



Karel Nel Observe



Observe

Karel Nel

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Art First
21 Eastcastle Street
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ART FIRST







Observe

Elizabeth Burroughs

In *Silent Thresholds* (2013), the predecessor to the present exhibition, Karel Nel considered Brancusi's studio and his own, and the longstanding relationships among makers, their influences serving as prompt for new thought, visual insight and future projection. Just as the previous body of works spoke of Nel's own relationship to artistic tradition, so *Observe* is a visual dialogue about his ongoing relationship to science, and to astronomy in particular: in these works, the Observatory in Helsinki, built in 1834, serves as scientific counterpart to Nel's own studio, which he argues, is *his* observatory.



In a recent lecture (Helsinki, 2015) to the team of COSMOS astronomers where he has the role as resident artist, Nel made an elegant case for the fact that the body is implicit in the act of perception: an image of, say, the Eiffel Tower (1), is merely that to a person who has never been in Paris. But for someone who has been in that city, the act of looking at the image results in a mental calculation that attempts to identify the bodily or physical location that would correspond with that particular view. The alignment of image with experience has a deep connection to a physiological 'GPS' reading. This same need for a physiological understanding, Nel argues, is just as important in the astronomers' reading of

PAGE 1: *Stepped stellar messages* detail

PAGES 2-3: *Stacked images* detail

LEFT: *Studio as observatory* detail





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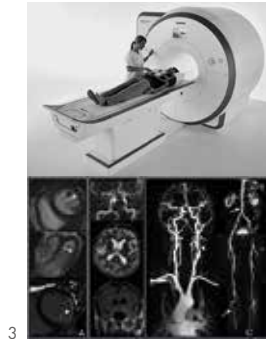
images that they receive from remote time-space, since it is only through some form of visual and bodily alignment that the images can begin to be interpreted. Nel recalls:

I will never forget the powerful moment in Paris when I finally understood the general location of the Cosmos' two degree field in the night sky by the description that, if one closed one eye and fully extended one's arm, then the field of study was approximately two thumb-prints by two thumb-prints, just below the constellation of Leo (2).

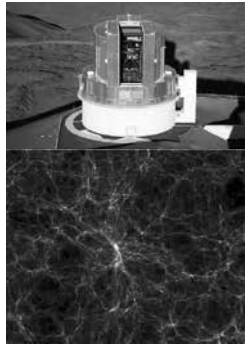
Nel, who has often been jokingly but affectionately described as 'the eye' by his colleagues because of his deep interest in the visual, makes a case for its primacy: the creation of lenses, 'optic stones', from the 11th century onwards in Europe gradually opened up realms of observation not possible with the naked eye. The distant became closer, and the minute became larger. Humans had, through this single technology expanded the spectrum of the visual, and, by doing so, extended the span of consciousness itself. To look is to aspire. To look involves curiosity, desire for knowledge and the need oftentimes to deduce from what has become visually evident.

Astronomers look out into the great distances of the universe through telescopes into a visual and mental abstraction in an attempt to understand phenomena such as large scale structures and galaxy formation. This activity is unlike that of the physician who is able to press a shoulder, feel anomalies in the body with his own hands, test the temperature of the forehead by touch or who can now scan the deep structures of the brain and body.





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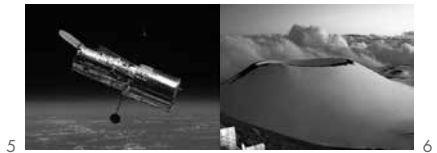
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In his Helsinki lecture, Nel compares images of the internal structures of the body, rendered visible through Magnetic-Resonance scans (3) to the visual translations of data gleaned from the cosmos by means of the powerful telescopes. The extraordinary similarities of our instruments for looking are also uncanny: the Subaru telescope points out into the firmament capturing images of interconnected galactic filaments which look surprisingly like the complex traceries of nerve tissue within the human brain itself (4). All those translations are abstractions, a rendering in 2-dimensions, of either internal cerebral architecture or the vast, galactic structures captured as infrared variance, x-rays or radio waves. The translations are not mapped as aural intervals or into variations of pressure or temperature to be perceived by the ear or as sensation on the skin: they become visual maps. In astronomy, the same phenomena – as perceived by the different types of astronomy – infrared, x-ray and radio – are often stacked one over the other, serving as confirmation of the different forms of perception, and sometimes highlighting inexplicable – at least for now – anomalies.

