

# ME AND MY METEORITE

Artist Katie Paterson is interested in all things astral and her latest work, the centrepiece of this summer's Exhibition Road Show, will be based on something that has fallen to Earth, she tells **Ben Luke**

FOR eight days at the end of July, just as the Olympics begin, Exhibition Road will for much of the time be closed to the usual onslaught of South Kensington traffic to make way for acrobats, ballroom dancing, live music and performing cyclists.

This planned chaos will be the Exhibition Road Show, a free festival to celebrate the Games, and lying quietly on the pavement amid the frantic activity will be an enigmatic, discreet and unimaginably ancient object: a meteorite about 50cm across, and around four and a half billion years old, which has been transformed into a new artwork by Katie Paterson. The 30-year-old Glaswegian will cast the meteorite before melting it down and then recasting it as itself.

The commission from Paterson, whose creations are often a fusion of art and science, is fitting given Exhibition Road's position between the V&A and the Natural History and Science Museums. Part mad-professor experiment and part coolly conceptual minimalist object, it is typical of her work. She has set up a phone line connected to the sounds of an Icelandic glacier, bounced Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata off the Moon and back to Earth via radio technology, and, as her current show at Haunch of Venison reveals, broadcast a minute of darkness from the farthest reaches of the universe on TV.

So what of her plan for Exhibition Road? "The meteorite is older than Earth," she says. "It is this incredible object that has been floating through space and time for billions of years, and

then it crashes in on Earth. Normally, they remain as static objects here but I am going to almost reform its layers of cosmic history."

Because they are usually behind glass on a plinth, I have always imagined that meteorites are precious objects. "I find that they are precious things," she agrees, "but there are an awful lot more of them than you might think. There are hundreds of thousands of meteorites on Earth."

As with all her projects, she is in the midst of extensive, and clearly enthusiastic, study. She tells me there are three types of meteorite which descend

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from the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter to Earth – iron, stony and stony-iron – and it is the iron type, essentially an alloy of iron and nickel, that she needs to be able to realise her idea. Where exactly does one get a meteorite?

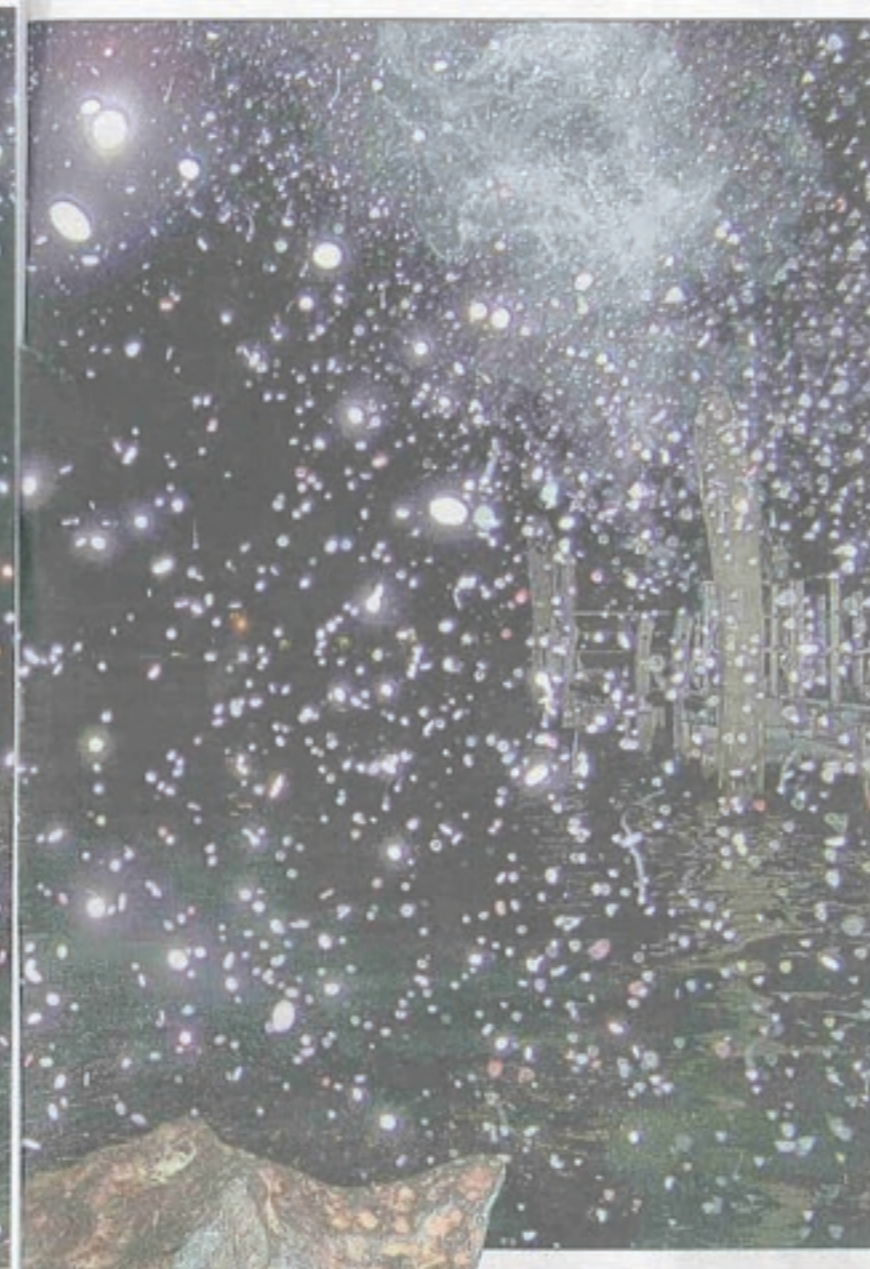
"You can buy them via various websites and there are auctions, and catalogues. I've got my eye on quite a few of them but I haven't decided which one I want yet. I'd like it to be quite substantial in size ... but they are extremely heavy." She has already bought a tiny fragment of meteorite from the Campo del Cielo crater in Argentina, "the size of a large pebble, which definitely feels like something

