

Quantum leap

Katie Paterson's visionary exploration of time, space and the beauty of the cosmos

By ELLEN PEIRSON-HAGGER

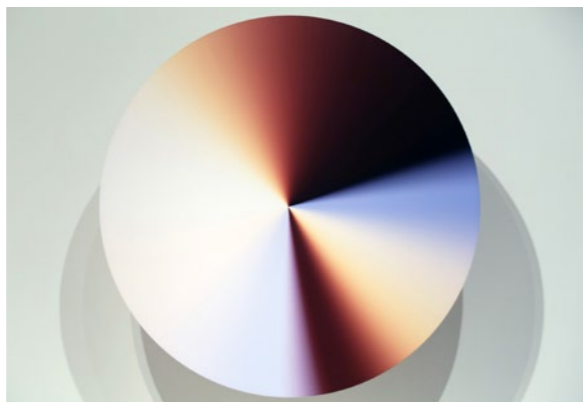
'Recently, I got a phone call from Nasa' isn't a phrase you often hear. But coming from Katie Paterson, the Scottish artist who once sent a meteorite back into space, it doesn't seem out of place. Since her 2007 graduate show, when she invited visitors to ring a phone number and listen to the sound of a melting glacier, Paterson has gained renown as one of the boldest creative talents of her generation, exhibiting in galleries all over the world, from London's Tate Britain and MCA Sydney to Vienna's Kunsthalle Wein and the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Yet she continues to turn the very notion of what it means to be an artist on its head.

We speak over the phone a few days after Paterson has returned home to Fife from a forest just outside Oslo, where she took part in the fifth annual handover ceremony for her work *Future Library*. In 2014, she planted 1,000 Norwegian spruce-trees, the wood from which supplies the paper for a unique anthology comprising 100 texts, each penned yearly by a different author (the first was Margaret Atwood) and kept in trust until, after a century, the library is complete. 'The ritual of it all has got me thinking,' says Paterson. 'I've just been there with my son, and when I was there last year I was pregnant. The project is 100 years long, just over the average length of a person's life. Most of the writers who will be involved aren't born yet, and those writing now will be deep within the past by the time the unborn ones start contributing.'

Future Library will outlive not only its inventor, but her contemporaries as well. By its very nature, Paterson's art is unlikely: she is concerned with notions that are just outside the bounds of human



Works by Katie Paterson from top left: 'Future Library', 'Hollow' (2016), 'The Cosmic Spectrum' (2019)



conception. 'Some of the ideas I have might not be possible right now, but they will be in a few years' time, when technology advances,' she says. Paterson first collaborated with scientists while studying at the Slade School of Fine Art, and recalls coming across UCL's Rock & Ice Physics Laboratory, where glaciers were stored in walk-in freezers. She has since worked with astronomers to map the locations of 27,000 constellations (*All the Dead Stars*, 2009) and with architects to bring together 10,000 unique tree species (*Hollow*, 2016). 'The biggest lesson is not to be held back by inhibition. I rely on the expertise of others,' she says.

It follows, then, that a call from Nasa would be the next step. 'I'm going to join their team as a space artist tour investigator,' Paterson explains. 'Nasa will be sending a spacecraft outside the Earth's atmosphere to collect cosmic dust, which will be used to analyse the making of the solar system.' She believes fervently in the importance of cross-disciplinary collaboration. 'I think scientists value having an artist on board. At Nasa, they're a bunch of people looking at squiggly lines. They find it hard to communicate that information and knowledge – that's where I come in.'

The power of Paterson's work lies in her ability to articulate technological ideas in a mesmerising, often emotional, way. 'I don't ever want to make anything too intangible or remote,' she says of her installations, which harness the power of the senses to express complex concepts. For a 2015 project, *Candle (from Earth into a Black Hole)*, she designed a scented candle made from layers that contain perfumes associated with different planets or stars; over the 12 hours it takes to burn down, visitors are led on a journey through space via scent. More recently, her digital artwork *The Cosmic Spectrum* (2019) – a constantly spinning spectrum wheel – captures the colour of the universe throughout its existence, showing how it would have been perceived in each era by the average human eye.

Many of these projects will come together this autumn in an exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, the sixth and final display in a series called 'NOW'. It will be a special show for Paterson – her biggest in Scotland to date – in a museum she used to visit regularly as an undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh. But Paterson doesn't look back, only forward, and beyond. 'I want my work to revitalise our lifespans with other species and timelines, and give us the opportunity to picture ourselves at other viewpoints,' she says. 'We live a very fleeting life, but we are all connected to the expanse of the universe.' □

'NOW' is at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (www.nationalgalleries.org) from 26 October to 31 May 2020.



'Candle (from Earth into a Black Hole)' (2015). Below left: Paterson creating the 'Future Library' in Oslo. Below: a Campo del Cielo meteorite recast by Paterson and returned to space. Bottom: the creation of 'Campo del Cielo, Field of the Sky'

