



**Daniel Armstrong**

**Lesley Duxbury**

**Harry Nankin**

courtesy of Dianne Tanzer Gallery

**Magda Cebokli**

courtesy of Dianne Tanzer Gallery

**Sam Leach**

courtesy of Nellie Castan Gallery

**Felicity Spear**

# Sky Lab

**Image: Apollo 11 Launch courtesy of NASA**

**Exhibition curated by Felicity Spear**

*Sky Lab*, as the title suggests, is an experiment. The questions: when we look towards the sky what do we see? What is 'out there?' How do we understand it from 'back here?' Increasingly we are looking beyond our planet to speculate about our place in the Universe. From a cosmic perspective science tells us that Earth is a totally insignificant speck of dust in an expanding and accelerating Universe. It will eventually disappear, cooling to the point of extinction. We are 'Earthlings' made from that dust. The artists involved in *Sky Lab* are experimenting in diverse ways with the culture and technologies of sky-situated knowledge.

Fifty years ago in 1959 C.P. Snow delivered his famous Rede Lecture, *The Two Cultures*, drawing our attention to the growing divide between the humanities and sciences. He stressed the need for a greater degree of literacy in both scientific and cultural respects. The increasing specialization and complexity of science has meant that in general the public mind sees science as inaccessible, and to an extent the same might be said of art. This has taken place in the context of a technologically driven and rapidly changing globalised world where we are being both connected more closely, and also drawn apart through complex communication systems. As our perspective changes and we find ourselves challenged by the urgent problem of sustaining life and biodiversity on Earth, new conversations between art and science, in both Western and Indigenous cultures, have the potential to contribute to new thinking.

One of the values of history is to remind us, for better or worse, of where we come from. It is 40 years since the spacecraft Apollo 11 Moon Landing and humans' first steps beyond Earth. These steps had their birth in a long historical trajectory. 400 years ago Galileo constructed his telescope. Looking into the night sky for the first time beyond the naked eye he saw the planet Jupiter surrounded by its moons. At the time his discovery supported the highly contentious Copernican view that Earth belonged to a solar-centered planetary system. In 2009, the International Year of Astronomy pays homage to Galileo.

2009 also marks 150 years since Charles Darwin published *The Origin of the Species*. His research into evolution via genetic variation and natural selection shows that we are genetically related to all living things on Earth. This has become the central organizing principle in biology. It plays a significant role in astronomy and cosmology by referring to the way in which the Universe changes over time. These events have grown out of a belief that science is our most reliable knowledge system for understanding the physical world. Artists are also drawn to the understanding and representation of nature, however, while remaking nature on the basis of understanding, they are not accountable to demonstrate proof. In this way artists are able to find a poetic dimension or insight that speaks of things outside art in new ways. F.S.

<b>Opening</b>	<b>Exhibition</b>	<b>Continuing</b>	<b>Stephen McLaughlan Gallery Melbourne</b>
<b>Thurs 3</b>	<b>2-19</b>	<b>13-30</b>	<b>Level 8 Nicholas Building 37 Swanston St</b>
<b>December</b>	<b>December</b>	<b>January</b>	<b>The corner of Flinders Lane 0407 317 323</b>
<b>6-8pm</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>Wed to Fri 1-5pm Saturday 11am-5pm</b>

## Daniel Armstrong

In his book, *Seeing and Believing*, Richard Panek suggests that the invention of the telescope created a pivotal division between the world we inhabit today and the world of our ancestors. When Galileo turned his simple telescope to the heavens all horizons disappeared and the concept of spatial boundaries was replaced with the concept of infinity. To look into the night sky through a telescope is to elevate ones sense of vision beyond its physiological limitations and to elevate ones consciousness beyond the immediate. When we look into deep space, we see into deep time. In this sense the telescope is an instrument of transcendence. Also central to this project is the notion of the blurred image, which has haunted the history of astronomy from Galileo to the present and inspired the desire to see further, and the quest to design more sophisticated and sensitive instruments of detection. We can now see further into the dark sky and hear the faintest whispers of ancient cosmological events. At this threshold the limits of representation are encountered and what we see is blurred.

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**Whisper To Me**  
Toy camera image - the Very Large Array  
New Mexico 2009  
Chromira digital print 600 x 600 mm



## Sam Leach

**The Lift** 2009  
Oil on Canvas  
1350 x 900 mm

The Russian cosmist believed that humans would ultimately have unlimited control over the cosmos. They held that future humans would use that control to find every atom of every human that had ever lived and literally recreate and resurrect them. They saw the colonising of space as a necessary first step to achieve that vision, and they were the pioneers of the highly successful Soviet space program, especially Fyodorov and Tsiolkovsky. I want to extend their vision to include non-human life as well as human - if space exploration can extend the viability of life beyond planetary timescales, then it will be of benefit to all life, not just humans. Further than that, I conjecture that technology itself is an extension of life and human consciousness. When painting, the brain creates the illusion that the brush is an extension of the hand, so that it is possible to feel the movement of bristles on canvas (whereas the actual sensation is the secondary vibrations of the handle). In these paintings I have based the images on the Shuttle robotic arm. The robot arm is based on a human arm, with shoulder, elbow and wrist. It is literally a prosthetic limb projected into space. I like the idea that the tip of the robot arm projected into space is also the tip of the extension of human consciousness.



