

LUMINESCENCE

CONCEPTUAL ARTIST KATIE PATERSON TAKES ON THE UNSEEN FORCES OF THE COSMOS AND BEYOND.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL FORDHAM

Artist Katie Paterson breathes life into the elements that make up Earth and the cosmos. Whether she is mapping the death of all the dead stars known to science, recording and transmitting the sound of a melting glacier or reflecting music from the surface of the moon, her work enables us to engage in a dialogue with forces too immense or too abstract for us to engage with in other ways.

"Hopefully that's what happens when you confront the work. It expands to become something much more than what you're faced with in the gallery," Katie tells me over coffee as a diffuse morning light angles in from the window of her kitchen. What you'll find at a Katie Paterson exhibition might be sheets of black steel pinpricked with light; a simple docket documenting recorded time; a cluster of light bulbs that simulate moonlight; transmitter-receivers and speakers emitting the sounds of dying stars and melting glaciers; Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata bounced from the moon. But these physical elements are simply the thin skin of a set of profound enquiries into the nature of things that is at the heart of the work.

Though the minimalist veneer of Katie's art might hint at the contrary, she is actually working firmly in the Romantic tradition, a tradition in which the artist enquires into the nature of the sublime, and in which landscape, moonlight and cosmos are acknowledged as manifestations of human imagination. "There's always this sense of scepticism, if that's the right word, encoded into my work. How possible is it, for example, to replicate moonlight? How possible can it be to listen to the sound of a dead star?"

Considering the scale and ambition of her art, the twenty-seven-year-old Glaswegian remains remarkably down-to-earth. She lives and works for the moment where we sit, at the edge of London's Victoria Park (though she's about to visit Berlin on

a recce for a potential permanent move). But the day-to-day practice of what she does involves constantly meeting, learning from and exchanging ideas with astronomers, ice and rock scientists, communications technicians as well as the odd Zen master. Though she walks the Earth like the rest of us, there is a luminescent delicacy about her that reflects, perhaps, the intangibility of the ideas to which her work gives form. "There's an obvious environmental connotation to a lot of my work, of course. But it was never my intention to make overt environmental or political statements. They are actually very quiet pieces."

That profound quietness resonates throughout Katie's work. It is a silence through which the whole of life and the breadth of the imagination can be drawn. Like the deep well created by Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami at the centre of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the emptiness is deep and all-encompassing, yet at one and the same time it represents the whole of existence.

Having collaborated with UCL astronomers while studying at Slade School of Art, she is hoping next year to take up the post of Artist-In-Residence at UCL's Department of Astronomy. In the meantime, the bicentenary of Charles Darwin's birth has brought her a grant that will enable her to travel to Hawaii to work at the Mauna Kea observatory with Cal Tech astronomer Richard Ellis. "Richard is trying to find the first star, the very origins of the universe. I'm interested in how you can conceptualise that, how you can evoke the light that emits from the beginning of time." The question that emerges is this: at the furthest reaches of enquiry, at the place where Katie creates, do science and art become one?

www.katiepaterson.org

