

INTIMATE IMMENSITY

11.10.19 – 27.10.19

ALI BEZER, ANASTASIA BOOTH,
SUNDARI CARMODY, KINLY GREY,
JENNA LEE AND LISA SAMMUT

CURATED BY AMY-CLARE MCCARTHY
AND KATHERINE DIONYSIUS

For thousands of years, people have looked to the stars and the sky for mapping and wayfinding, to tell and share stories, and to try to understand our place in the infinite universe. Across different time periods and geographies, people have sought the spiritual through the celestial, and have been guided by the sun and the moon, through the changing light of day, and the rise and fall of the tides.

This exhibition began with the broad intention to bring together artworks that engage with the cosmos and our relationship to it. It is human instinct to attempt to orientate oneself within something monumental and unfathomable, and each of the artists in this exhibition translates the immense scale of cosmic time and space into tangible moments that make the infinite more personal. Central to this are considerations of how we perceive, relate to and interpret cosmic phenomena and celestial bodies, whether this is through science, myth or the spiritual.

Borrowing its name from a chapter in Gaston Bachelard's architectural text *The Poetics of Space* (1958), *Intimate Immensity* includes new and recent works by Ali Bezer, Anastasia Booth, Sundari Carmody, Kinly Grey, Jenna Lee and Lisa Sammut. The works in the exhibition span painting, video, sculpture and installation, and explore light, time, cosmic noise, constellations, black holes and dark matter.

Ali Bezer's work, *Static*, is part of her ongoing investigation into the visual and psychological effects of hearing unfamiliar sounds. Through her practice, she expresses abstract recorded noises through sculpture and installation pieces, materialising sonic timbres, tonalities and structures into visual textures and forms. At more than seven metres wide and four metres high, *Static* has significant presence in the gallery space. Its luminous, vertical forms of varying heights mimic radio waves. The work references the cosmic microwave background: electromagnetic radiation that fills all space, and is a remnant of the big bang. While optical telescopes show the space between stars and galaxies as dark, radio telescopes detect a faint background noise or glow, contrary to many depictions of space as quiet. We can see and hear an interpretation of this 'noise' with our own eyes and ears on analogue televisions and radios. The artist's own early

experience with cosmic noise was listening as a child to *Symphonies of the Planets*, recordings released by NASA from the Voyager missions. Bezer's work employs aluminium for its visual qualities, which allow it to serve as an interpretation of static. Its appearance is at once monochrome and multifarious, as it catches and reflects the different light.

In **Jenna Lee's** work, *Balarr*, the artist refers to the Larrakia¹ word, which can mean 'to light up', 'to make light' or 'to dawn'. While she works across a number of different mediums, Lee often creates artworks that involve paper, language and text. Some of her more recent work 'explores the transformation of the printed word through the act of destruction and reconstruction, seeking to translate them into a new tangible language.'² *Balarr* is part of Lee's ongoing practice of exploring the acts of identification and labelling, and the relationships formed between language, label and object. By repeating the word across three different works, Lee references the layered meaning that the word possesses—it could be understood to mean the starting of a fire, the lighting up of one's eyes, the feeling of lightness, the first light of the day, or the first light in the universe. In some ways, the work implies the limitations of language, particularly written language that is void of tone or context, but it also suggests that language can be used to capture complex ideas within something tangible—it contains multitudes.

This sense of plurality is evident in **Kinly Grey's** practice, which they have described as intersections of the intimately personal and the cosmically reflective.³ For *Intimate Immensity*, Grey has produced a circular, orange, neon sculpture, whose circumference is informed by the artist's height. Suspended from the ceiling at Grey's shoulder height, the Vitruvian object emits a powerful orange glow that lights up the darkened space. The work imagines a black hole, and is visually similar to the first image of a black hole that was released earlier this year by the Event Horizon Telescope team. Like an event horizon—the boundary surrounding a black hole—the circular neon serves as a positive form that implies an invisible, unknowable form within.

Titled *expanding bodies*, Grey's work extends our experience of the human body to cosmic bodies. Like the universe, human bodies are not fixed; they are constantly growing, changing, expanding, shrinking. Through the work, the artist questions: what is our experience of static scale when we're in expansive and shrinking bodies? What are static states of being and why are we preoccupied with them? If everything transforms—if we are in a constant state of change by nature of the existence of time—is anything ever static?

Time and scale are recurring themes in **Lisa Sammut's** practice, and her works often take on forms inspired by cosmography, celestial architecture and planetary dynamics. Sammut's four-channel video work, *modest monuments*, shows small, wooden objects that move in their own time. Two of the objects behave similarly to a metronome, with pendulums slowly moving side to side. In another, a circle mounted on the end of a clock hand traces an anti-clockwise circle around an organic shape reminiscent of a mountain peak. Between 3 o'clock and 2 o'clock it stutters a few times, before continuing on its journey, like the sun rising and setting each day. The fourth object, more geometric in shape than the others, rotates slowly on its base.

