, 2024 10:31am

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Installation view of "Frank Walter: To Capture a Soul," 2024, at the Drawing Center, New York.  
Photo Daniel Terna

*A version of this essay originally appeared in **Reframed**, the Art in America newsletter about art that surprises us and works that get us worked up. [Sign up here](#) to receive it every Thursday.*

One morning in 1958, while researching his ancestry in the English city of Leeds, the Antiguan artist **Frank Walter** awoke to a disturbance. He looked out his window and noticed some aliens who appeared to glow. Rather than cowering in fear, he was awed by what he saw.

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It was hardly his only encounter with realms beyond our world. Walter, who died in 2009, would go on to claim to have been visited by a spectral King Charles II, and to have knowledge that extraterrestrials had overrun his estate in Dominica. It would be wrong to romanticize such events—Walter was periodically institutionalized and was diagnosed with schizophrenia, for which he does not seem to have taken any medication—but it is hard not to marvel at the paintings that stem from his visions.

*MWG Milky Way Galaxy* (ca. 1994), one of the nearly 200 works in Walter's current survey at New York's Drawing Center, features an eye-like form, its iris bisected by a spear whose tip is set within a target. This work, with its obscure symbols, recalls the paintings of Hilma af Klint, another artist who gave form to alternate universes. Yet **the Drawing Center** show suggests that, unlike af Klint, Walter channeled other worlds to escape his own, which was haunted by racism and violence.



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Walter was born in Liberta, Antigua, in 1924, and became familiar with death from a young age: before he turned 18, his grandfather was murdered, and his mother died from tuberculosis. Walter was subsequently left in the care of his grandmother, who told him about his European heritage—effectively showing him that his family lineage was shaped by enslavement and colonialism. The rest of Walter’s biography contains many details that are just as grim: he was incarcerated more than once; he ran a plantation in Antigua, stoking distrust from the Black community; and he was stripped of his estate in Dominica, since he could not produce legal documents needed to keep it.

No surprise, then, that Walter wanted to leave behind his reality. The Drawing Center show features ephemera that he amassed, including no shortage of space-related materials like a news clipping congratulating NASA for its missions and the back cover of a book promising an “uncensored” look at UFOs. Seeing these materials adds context to Walter’s paintings, the bulk of which appear to represent earthly landscapes seen in Antigua and Europe. Take *Untitled (Crescent moon)*, an undated work (like most in the show) that features a lunar slice abutting a black expanse. Curator Claire Gilman avers in the show’s catalog that this painting’s circular format may intentionally recall the porthole of a seafaring vessel. Might it also allude to the window of a rocket?

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Frank Walter, *MWG Milky Way Galaxy*, ca. 1994.

Photo Kenneth Milton/Courtesy The Walter Family

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Other works evoke interplanetary travel even more explicitly. *The Universe is Composed of 14 Galaxies*, a diagram of sorts that Walter scrawled on musical manuscript paper, features 14 concentric rings, each filled with cryptic text. The outermost ring contains the phrase “Cosmos shell”; the innermost features the words “ELECTRON FIELD.” An entire body of work in this show centers around blazing suns. *Sunset with Black Forms* features a maroon orb that rises above dark pillars, the contours of which recall a Martian society.

The Drawing Center exhibition makes it clear that many artists these days are looking at works by Walter. *Sunset with Black Forms* came on loan from KAWS’s collection. Glenn Ligon also lent a work to the show, and per the catalog, Peter Doig is the owner of Walter works not on view.

Meanwhile, **Josh Smith** is the subject of an accompanying Drawing Center presentation pointedly paired with the Walter show. In his exhibition, Smith offers drawings of palm trees, fish, the Grim Reaper, and more. The subject matter may be at odds with Walter’s, but Smith’s fast-paced drawing practice certainly mirrors Walter’s desire to memorialize just about every aspect of the world.

So, what makes Walter so intriguing to Smith and so many other artists? Consider a remark by Smith in the catalog: “Drawing is a therapeutic luxury.” Perhaps Walter thought of his practice similarly, turning to stargazing as a means of coming to terms with what was taking place on the ground below.