

A Universe on which to dwell

Marea Atkinson

School of Art, Architecture and Design,
University of South Australia,
PO Box 2471, Adelaide, Australia, 5001
email: Marea.Atkinson@unisa.edu.au

Abstract. The artworks *The Cosmic Garden* and *To Dwell Upon the Universe* created for the exhibition *Astronomical Inspirations*, at the Salle Miró, UNESCO Headquarters, for the launch of the International Year of Astronomy reflect upon the unfolding human perception and relationship with the cosmos and speculate on the nature of space expressed in printmaking via a study of astronomical phenomena, symbolism in visual and scientific artefacts and theories. The work overlaps between the printed image, the constructed print, the artist book and installation.

Keywords. Art, symbolism, installation, perception

1. Introduction

As Edward Harrison reminds us, “*We are a part or an aspect of the Universe experiencing and thinking about itself*” (Harrison 2003). As an artist, I found that this concept of an ever-changing universe interacting with human thinking (that may never be resolved) to be a profound turning point, rather than expecting that a final and complete unifying theory would emerge to explain the universe, it opened up the possibilities of exploration, experimentation, speculation and failure as part of the ongoing process. These two art works reflect and speculate on aspects of the known and the unknown universe. The works also explore the folded form associated with paper, books and constructed prints, using, etching, digital images printed on paper with mixed media installation.

The fold is interpreted by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze as an infinite layering of existence correlating with the “*nomadic*” experience of contemporary life. The nature of the print in etching and the digital image makes, reference to the historic role of the multiple printed image in disseminating the developing concepts of science and astronomy to a wide audience, from the 16th-19th centuries, prior to the invention of photography.

2. *The Cosmic Garden*

Medium. A Constructed Artist Book of digitised etching and digital images printed on paper, 2008–09. Size variable 190 cm (W) × 42 cm (H) × 32 cm (D).

This work references the relationship between the earth and the sky. It includes an etching of a constellation superimposed over an ariel view of a garden maze. The actual maze is located at the Villa Garzoni in Italy a 17th century baroque garden, near Lucca. Gardens were also sites of astronomical observation. The maze has been long associated with the movement of the Sun and as a symbolic journey conveying the complexities of life and knowledge. Here the terrestrial is integrated with the celestial. The use of symmetry, inversion, repeatability, mirroring are explored with the cosmos at the centre flanked by mirrored and inverted statues of unidentified Roman gods, goddesses and rulers, featured in the garden.

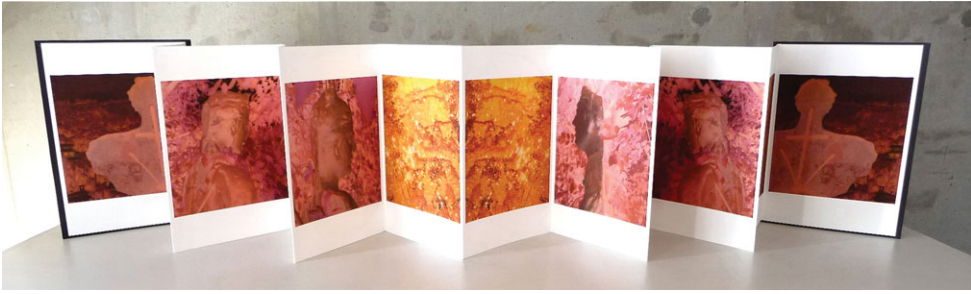


Figure 1. *The Cosmic Garden*. © M. Atkinson.

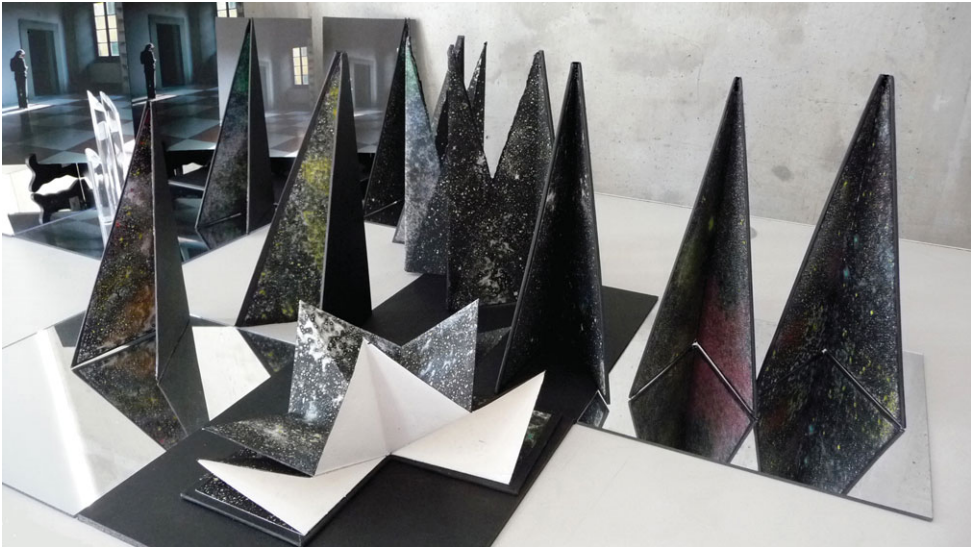


Figure 2. *To Dwell Upon the Universe*. © M. Atkinson.

The folding book form that can be unfolded and folded is a performative act and part of the concept of the work: to collapse and stretch time and space.

3. *To Dwell Upon the Universe*

Medium. An assemblage of etchings, digital prints, mirrors, plastic and foam core, 2008–2009, Size variable 180 cm (W) × 44 cm (H) × 42 cm (D).

This work is a three dimensional assemblage or installation of etchings, digital prints, artist books, folded constructed prints, inspired by an underlying notion of randomness, unpredictability, the work can be reassembled into different variations. It speculates upon an episodic beginning to the universe with bursting and half formed constructions, the transparent tubular structures evoke the idea of worm holes, where one can travel through time, floating on a mirrored and dense black surface.

Generally in the field of printmaking, woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, etc. there is an ongoing co-existence of binary opposites, mirror reversals, (print on paper mirrored by its carved or etched block). The concept of the multiple allows the same image to appear at multiple locations in time and space (Reeves 2001).

The English astronomer Thomas Wright in his book *An Original Theory or New Hypothesis of the Universe* of 1759 shows a series of intricate engravings. Wright proposed

the idea of a constructed universe, in Plate XXX1 the Milky Way is shown as among an infinite array of “*island universes*”, each consisting of matter organised into a sphere (Lachièze-Rey & Luminet 2001). Wright also predicted the disc-like shape of the Milky Way and that faint nebulae existed outside this formation, which were later verified in the 20th century (Gribbin 2009).

Einstein challenged the classical view of the universe as flat and unchanging, by developing the idea that space could warp and stretch. Later theories have proposed the notions of mirroring, parallel universes and extra dimensions that may be ruled by other laws of physics (Greene 2004).

References

- Greene, B. 2004, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (London: Penguin Books)
- Gribbin, J. 2009, *In Search of the Multiverse* (London: Penguin Group)
- Harrison, E. 2003, *Masks of the Universe, Changing Ideas on the Nature of the Cosmos*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Lachièze-Rey, M., & Luminet, J. P. 2001, *Celestial Treasury, From the music of the spheres to the conquest of space*, English edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Reeves, K, J. 2001, *The Infinite Palimpsest*, 2nd Impact Conference 2001, available at www.uiah.fi/conferences/impact/reeves/Reeves.pdf