

From Cosmology to Jewellery

Interview with Katie Paterson



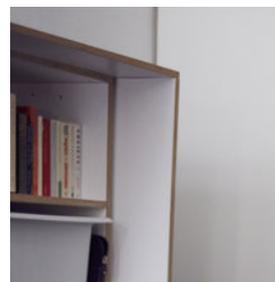
Stepping into Scottish artist Katie Paterson's Berlin-Kreuzberg studio feels a bit like stepping into a private research museum, one where, if you're lucky, you might be invited to touch the ancient stones and bones. There are neatly labeled fossils across one table, and another holds a thousands of years old mammoth's leg bone. Other than this evidence of her practice, the space is neat and tidy without being sparse.

She points out that she gets enough stimulus from her work – fossils that are millions of years old is enough for the mind. Just downstairs her home follows a similar aesthetic, inviting yet simple, framed posters hang on the walls and handmade Japanese ceramics line the shelves.

Category
Freunde von Freunden

Date of appearance
12-11-2014

Author
Alicia Reuter



You're working on a project called the Future Library, can you explain it?

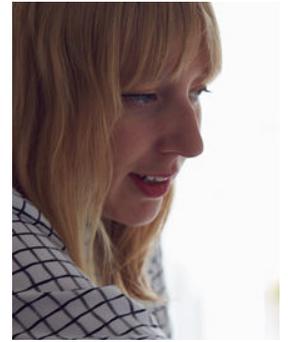
It's just outside Oslo, we've planting a forest, about 20 minutes by foot from the last metro stop. So it's still part of the city, but not – it feels like you're miles away. When you're in there you can't hear or feel the city. In 100 years time, when the trees are fully grown, we're going to cut the trees down and pulp it, make it into paper, and print this book, that's written now, but never for 100 years. Between now and then, we're inviting one author a year we're asking one author a year every year, so 100 writers will contribute to this anthology that will be printed on the forest in 100 years. We were really excited to announce that our first writer is Margaret Atwood.

That's a huge win! Do you have any other writers lined up or that you're asking?

Not yet. We're going to ask one writer a year. It's just always changing, always moving.

You have a beautifully minimalistic style - why do you prefer to keep things simple?

Thank you. I notice more and more the aesthetic in my artwork is monochrome; black or white, silver, neutral colors and hues. I'm drawn to bright whites, glacial greys, midnight blues, deep cosmic blacks, or even 'cosmic latte' – the color of the universe combined. This is the same in our home and studio. Perhaps having less overwhelming visual stimuli quietens the mind and allows a flowing imagination. I'm drawn to "wabi sabi" objects; and try to change the atmosphere in the space subtly with sounds and scents, and silence. I would like to start a collection of Japanese black glazed Raku ceramics. My ideas can seem simple, expressed in a few words, like haikus ("Call a glacier, listen to it melt" "A necklace of carved fossils sewn on era by era"). Right now I'm working on a book of 150 or so ideas, short text works to exist in the mind. Sometimes people are surprised by the lack of objects or things in my studio, but for me it's the natural way. Having only one piece of Egyptian petrified tree on the floor in the studio is enough stimuli for me. Contained within it is millions of years of geological time and history. When looked at closely, absolutely everything has so much detail, whether that's a micro grain of sand or a macro view of distant space. I am content to look at objects and phenomena for hours, days, weeks, and continually see something new. I always work better in a place that's quiet and doesn't have too many distractions going on. But it's not always like that sometimes, it's complete chaos. It's one or the other. It's all ordered and everything's done or we've got stuff everywhere exploding all over the studio.



What are these in the packaging? (pointing at neatly wrapped and labeled packages on a table)

These are from the Fossil Necklace. I've just finished it, but I thought these were kind of interesting.

Looking at the necklace and just how much it documents is really incredible.

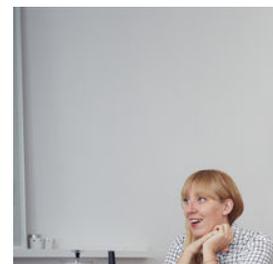
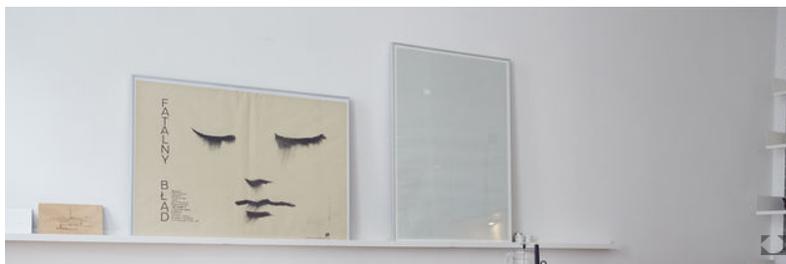
Yeah, I think that work probably took the longest of anything that we've worked on, because we had to learn so much. We had to learn about things like the major extinctions on the Earth. The necklace shows the first creatures to have eyes, the first thing to have wings, the first thing to breath, the very first cellular life ever to evolve on the planet. Then it goes around the whole of Earth's time and history. Eventually, it comes to us at the end. It traces the migration of people across the planet.