that is not from Earth – it is very strange". She wants viewers to experience this strangeness, "to gather round it, touch it and get close to it".

Paterson's science obsession began in the year between her degree in fine art at Edinburgh College of Art (surprisingly, she did not attend the prolific art school in Glasgow) and her Masters at the Slade in London. On a whim, she decided "just to take off for Iceland" and got a job as a waitress and chambermaid in a hotel there. "It was all very spontaneous but I'm so glad I decided to do that because it had a big impact on the work that was to come."

Like many visitors to Iceland she was stunned by the elemental landscape. "Being around all these incredible natural events such as the glaciers and the exploding geysers and volcanoes, where the earth is warm and it is moving, I suddenly had the sense that here I am, standing on the planet and it is revolving around another star. I hadn't had that sense before, so that's when I started looking deeper into ideas of time and space and cosmology."

Her Icelandic journey directly influenced the work that first caught the art world's attention. For her Slade MA show, Paterson created a neon sign which spelt out a mobile phone number. If you dialled, you were connected to a live feed of the gurgles and trickles of an Icelandic glacier, into whose lagoon Paterson had plunged an underwater microphone. The work focused on our disconnection with nature, she says, and sought to "collapse the distance" between this ancient geological phenomenon and a



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**Cosmic girl:** Katie Paterson's creations, such as her 100 Billion Suns work (left), currently on show at Haunch of Venison, are a fusion of art and science. For the Exhibition Road festival, Paterson (far left) will melt down and recast a meteorite like the one she has purchased (below middle) from the Campo del Cielo crater in Argentina (below).

human phone call: "The timescale of human life related to the timescale of the glacier," she explains.

Since then, Paterson has gone "from Iceland to the furthest edge of the universe". She talks with wonder about visiting the Keck observatory at the summit of a dormant volcano in Hawaii, whose telescope she used to film Ancient Darkness TV (2009), her one-minute long film of darkness from the furthest point of the observed universe, 13.5 billion years ago.

A spell as artist-in-residence in the astrophysics department at University College London has proved particularly fruitful. In her Haunch of Venison show, several works relate to Gamma Ray Bursts – explosions in deep space which "burn with the luminosity of 100 billion suns", she says. "They are quite unimaginable concepts really, and that is what I find really interesting. We're finding these astonishing things – with these huge telescopes we can look back almost to the Big Bang – and it is so difficult to conceive of that. So how do we think of it, and relate to it? I suppose those are the questions that are coming up when I make the work."

As well as expressing awe, Paterson maintains a sense of humbleness in the face of these cosmic events that is palpable in her modest and subtle works. "There is also a sense of absurdity to some of it," she says. Her condolence letters written on the death of distant stars are a case in point. "They are funny and people react to them like that, and that is obviously fine."

Who knows what revellers in Exhibition Road will make of the meteorite that has landed in their path at this summer's festival. "What is amazing is that an extraordinary number of people are going to be passing, obviously, during the Olympics and on that extremely busy road, so it is a brilliant opportunity to have people from all over the place experiencing the work," she says.

And what happens to the meteorite when the festival ends? "I'd like to send it back into space," she says. Nasa should expect a call.

■ The Exhibition Road Show runs from July 28 to August 5 (exhibitionroadshow.co.uk); Katie Paterson's exhibition at Haunch of Venison, W1 (020 7495 5050, haunchofvenison.com) runs until April 28; katiepaterson.org