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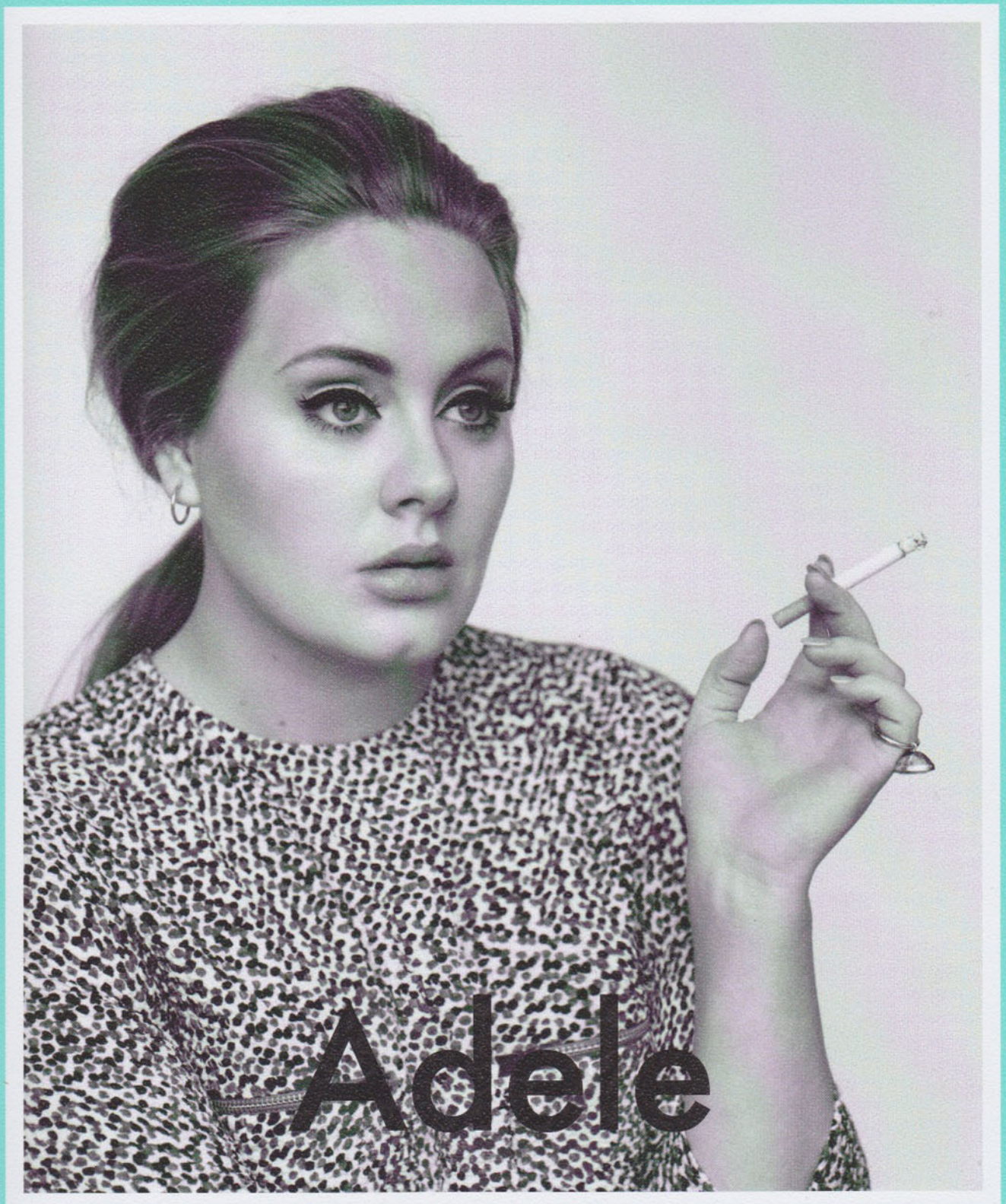

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A new voice

Katie Paterson

"I found exactly the right job by pressing the wrong button."

Portrait by Liz Collins

Modern Astronomy

Interview by Penny Martin

Katie Paterson, 29, is the first ever artist in residence in the department of physics and astronomy at University College London. Some of her conceptual artworks are giant maps, others installations. But you can't always see them. In 2007, approximately 10,000 people dialled +44 775 700 1122 to hear the sound of a melting glacier via her live phone line. Recently, she exhibited a grain of sand ground to a fraction of its original size by nanotechnology.