The works were created using analogue clock mechanisms to animate small objects in the artist's studio. Sammut explains that these works intend to explore 'the perception and exchange of sentimental yet cosmic gestures between the modest movements of earthly objects.'⁴ These humble objects could be interpreted as monuments to larger universal dynamics, and the endless loop of the videos a nod to the infinite.

Constellations are recognised as monumental in the sculptural work of **Anastasia Booth**. Her maquettes with circular mirrors resting on plaster rock forms become humble markers of the epic constellations. In many parts of the Western world, these constellations still bear their Greek names and connections to the myths and heroes the Greeks sought to immortalise through their association with the stars. Interestingly, in the case of Andromeda and Cassiopeia, it was the immortalising of flawed tragic heroines, guilty of pride and vanity, thus doomed by circumstance and patriarchy. (Perhaps it is for revenge that the Andromeda galaxy is predicted to collide with the Milky Way in four billion years?)² By casting these works at this scale, Booth suggests these 'small poetic monuments maintain a fragility, intimacy and vulnerability, which makes me think of the untold narratives of the displaced, the overlooked, vulnerable characters.'⁵ While certainly beyond a human scale of time, stars don't live forever, they can go supernova. This along with light pollution means some of these constellations are becoming less visible to us and are as vulnerable as the figures they represent. The two glass panes leaning against the wall demonstrate this most directly, showing the contemporary Andromeda star chart alongside what will be the extinct full constellation. Their imminent decline is mirrored in the oxidised copper that will darken during the duration of the exhibition, poetically rendered to vanish.

The Andromeda galaxy played a central role in astronomer Vera Rubin's discovery of evidence for the existence of dark matter, which is thought to count for about 85 percent of the matter in the universe. Floating in the centre of the space, **Sundari Carmody's** ethereal *Milky Way* grew out of Carmody's ongoing botanical and cosmological research, focussing on medicinal and psychoactive plants, circadian rhythms, sleep, and the figure of Vera Rubin. The work reflects the artist's ongoing interest in universal systems and aspects of being, which she describes as 'linger[ing] in the category of the unknown, in 'the dark.'⁶ In *Milky Way*, thousands of black seeds from the 'sleep-bringing poppy' or 'Papaver Somniferum' are dispersed in rows within the expanse of white organza. Rather than the typical spiral shape usually associated with our galaxy, the artist imagines the Milky Way as a structured grid, evoking the gridded maps and graphs that Rubin pored over to make her discoveries. While Rubin's graph suggested the presence of an unseen mass, Carmody's diagram alludes to the unseen stars above us.

Some stars are unseen to stargazers due to their distance, but much phenomena that was once visible to the naked eye is becoming invisible to us. When experiencing the night sky outside of major cities, where the stars and planets appear so much brighter, it becomes clear how the sky can be used as a map, with celestial objects providing as many 'landmarks' as the terrestrial world. It's also clear why so many cultures across the world ascribed stories, myth and lore to the stars; including

in Australia where Aboriginal people are considered to have been among the world's first—if not the first—astronomers⁷. Yet ironically, at this point in our history, with astronomy at its most sophisticated through technology, more and more people are living in places where light pollution and smog make the celestial less discernible to us. So what do we lose as individuals and as a culture if we can no longer gaze at and recognise the stars? What personal and spiritual connections to the immense expanse of the universe are we being denied due to environmental destruction and mass urbanisation? Not only is our one home in the universe being destroyed, but we are at risk of losing our intimate connections to the infinite cosmos beyond us.

By Amy-Clare McCarthy and Katherine Dionysius

Outer Space acknowledges the traditional custodians of Meanjin, where this project is carried out, and we pay our respects to Elders - past, present and emerging.

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¹ The Larrakia people are the Aboriginal traditional owners of all land and waters of the greater Darwin area.

² John Fries Award. Jenna Lee. <http://www.johnfriesaward.com/finalist/jenna-lee/> (accessed 20 September 2019)

³ Kinly Grey. <https://kinlygrey.com/about> (accessed 1 October 2019)

⁴ Personal communication, 6 August 2019.

⁵ Personal communication, 2 October 2019.

⁶ Sundari Carmody. <https://www.sundaricarmody.com/about> (accessed 20 September 2019).

⁷ Mim Cook. "'As long as we can see the sky, we can see our stories': Indigenous Australians first to discover variable stars". <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-15/indigenous-astronomy-discoveries-that-preceded-modern-science/11308924>. (Accessed 4 October 2019).