There but not there: the significance of absence

Karel Nel

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Photographs by John Hodgkiss

ART FIRST
There but not there
the significance of absence

Karel Nel

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In this exhibition, Nel draws on his experience of being at and thinking about places where the unthought has become manifest: how does one demonstrate that our universe is heliocentric? How does one work out the circumference of earth, and how far away the sun is? What tools can one use to determine the speed of light—and what more can one learn once this is known? Where did these intellectual epiphanies take place, and what does it mean to stand quietly before the blackboard where Arago calculated the girth of our planet? How does his line, his zero degree, set in the floor of the Centre for Astrophysics in Paris, affect the viewer, knowing that British declaration of the zero meridian at Greenwich, nullified the French intention? Is it possible to recover a frisson of the awe as the relationships between mass, energy and the speed of light became apparent by going back to the place where this new knowledge finally coalesced in consciousness?

In his travels, Nel has visited Galileo’s tomb in Florence, where the scientist, so disgraced in his own lifetime for daring to think beyond the orthodox, was re-interred once the Catholic Church finally conceded its error regarding the structure of the universe. For Nel, the black marble inlay that forms part of the sarcophagus seemed a stony mirror of the two
degree expanse of deep space that the COSMOS project is mapping just below the constellation of Leo, and which he has represented in his work. It is not what is there, some vestige of Galileo’s mortal remains in the silent church, that is important; it is the thought that he gave life to, which lives on—a rational structure which he believed magnified the glory of God rather than diminished it, but only if the quiet visitor brings Galileo’s knowledge to the place. In some sense, this final resting place memorialises the end of the Ptolemaic universe and marks the vindication of the pursuit of understanding. Galileo’s tomb is the sky.

The Centre for Astrophysics in Paris is the subject of four of the drawings on exhibition. It has been a centre where things which are difficult to think about have been thought. Keeping out the light refers to one of the meetings of the astrophysicists of the COSMOS project where the group sought darkness to be able to observe the faintest traces of light, sought as a part of the observations that are helping people to understand the origins of the cosmos. Here, where the speed of light was finally captured in human thought, the speed of light has become an instrument for trying to understand deep time, looking at images of stars as they existed billions of years ago. Here is a place where the ineffable is fought and wrestled with until it yields some of its secrets—and leads thinkers and explorers on to greater conundrums.

Kealakekua Bay on the Big Island of Hawaii is the site where James Cook, the British explorer and scientist, was both hailed as a god and later killed in a tumultuous clash of belief and error. The remote cove,
below the cliffs known as the Way of the Gods, where Cook died is marked by a white obelisk, an imperial marker in a foreign landscape. Its presence signifies a moment which changed both cultures irrevocably. Nel returns to this site regularly whenever the COSMOS team meets in Hawaii: the Subaru telescope on the rim of the nearby volcano, Mauna Kea, is used to observe the two square degree field of the cosmos.

While Nel has worked with the COSMOS scientists, helping to project their own thinking back to them in visual terms, these periodic meetings have also afforded him opportunities to contemplate some of the places where spiritual thought and the artistic imagination have provided their own unique challenges to the borders of human thought. It has meant being able to visit and consider Duchamp’s final work, the installation, *Étant donné*, where one is confronted by an aged set of studded, wooden doors. One is able to peer voyeuristically through two tiny holes in the closed doors at an enigmatic vision which is both sensuous but intellectually disruptive, a world that draws one in and repels one simultaneously. Duchamp’s last contribution deeply challenges the artistic conventions around propriety, and opens, as it were, the doors to the overtly pornographic works of Jeff Koons. Koons in turn subverts the accepted relationship between sexuality, spirituality and the transcendent, ironic in his shifting the boundaries of perception. Nel explores these layered complexities in his own drawing, *Étant donnés: the birth of Jeff Koons*.

Nel’s respect for the power of Duchamp’s role in the development of new ways of thinking in art is also reflected in *Fresh window: Duchamp’s obscurity is not overrated*. Nel regards Duchamp’s work as the most
serious challenge to the traditional notion of art as a window into another world, of art simply as optical rendering. Duchamp’s work, as much as that of the scientists that Nel works with, is about the representation of thought, of the creation of meaning in the face of the unknowable.

Nel’s work with the COSMOS team has also given rise to opportunities to be in Japan, and while there, he always makes his way to Ryõan-ji in Kyoto, the great fifteenth century rock and sand garden, that has been faithfully raked each day since its inception. Sitting on the viewing platform, one contemplates a Japanese codified informality, the apparently artless antifce of the seventeen stones afloat in a sea of sand. In Nel’s drawings, he dwells on the mystery of the simple yet compelling beauty of the place. The eye crosses the boundary of black pebbles and granite, and is drawn through the infinity of the field of sand into the utter singularity of the present.

In all these works, Nel himself grapples with the paradox of being there, but not being there: of being able to use, as it were, the physical co-ordinates of place, to project oneself momentarily, imaginatively into the mind-world of others whose thoughts have extended the terrain of consciousness. In creating these images, it is as if Nel himself begins to plot a map of sites where human thought takes a quantum leap and breaks through the barriers of obstructing thought.

Elizabeth Burroughs
COSMOS. Two square degree field. Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric. 63 x 219 cm. 2011.
Arago’s erasure: Centre for Astrophysics, Paris
Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric, 175 x 175 cm, 2011
Keeping out the light: Centre for Astrophysics, Paris
Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 175 x 175 cm 2011
Fraction: COSMOS deep survey
Pasted and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 175 x 175 cm 2011
In the presence of the speed of light: Centre for Astrophysics, Paris
Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 175 x 175 cm 2011
Ryōan-ji at dark moon, Kyoto
Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 66 x 236 cm 2011
Fresh window: Duchamp’s obscurity is not over-rated. Century, New York

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 172 x 172 cm 2011
Étant donnés: the birth of Jeff Koons, Philadelphia
Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 240 x 179 cm 2011
Karel Nel

Born 1955, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Nel studied Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, St Martin’s School of Art, London and the University of California, Berkeley (Fulbright Placement 1988–89). He now lives and works in Johannesburg and is Associate Professor at the School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand.

