

Katie Paterson: Hollow · Syzygy

Royal Fort Gardens Bristol 9 May onwards

The Lowry Manchester 29 April to 21 August

Tucked away in a corner of a lush Royal Fort Gardens in Bristol is a newly commissioned timber grotto. It is made from substantial untreated squared-off columns of peach-hued douglas fir that jut straight out of the ground at various heights like an organic growth on the gently mounded grass. Its entrance – there for you to find, rather than be presented with – doesn't welcome you with open arms. It is slight, in height and width, forcing you to make a physical adjustment before entering: you duck, turn three quarters and tread carefully. You find yourself anticipating and adapting to the unfamiliar environment in a way that we seldom have to these days. This is *Hollow*, 2016, a new public artwork by Katie Paterson (Profile AM338), designed in collaboration with architects Zeller and Moye and produced by Situations (which, incidentally, brought another wooden structure to Bristol earlier this year, in the form of Theaster Gates's *Sanctum*).

Hollow's exterior has something of the low-tech shrunken Superman's Fortress of Solitude to it, and yet the scale of its interior shrinks further by comparison – allowing for one person comfortably, two at an intimate squeeze. But what it purposefully lacks in spaciousness it more than makes up for in generosity of materials, spirit, imagination and ambition. Made from over 10,000 species of wood collected from around the globe, from every continent but Antarctica, this chamber consists of variously sized, textured and coloured blocks of wood stuck together, from floor to ceiling, giving the impression of a pixelated crystalline grotto. The colour range – highlighted through frosted glass openings that speckle the cavity below with irregular dappled light – is wide, from deepest black to pink, from green to a pine-yellow. These cubes and rods are like mathematical units of counting, similar to old Cuisenaire rods. They appear at once to measure and abstract in three-dimensional form a deep-time excavation of the history of the tree genus, ranging from the most recent species at the top to the oldest species, some of which are fossilised and sparkle, gem-like, beneath your feet.

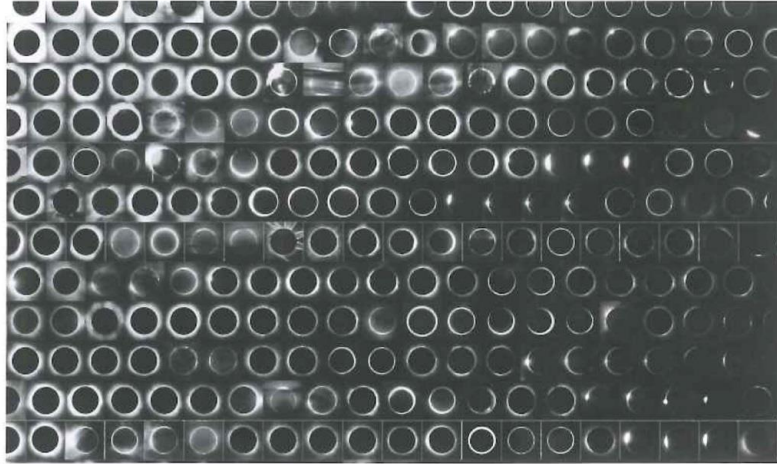
The nature of this truly cross-disciplinary collaborative affair – heavily researched and long in the making – is characteristic of

Paterson. But unlike many such interdisciplinary undertakings, most art funders' catnip, she manages to encapsulate her research into a highly refined visual analogue without any need necessarily for extensive explanatory text. Paterson is quite clear on this: 'experience', she tells me, 'is another way of learning'. Experience comes first; text, maybe later.

Her concurrent solo show, 'Syzygy' at the Lowry, displays the breadth of her ambition. Paterson's subject matter again is not modest: space and time, life and death, light and dark, science and art. Environmental concerns come to the fore in works like those based on Icelandic glaciers. In one she records the sound of their melting in situ, accessible to anyone via a phone line set up for the purpose, but more interesting are her three films, for which she collected samples of meltwater from three Icelandic glaciers which she later froze into moulds of LPs; we see and hear the samples being played on turntables, crackling, dripping and roaring in regular cycles until they melt completely.

'Syzygy' also reflects Paterson's interest in bringing barely fathomable cosmological scales of time and space into relation with human scales. Her new commission, *Ara*, 2016, sees a simple line of lightbulbs strung up across the open gallery ceiling and wired at various degrees of luminosity to represent the relative light in a constellation. In *Timepieces (Solar System)*, 2014, nine clocks are designed to tell the relative time of our nearest nine planets. And *The Dying Star Letters*, 2011, is a collection of obituary letters which she writes every time she is informed of the death of a star. All of these works involve similarly simple gestures which are nevertheless condensations of enormous cosmic events, only made possible by means of high-tech research and innovation. Paterson's goal is to allow us to experience relationships from which we often feel detached, due to their scientific complexity or enormity of scale. Her work communicates a form of knowledge on an epiphenomenological level which a rote learning of facts, such as that the duration of a day in Mercury is 4,223 hours, renders almost meaningless.

Much of what you encounter here has an air of seriousness to it: pared back use of colour (black, white and grey abound), simply designed clock faces, Morse code prints of a musical composition, a series of letters typed or handwritten on paper. In other ways there is something of Martin Creed's aesthetic to it, resulting in fun and joyousness in works like *100 Billion Suns*, 2011, in which a



Paterson releases 3,216 pieces of brightly coloured circular confetti every morning in the gallery (these are colour coded to represent the particular make-up of gamma ray bursts, the brightest electromagnetic explosions in the universe). Or *Totality*, 2016, another new commission at the Lowry, in which a giant mirror ball is inset with over 10,000 images of eclipses gathered worldwide and dramatically lit to give the room in which it spins the impression of an underwater phosphorescence or cosmic whirl.

Most impressive is the fact that Paterson's works, though highly conceptual, maintain a close connection between their means and ends. Paterson manages to convey the essence of a concept's complexity without pushing you away. This is practice-based research *par excellence*, where the process of abstracting complex ideas and transforming them into simple experiences both forms and informs the work. ■

LIZZIE LLOYD is a writer and translator based in Bristol.

Katie Paterson
Totality 2016