

Craft/Work

A Handful Of Dust: An Interview With Katie Paterson

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With an exhibition of new work currently on display at Edinburgh's Ingleby Gallery, Katie Paterson talks about the anthropocene, deep time, and the pulse point between science and art



Scottish Artist Katie Paterson with *Requiem*, an exhibition which tells the life of the planet in a single work. shows the birth. It is to go on display for the first time at Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh from this week. Until 11 June

Glaswegian Katie Paterson is one of the country's more melancholically inclined artists, a Romantic with a Sebaldian interest in Deep Time and Deep Space. She's something of a hyperborean (okay, she lives in Fife) and it was when she worked as a hotel maid in Iceland between her two art degrees that she developed a love for northern landscapes, geology, and natural light. Perhaps inevitably her attention has been drawn to the frailty of our planet.

Paterson's works have a cool purity: she makes conceptual works that meld poetic ideas and scientific fact. Take *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* (2007–08) where you could phone her mobile and listen to a glacier groaning. She's made a map called *All the Dead Stars* (2009) that features 27,000 'stellar corpses' but then later reanimates dead material by sending a meteorite back into space with *Campo del Cielo* (2012). And, playing with absence she's transmitted a Caguean 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence (*Earth–Moon–Earth 4' 33"* (2008)) to our only satellite that after traveling approximately 500,000 miles returns to Earth 2.5 seconds later.

There's a vertiginous quality to her practice: how are we supposed to deal with this infinity of time and things and facts? But such dizziness is countered by her inclination to preserve, to contain, to collect. Margaret Atwood initiated Paterson's *Future Library Project*, a public artwork that hides an original work by a writer each year from 2014, unread until publication a hundred years later. Elif Shafak, David Mitchell, and Karl Ove Knausgård have also contributed so far. These books are buried in a newly planted forest of 1,000 trees near Oslo. If the planet is still going in 2114 literature fans are in for a treat.

A major retrospective of Paterson's work was held at Turner Contemporary in Margate back in 2019. Her new show at Edinburgh's Ingleby gallery is representative of her ambition as, amongst other works, it features a single object – a large glass urn on a single plinth - that represents the birth and life of our planet. She has described this new direction as 'whispering activism'. We talked about what she calls 'the saddest work I've ever made':

Your new show at the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh has a piece called *Requiem*. It's about dust: can you say more about this central work?

Walking into the gallery you see an empty glass urn. Around the room are 364 hand-blown glass vials that sit on shelves: each contains a tablespoon of dust, which ranges in colour – there are stony greys, beige and pinks, oranges, blues and blacks. Some are iridescent, like silver. I've ground remains fossilized remains dug from deep within the Earth over billions of years, to dust. Day-by-day visitors will pour these vials of dust into the urn, layer-by-layer through geological time, from the most ancient life to the present day, which will build up like strata, visible through the glass. The first layer of dust predates the existence of the Sun. Each layer is equal in measure at twenty-one grams: the putative 'weight of a soul' as suggested by an early 20th century 'experiment'.

The dust spans the evolution of humankind over the last few million years, bringing together relics from lost civilizations to our present Anthropocene landscape, such as ruins from war-torn countries and techno-fossils, which will fill the top layers. So the artwork expresses a history of life and death across planet Earth, a remnant to a future lost world. It is both a celebratory, mythical object that reflects upon the history of all species – from the first creatures to open their eyes to the first flowers to flower – and a futurist mourning life on this planet.

How does *Requiem* investigate the evolution of humankind?

It does that from its early inception in the Pleistocene (six million years ago), through the Holocene (11,700 years ago), the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic Stone Ages (6000 years ago), the Bronze Age, the Middle Ages to the contemporary Anthropocene (1945 till now). It does this by collecting together remnants of archaic cultures, through objects such as early hunter gatherer tools from disappeared lands like Doggerland, relics of proto-writing, and artefacts such as jewellery and articles of adornment, pottery, earthenware, bones and glass remnants from Ancient Mesopotamia ('the cradle of civilization') through Ancient Meso America, Ancient China, the Indus Valley and Europe. Also represented are cultures and epochs long vanished like the Inca, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Vikings. And in doing so this charts the migration of humankind across the Earth, and the paths of species loss left in its wake, by collecting together bones of near extinct species. Rubble from war torn countries and material that signals nuclear bomb fallout will form the top layers. All of these objects are of the Earth; excavated and ground into the finest dust.

You destroy some of the objects with your own hand. Take us through your thoughts on doing this. Are you influenced by artists who have majored in destruction? I'm thinking of Gustav Metzger and his 'Destruction and Art Symposium' of 1967, or more recent works by Ai Weiwei?

Now that you mention it, I see a clear link to Metzger. His Auto-destructive Art came about as a form of creative protest in response to the invention of nuclear weapons, and addressed society's unhealthy fascination with destruction. *Requiem* is also a creative response to the destruction that is all around us; it's an elegy to a disappearing world and it questions how we might be remembered in the very deep future. Every piece of the artwork – from the oldest known rock in the Earth to the earliest multicellular life forms, from the first true skeletons to the cultural relics of past civilizations – has been ground to dust. We owe our lives to civilizations come and gone and yet here we are, at a moment in time when human-induced extinctions are happening 10,000 times higher than at any time in the past. It's painful to witness (and especially to be at the hand of) the destruction of meaningful objects. Yet, all around us, we are witnessing a cruel mass destruction, and a disrespect of nature and life that is unparalleled. All in one short lifetime. Perhaps, as we cradle the dust in our hand, and pour it into the compendium of life, its preciousness may become present and felt. Dust – light, almost insignificant material – here carries great weight.

