A strong sense of home has become, for so many, a fragile concept. From local issues of decentralisation to ruptures in a collective identity on a national level, international migration and the intense globalisation facilitated by the power of digital connectivity, people everywhere are being forced to disembogue from the spaces they know and the places that form them. At a time when the relationship between identity and place
is being tested so relentlessly, the urge to look up and out, beyond ourselves, is often shelved. Turning this dislocation on its head in her first major UK exhibition, *Syzygy*, artist Katie Paterson transports us to outer space and out of time to bring us home.

Running as part of The Lowry’s *Week 53*, a new weeklong, cross-arts festival that confronts the growing schism between our sense of self and the places we inhabit through works that respond to the theme of ‘focus’, Paterson embarks on a conceptual exploration of the cosmos. Featuring a collection of her interdisciplinary works and two new commissions, *Syzygy* is a far-reaching look beyond the fractured nature of our immediate world that seeks to reveal the
very interconnectedness of all that is and ever was. By reaching out as far as possible into deep space, Paterson attempts to return us to a lost sense of belonging.

A 200kg black anodised laser-cut board bears etchings that represent the location of every dead star ever recorded through a telescope - almost
27,000 of them. Despite the 100 astronomers it took to collect every record, the many hands of the fabricators to precisely etch the stars and the research team led by Paterson to pull the concept together, the board seems predominantly blackened and, from a distance, empty. It would be entirely white, Paterson tells me, had we the ability to see what’s truly there. In a time when so much cultural comment focuses on the ‘information overload’ that afflicts every generation since Y, here we are instead being confronted with just how much we don’t know.

However, once the artist, a sharply intelligent and soft-spoken Scotswoman, begins to vocalise the backstory to these seemingly minimalist works it becomes clear that she is remarkably optimistic about humanity, life, and time. When describing *History of Darkness*, an ongoing slide archive of images of darkness from different times and places in the history of the Universe, she laughs and explains herself, “I just see fullness where others see emptiness.” This off-the-cuff comment can be seen to encapsulate her entire philosophy. Later telling me about the time she spent in
Japan, discovering an Eastern belief system that resonates with her, she explains that if there is a philosophy to her work then it’s akin to zen philosophy, underpinned by belief in “the deep interconnections of things not only on earth but in the universe. Believing one thing comes from another and it all connects together.”

One connection she focuses on is that between the expanding reach of human knowledge and the concurrent limits to our understanding. In contrast to the stark reminder of how little we know in All the Dead Stars, Paterson positions her most ambitious new commission, Totality. A mirror ball adorned with 10,000 reflective tiles, each hand printed with an image of a different solar eclipse, it revolves in a curtained-off room only accessible through the bare room containing only All the Dead Stars. Mimicking a planetary revolution and projecting the vast expanse of human discovery on to every surface, it shows every recorded image of every solar eclipse ever recorded by a human. The project took a year to complete, with teams of researchers scouring the internet and contacting telescopes across the globe to compile what Paterson proudly refers to as “a discotheque of the sublime.”

Catching up after her tour of the exhibition, we talk about the darkness that permeates her work. She discusses how darkness, like death, is a frightening yet inevitable part of life that our society has trouble accepting. “There’s a really fine line between those things, death, darkness, beyond our time,” she says. “That is what’s so strange. They feel so alien and distant and horrendous and yet so part of everyone’s life.” In Paterson’s work, the transcendental is given new forms so that we can all make sense of it; “Lots of people get overwhelmed, and so do I, but in a good way. I find it normal, the edge of the universe.”

With an otherworldly sense of something greater than herself, Paterson is attuned to that which is beyond the minute experience of the individual, her artwork representing life looked at from a macro scale. When contemporary art with a
dystopian perspective of the future is seen so frequently, this fatalist approach is refreshingly comforting. *Future Library*, for example, passes on a huge amount of responsibility to future generations. In Oslo, a forest of 100 trees has been planted by Paterson and a group of foresters. Commissioning one author a year for the next 100 years to write a text which will then be locked away until 2115, it is planned that these texts will be printed on paper made from the fully grown trees planted a century earlier, only to be read by future generations. It’s a selfless act, producing work that no one in your lifetime will ever experience. Many of Paterson’s projects are set to last beyond our lifetimes. In birthing a project this artist does so with the acceptance that she will have to relinquish control of it, entrusting its continuance to the hands of others. In the case of the *Future Library*, she is entrusting it to others who aren’t yet born. Each project also comes with the acceptance that the universe is ever-changing and finitude is inevitable but offers relief in the knowledge that we are connected with all that comes before and after us.

Paterson makes the abstract palatable, mapping, collating, organising the breadth of information on celestial matters that humanity has gathered, throughout time and across technologies, into pieces of art that are characterised by their aesthetic subtlety. In one room, a grand piano self-plays Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata, a tune which has in reality been reflected from the moon and back via morse code. Strung up above it is *Ara*, Paterson’s second commission for The Lowry, a string of 101 LED light bulbs at varying intensities, each bulb actually a scaled down representation of a star in the Ara constellation. Opposite, 9 numberless clocks in a row, each ticking at the speed of time on a different planet in relation to earth. These are simple abstractions of the everyday that tell a story of our place in the universe. They are here to remind us that, as Paterson says, “We are made of the same stuff. The universe is our home, it is our locus.”