Stepped stellar messages suggests the layering of the images – messages from far distant galaxies – elusive clues which need to be pieced together. Shimmering subtly with a scatter of specularite, the location and orientation of the image is difficult to read, as an inter-galactic void fills the lower portion while the opaque silvery messages lie stacked above. Without the defining linear grids, the information and the possibility of comprehension collapse.

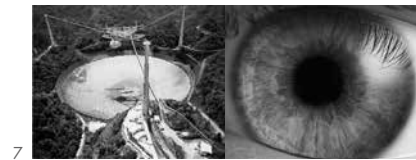
In Nel's studio, there are a few places where works, created over four decades, are stacked and stored, the knowledge and thought they



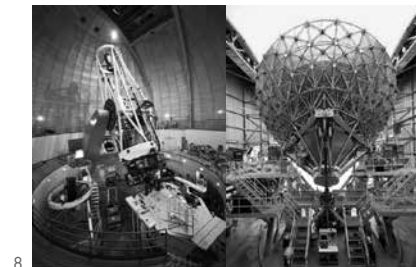


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represent present but not evident. A history of making is infolded into these stacked images. Though physically present, but not accessible to the eye, they nevertheless represent a sustained effort to capture changes of state and perception, not to mention a sustained grappling with the knowledge we are gifted through the technologies of the like of the Hubble telescope (5), the Subaru telescope on the volcanic rim of Mount Mauna Kea on the big island of Hawaii (6), or the uncanny retinal dish of the telescope, set into the mountain forest in Arecibo, Puerto Rico (7).

In the old Helsinki Observatory – and in contemporary telescopes such as the Subaru and James Clark Maxwell telescopes, both on Mauna Kea – the humans who work with the telescopes need ladders to be able to direct and take advantage of the optical machinery they have built (8). These ladders are practical and, for Nel, symbolic. The ladders drawn in *Stepping up to the speed of light* and *Ladder of lights* are to be found at the Helsinki Observatory. The more complex ladder is crafted in such a way that the seeker after the new can sit to take in the wonders of the universe, and draw out a flat surface where a book can be placed and notes made. The high-key colouring, reminiscent of the visual spectrum, also suggests that the plain wooden set of steps is a prismic ladder, a ladder for searching for the truth as best one can understand it, given the limits of perception and the hidden hues of light. Looking with intent is aspirational – and looking upward and outward is to strain toward infinity, to look for what is beyond our ken.

The interiors of the upper storey of the Helsinki Observatory need to allow access by means of a staircase curving up from below, but also require a flat floor so that the astronomers could move unimpeded in





the space. The demands of the circular space meant that the trap doors allowing entrance fold upwards and sideways, like an elaborate but efficient wooden origami. These unexpected, irregular pieces start up into the space of the room like abstract sculptures, propped up, when needed by wooden struts (9). The large trapdoors follow a curved and angular geometry that is not strictly Euclidean, and which look forward to the conundrums faced by astronomers who in recent years have needed to create receivers that could fold up into a rocket capsule and then unfurl when deployed in space. Nel speaks about their strange projection into the circular space, as though presences at the portal as one enters the inner and uppermost room (10).

Nel's own studio, a long barrel-vaulted space flooded with air and light (12), has its own unusual presences: the large, wooden Dan receptacle, from Liberia, suggests a purpose that is not evident to the outside eye. The immaculately chiselled ridges that form the base of the bowl suggest its use as a technology whose purpose is now elusive. Mounted upright, the wooden Dan dish (11) seems both archaic and contemporary, a receptor for knowledge now unnamed.

In *Studio as observatory*, a shaft of light penetrates the dim space. Its precision seems emblematic of consciousness, and the human drive to make sense of the world: the light divided from the darkness; the night from the day; the firmament from the waters; the waters from the land. The studio is a place of quiet inner observation and contemplative actions that form a quest, an ascent required to understand levels of consciousness. The study of light and darkness is central to art and astronomy in both the physical and metaphysical senses.



