

# In Tandem

## A Short Essay on *Parallel Universe*

Stephen McLaughlan Gallery

April 3 -27, 2019

Someone once said that all good research should begin “at the point of greatest astonishment.” Find that, and you – as an artist or scientist - will probably have found your central research question, stoking your curiosity for months, years, often decades inside your studio or laboratory. In her catalogue essay, artist and curator Felicity Spear offers us the following, astonishing, question, “What if beyond our dislocated dreams we could sense a parallel universe made possible because we could see more of the information which we cannot now see? A universe which another being might perceive but humans might not.” It is from this foundational question that the whole of this varied-as-the-universe-itself exhibition grows.

Ten artists, including Spear herself, bring us mostly visual takes on this great big, ornate, cathedral of a universe that we sentient beings inhabit. Mostly, we have stumbled about in the dark. But in the past few, short, centuries, briefer in the scheme of things than the life of a mayfly – from the Renaissance to the large hadron collider – some members of our tribe, let’s call them scientists, have illuminated that darkness with countless tiny-as-a-grain-of-sand pieces of the grand jigsaw puzzle. Others – let’s call them artists – have responded to these discoveries with a sense of awe and wonder, giving sensual, emotional, and consciousness expanding form to what might otherwise be raw data and nascent hypotheses. Both the artist and the scientist look into the universe through different ends of the same telescope. Both are equally important to the rest of our tribe. And some, like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, embody both the artist and the scientist in the one curious being, existing without intellectual boundaries. I often describe Michelangelo’s *David* as the perfect inter-disciplinary PhD project. It took three years to complete, and it embodied (in marble) more about the circulation of the blood than any text in written form.

Look at how the weight placed on one ankle raises the adjoining blood vessel...scientific discovery through artistic practice.

This is a small exhibition – but what is small? The tiny grain of sand I mentioned above is as big as a galaxy compared to a sub-atomic particle. And these exquisite, challenging, artworks give us a glimpse into not just the exterior universe, but the interior shadow worlds of the ten artists involved. In Stephen McLaughlan's light-filled eyrie of a gallery, there is a lot of mapping going on. And while the Situationists instructed us that "the map is not the territory" there are times when maps of all kinds – psychological, practical, emotional – are necessary to locate and ultimately *define* the territory.

These ten very much sentient artists each create their own parallel universe through different forms of technological matter and creative – often poetic - application. Magda Cebokli, whose powerful black and white, acrylic on linen abstractions *Sensorium* hover between the Op Art sleight of hand of Bridget Riley and the painful lashes of the disco strobe lamp, probably speaks for many of the artists when she writes in the room notes, in relation to discoveries such as X-Rays, CAT scans, and the Hubble telescope, "what we 'know' is still biased by the structure of the tools we use to gain information and by how we interpret that information."

Anne Scott Wilson with her *Ghost in the Machine* video, definitely takes a poetic turn using the skills of the dancer Charles Ball. Her work is a love letter to the drone. One moving us through choreography, the other through algorithms. And with a brilliantly apposite quote from Paul Virilio she writes about a sort of robot-Cartesian Dualism, "In a way, technologies have negated the transcendental God in order to invent the machine-God. However, these two gods raise similar questions."

Harry Nankin's *Damselfly Nebula*, an image captured as a photogram, reminds us of how much more advanced and evolved nature is than human, minerals-based technologies. Instead of drones, he favours damselflies. "Like a starry nebula, the swarm of insects orbits the light. This playful analogy between tiny lives and the heavens attends to the importance of scale in everything we perceive. Like the size of a damselfly relative to a nebula. Or, like

the simple external appearance of an insect compared to the intricacies of its biochemistry, evolutionary history or ecological role.” Ultimately, this work is a warning to us all when Nankin concludes, “Stranded in the falsely-scaled hubris of anthropic domination, our collective trajectory appears to be towards an ever-deepening ecological crisis.”

The term “expanded field” has in recent decades been tagged on to formerly discrete subsections of the visual arts, such as “the expanded field of painting”. Sam Leach, in a highly intelligent observation of what might be called “the expanded field of the expanded field” takes this into non-art areas such as biology and evolution with his wittily titled *Proposal for Owl Lunar Extravehicular Helmet*. He writes, “the understanding of human perception is continually refined through biological research on non-human animals and the ability of non-humans to perceive aspects of the world humans are not biologically capable of sensing expands our knowledge of the world. This expanded field will be crucial in future explorations.” When contemplating this beautiful work of oil and resin on wood it’s difficult to avoid the word “masterpiece” (even with its gendered implications).

One subsection of my own research area of Superfictions is what I call “Adventurism”, seen in the works of Michael Candy, Robert Zhao Renhui, and Clare McCracken, to name but three dynamic practitioners. I would place Debbie Symons in this sub-genre when you consider the totality of what went into her awesome (in the true sense of the word) hand-blown glass installation *Sing*, and its accompanying drawings. Spear describes Symons’ works as “techno-romantic”. Symons recently returned from a residency in the Amazon rainforest and was intrigued and fascinated by the precarious suspension of the yellow-rumped cacique nests, hanging above the surface of the flooded forest. In the Gallery Symons has suspended her glass nests from the ceiling. She writes of the genesis of this project, “The reflection of the birds’ nests against the night sky in the waters below added to the otherworldliness of this vulnerable and conflicted place. Embedded within the fragility of their materiality and superimposing reflections of the night sky, they elude to undiscovered multiverses while also reflecting our own.”

