

Syzygy exhibition squeezes cosmic wonders into everyday objects

Katie Paterson's deceptively stark new show in Manchester finds her redefining the sublime

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By [Paul Graham Raven](#)



Let's rave until the sun returns
Totality (c) Katie Paterson, 2016

In a small white room, deep inside the Lowry in Manchester, UK, a globe – a black sun, perhaps a metre across – hangs with its equator at about head-height. It is covered with tiny reflective squares, each bearing one of thousands of images of solar eclipses seen from Earth. Two beams of light strike the globe from opposite corners of the room, and eclipse images are reflected and projected in slow, dizzying pinwheel loops and arcs across the walls, the floor and people's bodies. It's like a glitterball at a *fin de siècle* rave where disco and dark industrial finally get together to dance in the moment of totality.

It is part of Katie Paterson's Syzygy exhibition. Paterson says she has never been much of a science-fiction fan, but her father read it avidly. Perhaps that's how she has ended up making art that plays with one of science fiction's favourite motifs, but does so in a quite contrary

fashion, and to a different end.

Science fiction, whether literary or cinematic, has always enjoyed playing with the juxtaposition of the vast and the tiny, the very distant and the extremely intimate. This aesthetic has roots in the 19th-century concept of “the sublime”, which celebrated the capability of the “natural” world to leave a human beholder awestruck by their own scalar insignificance in the context of geological time and dynamics. Later, the technological sublime became associated with feats of mega-engineering, such as dams and railways and steamships, through which it was supposed that mankind – and I retain that gendered noun deliberately – was conquering that which it once held in awe, imposing rationality and order on the magnificent yet feminised chaos of nature.

Infinite space

Katie Paterson works with scales that make the Grand Canyon look like a crack in the pavement: the depths of geological and cosmological time, the breadth of the visible universe, the [numbers of dead stars](#) like grains of sand on an unmeasurable beach. The classical Ruskinian sublime was supposed to humble you before the awesome majesty of creation; the technological sublime, meanwhile, seeks to celebrate the power of science to bring nature to heel: the curation of creation, if you will. But despite working at scales of the utmost sublimity, Paterson is somehow doing neither of these things.

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“Sublime” probably isn’t the first word you’d think of when walking around Syzygy; “stark” is more likely. The small irregular spaces of the gallery are painted pure white, populated by objects possessing a seeming ordinariness, if not exactly a familiarity. A black piano plays itself [a gappy version of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*](#), some of its notes waylaid by

interference while on a Morse Code trip to the moon and back. A rope of bulbs hangs from the ceiling, each one glowing as brightly as the light we see from the star of the distant constellation it represents.



What time is it?

Katie Paterson, Timepieces (Solar System) 2014 Adapted clocks, Photo © John McKenzie, Courtesy of the artist and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh

On the wall, seven classic wall clocks, of the sort that might come from the props department of a film noir studio, show the differing passage of time as experienced on the surface of seven objects in the solar system. The sublime is always in there, somehow, conjured from deep silos of scientific data, before being made into simple things that wouldn't look out of place in an old Bauhaus catalogue.

Just punctuation

Perhaps the sublime has been sublimated? What's happening here is a sort of domestication of the cosmic sublime: an illumination and illustration of that sense of scale, which neither makes it monstrous nor claims to have tamed it. It's less a bringing-to-heel than a bringing-indoors – folding all those impossible distances and sizes into everyday objects in the comparative intimacy of domestic space.

Paterson seems to have no agenda or particular message to impart; even her [pieces concerned with glaciers](#) are lacking in preachiness or panic. The point appears to be that, when you spend time working with timescales as long as the lives of glaciers and galaxies, humanity and its follies become little more than a punctuation mark in a book as long as time itself.

That's a distinctive stance, if a muted one. Perhaps it's timely, too. We needn't be terrified of our smallness in the context of an immeasurably vast universe, Paterson's work suggests, nor strive to build great works by way of compensation for our insignificance. We simply need to get accustomed to having it around.

[Syzygy by Katie Paterson](#) is on show at [The Lowry](#), Manchester, UK, from 29 April 2016 to 17 July 2016

Her first permanent public work in the UK, [Hollow](#), made from 10,000 tree samples from across the world, will open in Bristol Royal Fort Gardens on 9 May.

See also: [The Toxic Sublime: Marc Quinn on our relationship with nature](#); [Illusions, voids and convex ghosts](#)

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