Karel Nel is a practicing artist and has, over many years, been interested in the interface between art and science. This ongoing investigation has led to his inclusion in the COSMOS project as artist-in-residence. Nel is also a respected collector of African, Asian and Oceanic art with a particular interest in currencies. He has expertise in southern African art and advises and consults with museums in South Africa, New York, London and Paris. He has also been part of curatorial teams for major international exhibitions on early Zulu, Tsonga and Shangaan art, and has contributed to numerous publications on this material.

Solo exhibitions

2011
There But Not There – Art First, London

2009
Penelope and the Cosmos (with Willem Boshoff), CIRCA, Johannesburg

2008
The Brilliance of Darkness, Art First, London

2007
Lost Light: Syntactic images from deep space, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg

2005
In the Presence of Leaves, Art First, London

2004
(Ch)ristobal de Oñate, Leslie Totsa Fine Art, Los Angeles

2003
Status of Dust, Art First, London

2002
Unfathomable Depths, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles

1999
Status of Dust, Art First, New York

1998
Images of Paradise and Death, Leslie Totsa Fine Art, Los Angeles

1996
View on the Inner House, Art First, London

1995
Isis and the Inner House, Leslie Totsa Fine Art, Los Angeles

1994
Inner Province, Art First, London

1993
Isles and the Inner House, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg

1990
Recent Work, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg

1986
Quiet Lives, Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of Witwatersrand

1983
Recent Drawings and Guest Artist, Johannesburg Art Gallery

1980
Drawings, Olivetti Gallery, Johannesburg

Selected group exhibitions

2011
Life of Bone – Art Meets Science, Origins Centre, Johannesburg

2010
Still – Art First, London

2009
The delicate thread of life – Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg

2009
The Drawing Eye, Pall Mall, London
2004 At Home in Democracy, South African National Gallery, Cape Town
2003/4 4 Places, Galerie Mukaddim, Copenhagen and Kragthaugsgardmuseet, Rikshavn, Denmark, Touring to: Pretoria Museum and Chinon Museum, Rosnay, South Africa
2001 Art First at 10, Art First, London
2000 The Scholar Art Collection, SADLA 4 Art Museum, Endaldercul, South Africa
1999 Closing Art: Packaging Space, Post-Apartheid Art Now South Africa, Smithsonian, Washington DC
Emergence, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown and touring exhibition
1998 Divided City, Johannesburg Museum of Non-Revolutionary History, Southern Civic Gallery, Johannesburg, S.A
1997 Nye Nye, OJ, Art First, London
1996 Art First at 10, Art First, London
1995 Artists Against Apartheid, Johannesburg Art Gallery
1994 Artists Against Apartheid, Johannesburg Art Gallery
1993 Basotho Artist, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown
1992 University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, USA
1991 University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, USA
1990 Cape Town Festival, SA National Gallery, Cape Town and national tour
1989 Fort Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California (prizewinner)
1988 Cape Town Triennial, SA National Gallery, Cape Town and national tour
1987 Vita Art Now, Johannesburg Art Gallery
1986 The Volkskas Atelier Award (and 1987, 1988)
1985 Selection From a Century, Johannesburg Art Gallery
1984 Anglo American: Trance Atlantic – mural/drawing
1983 University of the Witswatersrand
1982 Cape Town Triennial (gold medallist), SA National Gallery, Cape Town and national tour
1980 Durban Arts ‘80, sculpture exhibition
1977 University of the Witswatersrand

Commissions
2004 Dead Country, South Africa House, London
2003 Field of Violets, Nedbank headquarters, Sandton
1999 AIDA, Johannesburg, Place of Nations (Entrance Panel)
1997 RM/72 Headquarters, Cape Town, Signs of Fire (drawings)
1996 The Ways of Shaka, Russian, Jacobus
1995 Five Colours for the Tanks Museum Group, Johannesburg
1993 Grahamstown-Festival of the Arts, Trance Atlantic
1992 Urgent Art: Portrait of a Country (student award)
1987 Johannesburg Art Gallery
1986 Anglo American: Trance Atlantic – mural/drawing

Collections
Angulo Associates Corporation, Johannesburg
Barloworld Corporate Collection, Johannesburg
BHP Billiton Art Collection, Johannesburg
Blomfontein University
Delaire Art Gallery
ENEL Electric Company, USA
Johannesburg Art Gallery
The Johannesburg Museum of Art, New York
KMN Collection, Johannesburg
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC
Pretoria Museum
Rembrandt Foundation, Stellenbosch, Cape Town
South African National Gallery, Cape Town
Standard Bank Collection, Johannesburg
Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg

Awards and residencies
2004 Artist in residence – the COSMOS Project (Spring)
2003 Johannesburg, South Africa, residence
1991 The Old Mutual Vita Award (overall winner)
1989 Art Gallery Founders Prize of the University of California, Berkeley
1987 Fulbright Placement (University of California, Berkeley)
University Council Fellowship (University of the Witswatersrand)
1982 Australian National Gallery
1981 Art Gallery Founders Prize of the University of California, Berkeley
1980 Australian National Gallery
1979 Monte Carlo 70,000 francs award
1977 University of California, Berkeley
1976 University of the Witswatersrand
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