



ONES TO WATCH IN 2019: VISUAL ART

Out of this world

Katie Paterson grapples with some of the biggest ideas in cosmology and deep time and offers up work which helps make them more understandable, whether that's on a beach or in a gallery

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You can never be sure where a conversation with Katie Paterson is going to lead. You might find yourself talking about the colour of the universe at the birth of the first stars (sky blue, apparently), or how you print a book with cosmic dust. Paterson's art reaches into times and distances most of us would consider mind-boggling.

"It's the point of mind-boggling which interests me," she says, drinking mint tea in the cafe at Edinburgh's Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. "The point when your mind is stretching to go a little bit further, the point where words stop – I think that's where my interests often begin."

For all that her work reaches for the stars (often literally), the artist

herself is refreshingly down to earth. She finds ways of expressing big concepts to do with cosmology, space and time, which are elegantly mundane – a disco ball made from images of every solar eclipse ever recorded, a necklace of 170 fossils, charting millions of years. These works take ideas so big they are all but unimaginable and find ways of fitting them into our heads.

Glasgow-born Paterson, who has recently returned to Scotland after years living in Berlin, is gearing up for the biggest year of her career so far. In January, her largest solo show to date opens at Turner Contemporary in Margate (A place that exists only in moonlight: Katie Paterson & JMW Turner). March sees the rolling out of *First there is a mountain*, a six-month-long "event" which will see hundreds

of people building mountain-shaped sandcastles on beaches all over the UK. Then, in October, she will be central artist in the last of the National Galleries of Scotland's NOW shows.

Although she grew up in Glasgow and studied at Edinburgh College of Art, this will be the first chance many in Scotland have had to see a significant body of her work. In the past decade, she has established herself as a major figure with a distinctive practice in which long periods of rigorous research feed into works which are elegantly minimal: a scented candle which burns through an aromatic journey from Earth to outer space; a set of lightbulbs engineered to look like moonlight; a map which charts 27,000 dead stars. She has collaborated with experts, from astrophysicists to paleontologists, lighting engineers to perfumers.

First there is a mountain is her first work to involve members of the public. Volunteers both young and old will be equipped with buckets and spades and a set of mountain-shaped moulds which nest inside one another. Starting in Whitstable, Kent, in March, the work will take in beaches all over the UK – including

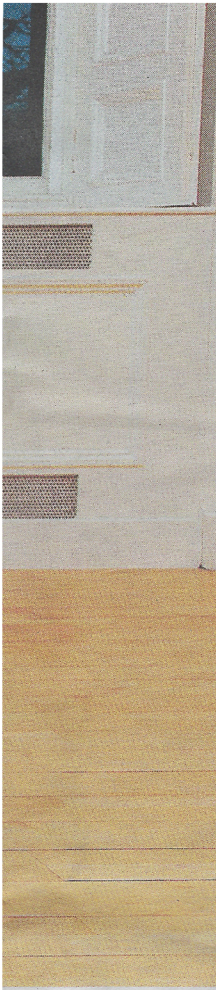
Katie Paterson at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, where her work will be shown in the autumn as part of NOW; images from *First there is a mountain*, right, which begins on 31 March and runs on different beaches around the UK until 27 October

Portobello, Aberdeen and North Uist – a new location every two weeks throughout British Summer Time.

It's the product of years of planning, matching tide timetables, and carrying out research to find a suitable biodegradable material (a bioplastic made from corn starch) from which the moulds can be made. Then there was the task of identifying mountains which, when rendered topographically and to scale, would nest inside one another: "I must have looked at almost every single mountain on Earth," Paterson laughs. It's meant to be fun but has big ideas nested within it: sand, which is essentially ground up mountain, built into mountains which are then washed away by the tide. Paterson describes it as "a fast-forwarding of geological history, being played out with people's hands".

She says her interest in all things cosmological was sparked when she spent eight months working at a hotel in Iceland after she graduated from ECA. An intense time spent in a landscape of glaciers and geysers

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Photograph Scott Louden

where geological, cosmological time is writ large made her look at the world in a different way. "It was an astonishing moment in time. Literally everywhere you looked you were reminded that you were on the planet Earth, because it was seething with life. I think I looked at the moon for the first time properly there."

On her return, she went to study for an MFA at the Slade, full of ideas. Her graduation work included a mobile phone placed in an Icelandic glacier – visitors to the show could dial the number and listen to the trickle of melting ice – and a pair of records made from glacial ice, imprinted with the sounds of the glacier, melting as they played.

It set the tone for her practice, "thinking and imagining, and a little bit of daydreaming – and then dealing with how to make it all happen afterwards." It's rarely easy. "Honestly, everything I do ends up being difficult," she laughs. "My mum's always saying 'Are you ever going to come up with something easy?' And, the answer is, "Well, no! Every project comes with its own demands and its own complexities, but that's part of what I love."

For one work, she had a grain of sand cut to nano proportions,

0.00005mm across. *Hollow*, a sculpture made in Bristol, used wood from 10,000 types of tree. *Future Library*, meanwhile, began in 2014 in Norway with the planting of a forest. In 2114, the trees will be used to print a book containing one short story submitted to the project every year (Margaret Atwood and David Mitchell have already contributed) and kept, unread, until then. Paterson has knowingly created a project which will come to fruition when she is no longer here.

"Sometimes it does hit home, especially when I see the trees year on year growing, from tiny saplings to two-foot trees, and then you start to imagine when they'll grow as tall as us, and then higher. *Future Library* is a big part of my life, my years are running with its years. In 2017, I was pregnant in the forest, and last year [2018] I had my son with me, so it's weird, growing and evolving alongside it."

A hundred years is a long time, but then Paterson also thinks cosmologically. A new work which will premiere at Turner Contemporary and will also be in the Edinburgh show is a spinning colour wheel, two metres in diameter, "which brings together the colours



of the history of the whole universe, from its beginning with the big bang, till its eventual end." She says this blithely, and for a moment we both pause and think about what she has just said.

Sky blue, she says, gives way to deep, dark red, and the present era – the era of the stars – is a colour scientists have cheerfully dubbed "cosmic latte" ("like a coffee, the universe really is beige!") Then it continues through orange, as the stars die, to reach "absolute darkness, when all the stars have burned out and even all the black holes have evaporated". We pause again. But Paterson continues. "We're still working on it. We haven't got the final deep orange of the end of the universe. There's a bit of

talk about whether it's a very reddish orange..." ■

A place that exists only in moonlight: Katie Paterson & JMW Turner is at Turner Contemporary in Margate from 26 January until 6 May; First there is a mountain will take place on beaches around the UK from 31 March until 27 October, including Portobello Beach, Edinburgh, 16 June, Aberdeen Beach, 23 June, Waulkmill Bay, Orkney, 30 June, Coll Beach, Isle of Lewis, 7 July, Baleshare Beach, North Uist, 14 July, and Calgary Bay, Isle of Mull, 28 July. NOW | Katie Paterson and others is at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art from 5 October until 3 May 2020; www.katiepaterson.org