



End-of-the-pier show

A Kent seaside will be a magnet for the storms of the world, reports Louise Cohen

Who says artists don't tackle the big issues? Katie Paterson (below) has camped next to a glacier, mapped the Universe's exploded stars and looked back in time 13 billion years. In light of the Cumbrian flooding last month and the global issues being discussed in Copenhagen, it's an oeuvre that seems particularly topical.

I'm waiting for Paterson in a coffee shop in Camden, North London, when she shuffles in — a slightly shy person, smiling sweetly in a bobble hat. She's on her way to Deal in Kent, where she will be installing her latest project, *Streetlight Storm*, on the pier.

"The pier has 20 lamps, and they're going to flicker in time with lightning storms as they happen everywhere from the North Pole to North Africa," Paterson says. "They'll all be going at once. Loosely, the brighter they are, the nearer the storm."

Is Paterson some kind of technological wizard? "God, I don't know anything about technology," she giggles. "I just have these ideas and then I have to work out how to do them — or get other people to do them."

In this case, Martin Füllekrug, a lightning expert at the University of Bath, has devised an antenna — "just like a big bit of chicken wire" — that picks up electrical signals from the lightning strikes. These are isolated as audio waves, which are then connected electronically to the lights, courtesy of the engineer Ken Doyle.

So does Paterson intend her work as an environmental wake-up call? "In a way, but it's more just about something that's really far away but visualised through something that's near by. I like working with everyday things, like radios or mobile phones."

She's thinking particularly of the work that launched her career in 2007. Having studied in Edinburgh, the Glasgow-born Paterson took her MA at the Slade. For her degree show she put a phone number on the wall in neon lights that allowed visitors to hear a glacier melting live.

"I camped with the equipment on the edge of a glacier in Iceland, and we submerged an underwater mike in the glacial lagoon," Paterson says. "It was connected to a mobile phone on auto answer, so you could hear the glacier melting away, a sort of crackling."

The piece was spotted by the director of Modern

Art Oxford, who gave Paterson her first solo show. Together with the glacier's number, Paterson exhibited another far-fetched creation, *Earth-Moon-Earth*. "All over the world there are radio hobbyists who send signals to the Moon in Morse code and reflect them back to Earth, but not all of it comes back so they compete to get a clear signal." Paterson's reinterpretation was to send the *Moonlight Sonata* to the Moon and have a digital piano play what came back — with gaps for the lost signals, presumably bouncing around the solar system. "I know, it's totally bonkers."

Bonkers it may be, but Paterson is a hit. That work — along with light bulbs replicating moonlight and a laser-etched map of the Universe's no-longer-existent stars — has been exhibited in Stockholm and New York as well as Tate Britain's *Aftermodern* exhibition last year. She has won awards and funding that allow her to keep working on this scale.

Paterson divides her time between her family in Glasgow, Camden, where she lives with her partner, also an artist, and Berlin, where she also has a flat. "I love Berlin, and I'm thinking about moving there," she says, "but I have to go where the work is at the moment." In 2010 that will mean going to South Korea for a solo show, a tour of the seaside towns of South England with *Streetlight Storm*, and, most excitingly, a trip to Hawaii.

She is elaborating on another previous work, *Ancient Darkness*, an image taken from the W. M. Keck Observatory that sits above the clouds on the summit of an Hawaiian volcano. Consisting of two 10m telescopes that can work in conjunction, it is so powerful that it can look 13 billion years into the past. "Yeah, it's real!" she gasps. "Every time we look into the sky everything is in the past because of the distance. Even the light from the Sun is a few minutes old.

So when we look at our closest galaxy, it's 25,000 years in the past. Now they are looking so far back that they've got to within 5 per cent of the big bang. We're nearly looking at the beginning of the Universe."

These are the daydreams of astrologers, sci-fi geeks and journalists everywhere. But a lot of people will question whether it has anything to do with art. "I find it hard to explain my work sometimes, because sometimes I don't understand it myself," Paterson admits. "I can't get my head around how the telescope works either — but that's why it's so interesting."

Streetlight Storm, supported by Vauxhall Motors and Albion Gallery in partnership with Turner Contemporary and Whitstable Biennale, runs from Dec 21 to Jan 30 on Deal Pier