## Magda Cebokli

**Trace (grey#4)** 2009  
Acrylic on Linen  
1015 x 1015 mm



*Trace (grey#4)* is one of a series of works examining the visual alchemy that emerges from the repetition of a simple form. The series explores the relationship between the circle and the square and contemplates the shared ground of abstraction, mathematics and science. Like much of my work, it is also concerned with light and dark and the process of seeing.

Over millennia, the sky has been the field on which the human capacity for abstraction has been exercised. The history of astronomy is the history of the development and refinement of scientific thinking – it charts the movement backward and forward between observation and theory, question and answer, proposition and test.

For me, the making of abstract painting involves exploring a network of questions, one leading to the other and finally becoming articulated in a series of related works. The resultant series charts the process of the conceptualising that has gone on as well as any conclusions or findings that are arrived at. Perhaps not applied as rigorously as in a laboratory, the basic process is still the same and reflects a type of thinking that has more in common with the abstract and empirical sciences than usually recognised.

## Harry Nankin



**As birds hovering** 2001  
320 x 210 x 1680 mm (main object)  
Mixed Media

*As birds hovering* is a painted asymmetrical hardwood 'vessel' suspended above a mirror reflecting its projected shadow. The vessel is made of hardwood painted with acrylic emulsion, silver gelatine paper ash and resin. There is also the glass mirror, fine suspension wire and a powered overhead light globe. The title quotes Isaiah 31.5: "As birds hovering, so will the Lord of Hosts protect Jerusalem."

Naomi Cass has written: "With loving care, Harry Nankin lays the ... story of migration inside a vessel - carved from the hollowed-out elbow of a National Trust-registered 'Spotted Gum' (*Eucalyptus maculata*) reputedly planted in 1852 at Melbourne University from Queensland seed collected and donated by Ferdinand von Mueller - alongside the broader context of Jewish persecution and multiple identity in the Diaspora ... The interior of this craft is marked with imprints of Linden leaves and cryptic inscriptions in English, Hebrew, German and Greek, using ash-grey paint derived from burning photographic paper mixed with an acrylic base. Nankin presents a curious juxtaposition of discursive gestures: a sacred Hebrew text [the *Sh'ma*] is placed alongside organic and indigenous references such as the bark canoe, a coolamon or receptacle. His texts point towards ... a discontinuous cultural identity. The form itself recalls a boat, a coffin, perhaps a *Tiq* (Eastern Jewish case for the Torah or Five Books of Moses) or simply a receptacle for holding significance, indigenous or European. Carved paper thin, there are holes in this vessel: tradition is only a shell or husk of the past, but through which bright light passes and [leaves its] mark". (Naomi Cass *Tilia Europaea* August 2001 Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts) Above all, that light is the mysterious firmament of heaven reflected in the eyes and dreams of all the peoples of the world, far below.

## Lesley Duxbury

**Outer Site - day**  
(detail)  
**Outer Site - night**  
(detail)  
Inkjet prints 2009  
700 X 1000 mm

Every day above us great orbs spin slowly as they rise and set, circling the earth in wide arcs. Stars twinkle in formations and patterns identified with mythological figures and earthly forms appear and disappear from Southern skies on an annual timescale. But we are mostly unaware of these unceasing celestial movements and activities as we go about our daily lives preoccupied with what is beneath our feet or within our range of sight. The brilliance of the sun and the scattering of its light to create the blue of the sky completely obliterate any view beyond our atmosphere. And the view is no clearer at night for those of us who live in cities, for the distractions below may be so great that we never look up to see what's out there, or light pollution puts paid to any attempt from those with the inclination to see and experience the wonder just out of sight.



## Felicity Spear

Mapping Matter and Light:

It is now believed that the Universe consists of a set of interacting processes and relational fields where space and time are purely relative phenomena, and matter and energy are interchangeable. Space has been described as a membrane curved and distorted by the gravitational pull of matter. Recent sky surveys and mappings of various wavelength bands of electromagnetic radiation have enabled astrophysicists to observe the distribution of matter and light in the large-scale structure of the universe. They reveal collections of giant bubble-like voids separated by sheets and filaments of galaxies, with occasional relatively dense superclusters. It is thought that gravity, dark matter and dark energy, of which none is visible, contribute to sculpting the hollows and clumps seen at such scales. While remote sensing technologies stand in for first-hand sense experience, so ideas about mapping stand in for space, giving a form of visible reality to an invisible reality. Such models however are always embedded in the subjective conditions of human thinking, enabling us to imagine or reinvent different realities that have the potential to bridge the insights of art and science.

**Redshifted:**  
**As Far As We Can See**  
(Detail)  
Oil on linen 2009  
810 x 1120 mm