Were you uncomfortable crushing the material?

Yes, it was an uncomfortable process. For the fossils, not so much, as they are so earthly in their natural state: they are somewhere between objects and ruins. Many of the materials were already dust or dust-like – the pre-solar remnants, the ancient stones, materials from mountain top removal mining...

The closer we come to the human era the more difficult it became. The cultural objects were the hardest, those touched by other hands. It felt more intimate. Yet, as these objects or materials have been excavated from the earth it also felt like they were being returned to earth too.

Clearly you're worried about climate change and the existential threat to the planet – are you at all reassured by the likes of our fellow Scot, Cal Flyn (author of *Islands of Abandonment*) and her residual optimism that the Earth seems to recover from just about everything we can throw at it?

It looks an amazing book but I've not got to it as yet. I'd say that it is important to have hope and optimism, and the Earth does have an amazing capacity to recover. Though recover it may, the losses of the natural world are our loss. Through the destruction of nature we are destroying ourselves. Margaret Atwood told us "Kill the oceans and you die". Extinction is irreversible. Is this the kind of future we want?

Working on *Requiem* has uncovered harsh realities. I've learned that humans are agents of geological change. We have fundamentally altered the biosphere: humans dominate 75% of the ice-free landscape of Earth. In 2022 human made materials equal the weight of all life on Earth. The seas are draining of life; nearly every wild place has been cut into and cut off. So I want to ask – how can we connect more deeply with the living world around us? How can we engage in deep time, a time beyond our human lives? How can we stretch our imaginations to build new visions?

You've said this work isn't afraid to be political and confrontational – can you expand on this?

My artworks tend to be quiet. Here I've taken a hammer to the Earth, but with a gesture of pure love. *Requiem* is a container of life; it is a prayer; it speaks of our deep interconnectedness with all that has lived before us. Our generation faces existential threats and many of the objects in the urn reflect this; they are confrontational. And so *Requiem* contains regurgitated plastic from a baby albatross found in Bird Island, sub-Antarctica. There's trinitite from the first atomic bomb detonation, soot drilled from ice cores in Greenland, a plastic cup found in the deepest ocean on the planet: these are loaded objects.

Can you say more about *Evergreen* and *Ending* – the other works shown on extinction?

Evergreen is another collaboration with scientists, botanists and herbariums that collects all existing imagery of extinct plants. Illustrator Deborah Lambkin drew these then woven together in a textile, embroidered, sewn by The Royal School of Needlework. A work of reverence then...

Ending is a painting: a one-metre diameter circle divided into a hundred sections each representing an era of existence. It's like a clock starting at twelve with watercolour pigments made from fossilized remnants moving through to material from the present day. There's also an hourglass called *The Moment* that runs for fifteen minutes filled with fragments of pre-solar dust – matter that predates our solar system. So the artwork holds an entire cosmos, symbolically and physically.

Is thinking about Deep Time actually truly 'thinkable' right now given our quotidian concerns about price rises and Putin bombing us all tomorrow?

The current threats are overwhelming and unthinkable. Yet I believe it's more important than ever to have an awareness of deep time, and situate ourselves in a wider time-horizon. Short sightedness may be the biggest threat to humanity. To create lasting change, as Marcia Bjonerud said, we need to embrace 'Timefulness' as well as Mindfulness. To be human is to understand that we are part of a long continuum. Feeling a connection to deep time can be a source of solace and create a feeling of rootedness.

As said you often collaborate with scientists – can you tell us a bit more about whom you worked with on *Requiem*?

It's been a huge collective undertaking. Jan Zalasiewicz, Emeritus Professor of Palaeobiology at the University of Leicester has been a major inspiration. *Requiem* couldn't have been made without his wisdom and input. I've received donations of objects and materials from scientists across the globe including the British Antarctic Survey, the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, the Geological Survey of Greenland and Denmark, and the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. There are also contributions from archeologists, mineralogists, trilobite experts, and many others. I've crushed a piece from the Chittagong ship breaking yard – 'where ships go to die'. We've got material from an oil-spill site on the Niger delta, mined material from Inner Mongolia, ash from a home destroyed in the New South Wales bush fires. And there's space debris from the European Space Agency. I hiked to the top of Okjökull in Iceland with author Andri Snær Magnason to collect stones from the first glacier in the country to be declared dead.

Do you think there is, in Nabokovian terms, an apical point where science and art meet? Is this what you're in search of in your work?

I like the idea of catching the pulse point between creativity, theory, and practice in the arts and sciences. My work couldn't exist without a wide network of scientific expertise, yet in couldn't happily sit in a context other than art. *Requiem* – is it an artwork, a weird museum relic, a cabinet of curiosities, or an extreme riddle for future archeologists? I'm not so sure. It's certainly a lament.