Penny: Your work sounds quite lonely, tracking dead stars and broadcasting the sound of melting glaciers.

Katie: I actually work with lots and lots of people. For my piece, the map of 'All the Dead Stars', I began by finding out what a dead star was and wrote to hundreds of astronomers and astrophysicists. Eventually, I had so much advice I was overwhelmed. Sometimes I just want to disappear and revert to being a more traditional artist.

But you do get to play two classical roles off one another – the empirical scientist versus the romantic artist.

Yeah, but sometimes it feels like a contradiction. 'Hybrid' is a very nice word for it. That's why I feel so at home at the moment, being the resident artist in an astrophysics department. I find their research culture here so interesting. Their world is very contained; often they don't even know the person sitting at the desk next to them. But then their work is so much more about sharing their findings than in the art world.

Don't artists do that too, by showing at an art fair or exhibiting in a gallery?

Artists have a different way of sharing, in parallel to each other. Being a scientist is more like being a cell in a larger body. When journals get published, the scientific community benefits as a whole.

What do scientists get out of working with you? Are they flattered by your attention?

I've been thinking about this recently in connection with a project I worked on to make a set of light bulbs that would supply a human lifetime's quantity of simulated moonlight. I found this wonderful person, Dieter, who works in specialist lighting – I couldn't have done it without him. I'm reliant upon amazing people who've given their time and effort and dedicated themselves to these quite absurd projects.

And presumably you provide a platform? You're a bit like a producer who comes along and says, 'I'll put on your play'?

Yeah, in a sense.

Why do you think you got so interested in the skies in the first place?

It was a year after I graduated from Edinburgh. I was at that difficult stage when you have to work out what to do next. I was looking for job in a Glasgow job centre and found exactly the right one by pressing the wrong button. You see, it had always been an ambition for me to get to Iceland. I moved over there, waitressed in a hotel, and managed to see quite a lot of the country as a perk of the job. I got to go to the glaciers and volcanoes. And that was my first true experience of sky and air, I suppose. When I got there, there was just a complete sense of being on the planet that I'd never really experienced before. I'm sure that impacts on my work in a way. It was an 'Oh my God' moment, a realisation that we're all on a planet spinning around, exploding, violent and full of energy. I could see it and feel it everywhere. From a geyser exploding to hot lava, the weather changing every two minutes, it was just the sudden and immediate awareness of being a part of this big ecosystem. That's probably what sparked my interest.

You seem quite intrepid.

I'm very curious about things. It doesn't have to be spectacular, or the wildernesses of Iceland. Most things interest me. I've never been bored in my life. There are too many amazing things to experience.

You never get bored?

I don't think so. I actually don't know what boredom is. I get tired or frustrated, of course, but I'm mostly occupied by production, which puts me in a very rational frame of mind. I have a linear way of thinking. It's really important to keep on top of these things, otherwise the rest will fall apart. But I'm really bad with ordering hundreds of books, all with amazing titles, and then they form piles in my house because I never really have the time to read them. The titles are incredible, like *100 Billion Suns*. I've even named a piece of work after it.

Works like your nano-sized grain of sand rely on the viewer's trust, since they're imperceptible.

It's really important to me that people do know it's real. For example, with 'Vatnajökul', the live phone call to the glacier, a lot of people said to me, 'Oh, wasn't that just you in the flat, splashing water in the bath?' But in fact, there were 10,000 calls made to it from 47 different countries.

If you can't see your work, does it have a signature aesthetic?

Quite minimal, I think. It seems to make sense, because I'm quite precise and quiet as a person. A lot of the subjects are quite melancholic on the face of it. For example, the dead stars. But actually, where each star dies, it's also the place where a million other stars are born. These intimate connections between things give you a sense of being part of something far bigger. Not to make you feel diminished but part of something immense and spectacular.

Several of your works don't have end points.

Yes, I certainly like the idea of something that doesn't really end or begin. For example, the broadcast of the 'Moonlight' Sonata that was bounced off the surface of the moon – I'd like to think that the notes are still floating somewhere in space.

In her portrait, Katie is wearing a tan leather and off-white canvas dress by BALLY.