One of the exciting aspects of a group exhibition like this is it gives artists a chance to experiment in new areas and with new techniques. This is true for several artists in Parallel

Universe, but none more so than Lesley Duxbury, whose career highlights have included exhibiting in parallel with Constable and Turner at the National Gallery of Australia, and undertaking some pretty exciting residencies and adventures of her own. In her inkjet print *Closing the Distance*, her work moves visually into an almost sci-fi realm of the extraordinary emerging from the quotidian. What are we looking at here? Is it a newly formed ice-covered planet in a distant galaxy? Or is it an up-close and grubby micro-shot of an ice-covered pavement in suburbia? Sometimes not knowing is the point at which wonder begins.

Continuing the “adventurist” theme, Tarja Trygg in her work *Is Anybody There?* produces a fabulous work of what I call “synthetic modernism” whereby old and new technologies are synthesised, rather than presented in opposition, with modernism and post-modernism vying like a footie match. Specifically, in Trygg’s case, pin-hole and solar photography, birthed through digital printing. She lives in Finland. There, where the seasons seem to change with an unusual rapidity, she captured an exposure over many months. Trygg’s point of greatest astonishment produced the question, “If humanity is set on a path of destruction, is there another option?” Her answer is both eloquent and sublime.

Vicki Hallett is a committed interdisciplinary researcher whose sound installation *Beyond Our Hertz* “extends and expands acoustic ecology as an immersive, socially engaged, accessible and interdisciplinary field that can inspire the community to listen to the environment and sonically explore the cultural and biological diversity of ecosystems.” To grasp the immensity of her project, and its global reach, I will simply list her source material and those who helped her along the way. “Sound source location and thanks to: Great Artesian Basin, South Australia, Limpopo Province, South Africa, Dr Ros Bandt’s Acoustic Sanctuary, Fryerstown, Victoria, Australia, African forest elephant - courtesy the Elephant Listening Project at Cornell University, USA, Blue whale and ice crashing - courtesy Dr Brian Miller and the Australian Antarctic Division.” Hallett is a creator of universes, parallel, personal, and peripatetic. And if I need a link to the next artist, who is also the curator of this ground-breaking exhibition, it is the exclamation “WOW”.

It was my privilege, many years ago, to examine the studio-based PhD submission of Felicity Spear at Monash University. I guess “WOW” would, in microcosm, describe my examiner’s report. Her interests draw on other disciplines as well understanding that they are not mutually exclusive. In her room notes to Parallel Universe she asks the question, “What was the ‘WOW’ signal? Was it a cryptic message from an ‘other’ universe?” And she answers it in two very different ways – through the complex drawing geometries of *Many Worlds*, that also show her to be an accomplished colourist, and through painting *Umwelt*, a beneath-the-radar exposition of bat navigation. Spear shows a generosity of spirit and commitment to her fellow artists, mounting ongoing series of such group exhibitions when she might be spending all her time in her own studio. Not only does she showcase the careers of her contemporaries, but she gifts the end result to us all. And she underpins her futuristic speculations with solid historical references, whether it be to Neil Armstrong taking the first moon walk fifty years ago this year, or in 1909, the German biologist Jakob von Uexküll making the observation, which, she writes, “escapes most of us, that different animals in the same ecosystem tune in to different environmental signals. These are fundamental to their communication and signification. The small subset of the world, which an animal is able to detect, he describes as its ‘umwelt’. A parallel universe perhaps?”

Throughout cultural history, poetry has been a parallel universe to the visual arts. Many great artists, such as William Blake, have also been equally great poets, while others have been hugely influenced by, and collaborated with, poets. One of the stand-out exhibitions running parallel to the last Venice Biennale was “Philip Guston and the Poets”. And the great art movement of Surrealism was such a blend of the two it was often difficult to tell which was influencing the other. Michael Vale is a natural and brilliant exponent of what might be called neo-surrealism – as was the Scottish painter Steven Campbell, and the contemporary Melbourne painter Peter Ellis. Vale, who I know is a gifted and inspiring lecturer at Monash University, describes his contribution to Parallel Universe as “a neo-gothic sunset of the conscious mind.” A lesser curator than Spear might not have had the imagination to include such an important painting *The Red Triangle* by such an important artist within this show. But when you see it hanging there, in close proximity to Tarja Trygg,

Vicki Hallett, and Debbie Symons you realise it is possibly the linchpin of the entire exhibition. It speaks to the past and of an imaginary future. It is free of advanced technology yet seems to exist somewhere in the future. I once wrote an essay for *Times Higher Education* (London) called "Matisse and the iPhone" which posited that long after today's state of the art technology looked as dated as your grandfather's flares or your older brother's audio cassettes, Matisse's great painting *The Dance*, would still be up ahead of us, beckoning us into the future, to a parallel universe that is both embodied and out-of-body. Of the brain, but also of the imagination and the senses. A parallel universe operating under different laws of physics and (e)motion.

This is an important exhibition, and I can imagine an expanded, international version of it sitting very well indeed within one of the gallery venues of the Wellcome Foundation, say, in London, or the ArtScience Museum, Singapore, alongside artists with similar concerns such as Annie Cattrell (Glasgow/London), Hubert Duprat (France), and Adeline Kueh (Singapore). Highly recommended!

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**Dr Peter Hill is an artist, writer, and independent curator. He is an Adjunct Professor at RMIT University, Melbourne. As an artist, he has exhibited in the Sydney Biennale (MCA), and the Museum of Modern Art (Oxford). As a memoirist, his book *Stargazing, Memoirs of a Young Lighthouse Keeper*, won Scotland's main literary prize, a Saltire Award. It was read on the BBC as a "Book of the Week" by David Tennant whose alter-ego Dr Who remains popular culture's leading proponent of parallel universes. He has contributed to *The London Review of Books*, *Frieze*, *ARTnews* (New York), *Artpress* (Paris), *Asian Art News* (Hong Kong), *Vault* (Melbourne), *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*.**