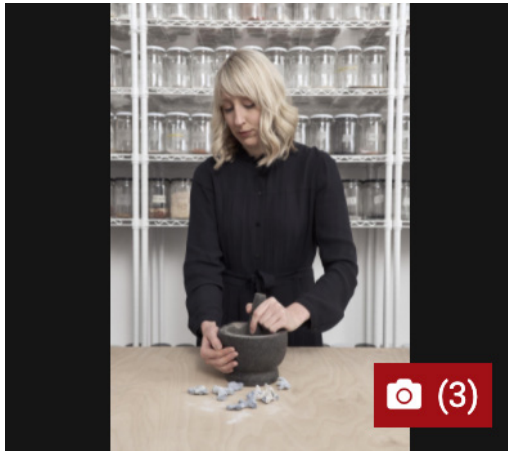


Galleries: Katie Paterson grinds historic fragments into dust

By Sarah Urwin Jones



Requiem is, says Katie Paterson, “probably the most epic work I’ve ever made.” Given that the Glasgow-born artist’s past works have ranged from broadcasting live the sounds of a melting glacier to mapping all the dead stars in the universe, and planting a forest (Future Library, 2014) that will, in a century, provide the paper to print the unread works of 100 authors – Margaret Atwood was the first – placed yearly in a “silent archive”, this is no small contention.

Yet, opening next month at Edinburgh’s Ingleby Gallery, Requiem is a quiet sort of epic – a large glass urn, loosely based on funereal vessels of the past, ready to be filled with dust from ground up relics from our world’s long history.

“It’s melancholic, the saddest work I’ve ever made, but I am also thinking how astonishing it is that all this has come before us, from the planet being formed billions of years ago to the first creatures to come out of the sea, the first flower, all the major extinctions.... And here we are on this beautiful planet which we are not taking care of,” says Paterson.

Paterson, who studied at Edinburgh College of Art and the Slade in London, always knew that she was going to be an artist. The interest in science came later, in fully fledged form, although it was there, even in childhood. Now she spends her life collaborating with scientists and researchers, with flinging out wild ideas and seeing which seed, to echo the wonder of the cosmos and render it in to something which speaks both to art and science.

The idea for Requiem was sparked when Paterson made Fossil Necklace (2013), a work that reworked the history of geological time as beads on a necklace. “I had an image of all the fossil remains I had in the cellar at the time – crazy things – and I imagined them all turning to dust. It seems so insignificant, but dust is how life perhaps came to Earth in the first place.”

And so, some three years ago, she began. Various objects were reduced to dust, from the earliest, a fragment from a meteorite that existed before the birth of our sun, through Inca relics to rather more chilling contemporary matter from the Anthropocene, such as trinitite from the first Atomic Bomb detonation and plastic regurgitated from an albatross chick. The grinding is all done by hand, after a hydraulic press in Paterson’s studio reduces the pieces to large shards. “It’s very basic. I use a pestle and mortar – it’s like the Stone Age!”

“So much of it felt just totally wrong,” says Paterson, as she talks of grinding up historic donations given for the purpose by scientists and museums, from the British Antarctic Survey to the Smithsonian. “There are objects that you might think are precious, although I started to come to an understanding that some things are not as rare as you might think. We’ve not crushed anything that’s incredibly rare, but to me it’s all precious. It’s a horrible process. And if it’s that painful to see one bit of history turned to dust, what is it when we are facing this moment of great imminence and peril for our world?”

The dust in each of the 370 vials weighs 21 grammes, once postulated as the weight of the soul. The vials will then be poured, daily, in to the glass “funereal urn” in the centre of the gallery, blown at the National Glass Centre in Sunderland. “Each little vial holds a story and then comes together in a complex layering,” says Paterson. Environmental activists, writers and others have been invited to do some of the pouring, but members of the public are also invited to pour. A publication cataloguing each layer will be produced in the summer.

“I think it’s a whispering activism,” says Paterson, who acknowledges this as her first truly political work. “It’s very delicate and hopefully quite subtle, but it’s posing pretty big questions, and making a connection to people in the act of holding these moments of time in dust and pouring it out, imagining the very deep past and the forms of life we connect to.... It currently feels like there are so many threats facing humanity, but we also have answers and ways forward to create a totally different kind of future.”

As a species, we have collectively shown a stubborn and unending refusal to listen to the lessons of history. In grinding our history up before our eyes, Paterson seems to say, I have ground up the past, our history, all that has been and that we have done. I have done this, and perhaps we collectively don’t have to. To paraphrase another epic work that casts its shadow on Paterson’s grinder – We come from dust, we return to dust. Perhaps it might be good to delay that last part a while longer.

Katie Paterson: Requiem, Ingleby Gallery, 33 Barony Street, Edinburgh, 0131 556 4441
www.inglebygallery.com 9 Apr - 11 Jun, Weds - Sat, 11am - 5pm, or by appointment.