You've recently sent a meteorite into space, can you tell me about that?

It was a small hand held meteorite that I melted and recast and then it went up into the international space station. It was meteorite material, iron, nickel, a couple of strange trace elements. It was just like a doppelganger of itself it was exactly the same shape and form. It weighed 680 grams. I remember that because I also made a huge meteorite that went through the same process, but it was 120 kilo, which would have been the same quantity of air for all the astronauts for 6 months. It took a few weeks, and it did dock.

Would say that you live more in the past, present or future?

Oh, wow, all of them, just about. The past in that we find fossils from billions of years ago. Dying, stars where the light has taken a million something years to reach us. Very much in the very deep past, kind of cosmic past, but also in the future because the Future Library is really looking ahead to the future. It takes place now, but actually it kind of evolves over the 100 years. And then the present is pretty hard to ignore. It's also working with the present as well, because we're digging up the forest, and growing the trees, and working with things right now. Working with really modern technologies, and sending the meteorite into space. That was a very present thing, because we're watching it live, and a lot of the works are live as well.



I see you have some Vitra furniture – the Standard chair from Jean Prouvé, and Eames Plastic Side Chair and an Eames Plastic Armchair by Charles & Ray Eames. Can you tell me where did you find the pieces?

My artwork crosses over disciplines, from cosmology to jewellery, working with scientists, engineers, geologists, foresters, astronauts. It has a minimal aesthetic. I've always been drawn to graphic, product and furniture design too – through my artwork and personal tastes, and I'm beginning collaborations with product designers and architects right now. I pick up ideas wherever I go and a fairly recent trip to the Design Museum in Copenhagen had an influence in our studio design and the pieces we collect.

What attracted you to them?

My surroundings really influence my work. As I travel so much, my surroundings are constantly in flux, and the differences in tempos of dense cities, to remote and expansive landscapes, can reflect themselves in my artwork and ideas. My studio, where I always return to, is a kind of sanctuary. I like a calm, quiet, and undistracted atmosphere, where ideas can take form – a space for daydreaming. I was drawn to these pieces as when I walk into the studio or our home, the simplicity of the design in the objects surrounding me affects my state of mind. I spend a lot of time on the computer, so comfort is also important. Kenya Hara's book "White" is like a bible to me. In our studio, the surrounding whiteness is like a projection screen for the imagination. It allows me to really look at objects; whether that's the design of a stroke on the clock face of my planetary clocks series, or a miniscule fossil bead under the microscope, to a massive 2x3 meter 250 kilo metal map etched with all the dead stars.

How do you decide where they go in your home?

We are lucky that our home is downstairs from our studio, with separate entranceways, so we float between both places all the time, and so does our furniture. Both spaces change depending on the meeting, work, production processes, social occasions. Our spaces and furniture are adaptable, depending whether it's only me working, or a small team. Our two grey cats also have an impact, who love to lounge on, hang off, and scratch the fabric covered Eames chair.



Do you hope to expand your collection?

I do. I'm embarking on a large scale public commission in Bristol, UK a collaboration with the architects Zeller+Moye. We are creating a cave-like structure which will be built with all the world's tree species – literally tens of thousands of different pieces of wood. So right now I'm obsessed with wood. And tree houses, and forests. I would like to expand my collection, perhaps a wooden piece from the [Plywood Group](#). Lighting is very important to me – I worked on a piece Light bulb to Simulate Moonlight, a simple bulb which gives off a bright white-blue-yellow hazy light. I've got my eye on [Potence](#) by [Jean Prouvé](#) as a way to install the Moonlight bulb in a domestic setting.

Do you have a single favorite piece of furniture in your home or workspace?

My partner built all the main structures in our studio – the desks, shelving, storage spaces, upper bed. We designed each structure and planned every detail to hold perfectly our artworks, archive boxes, books, files, folders, packing, press, tools, equipment, different papers sizes and so on; what we didn't predict is how quickly they get filled! Sometimes my studio oscillates between chaos and order; huge fossil bones cluttering the place, tree branches, clock hands, paint, maps, perfumes, kaleidoscopes, diagrams, globes, metal cut outs, slides, crates, models, prototypes, marble, silver words, meteorites – then at other times – almost completely empty, when we pack up and start the next project. Plants and cacti have an important place in our studio and the balcony, bringing the seasons inside. I like to be surrounded by books – sometimes simply the title can spark some kind of new idea.

My 4-metre desk holds a whole plethora of administrative documents, but also my ever expanding stationary collection for my work *The Dying Star Letters*, where I write a letter each time a star dies. If we expand the studio I plan to build a wall-to-ceiling glass cabinet containing all the fossil dust from the remains from *Fossil Necklace*. One day we are keen to design our own home.

Photography: John Brömstrup

Text: Alicia Reuter

See more of this portrait on [Freunden von Freunden](#).