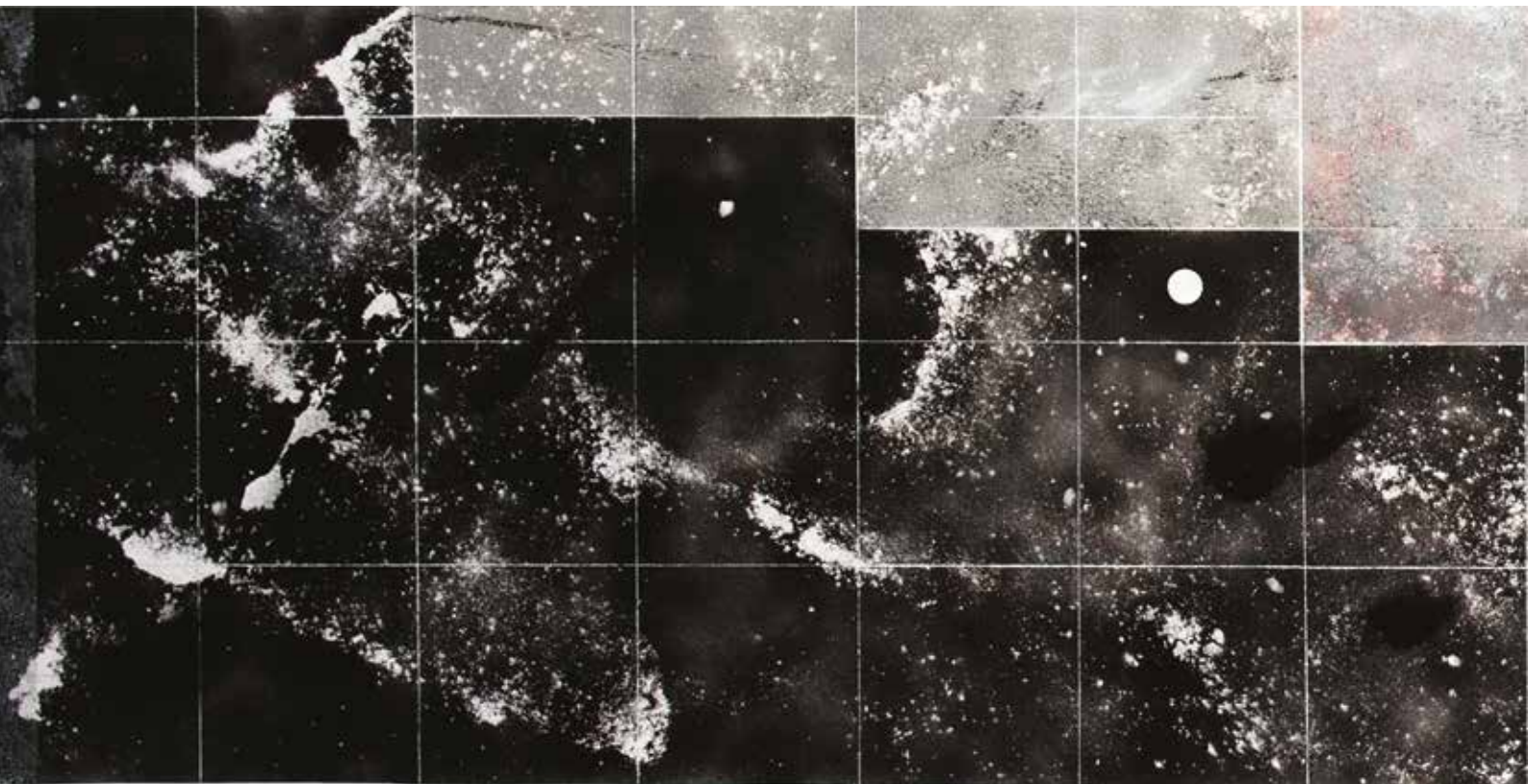
12



The ladder has long been symbolic of spiritual questing – one only has to recall the ladder in Jacob’s dream or the ladder in the Kaballah that links the *sephiroth* into a coherent system. In *Initiate ascent*, Nel has included two ladders from Papua New Guinea. In that society, ascending the ladder enacts the transition from boyhood to manhood as the young men enter the ceremonial tall houses, and symbolises the mystery of the change of state, and the change of consciousness that goes with it. The ladder enables an incremental change of vantage point – new view upon new view, insight upon insight.

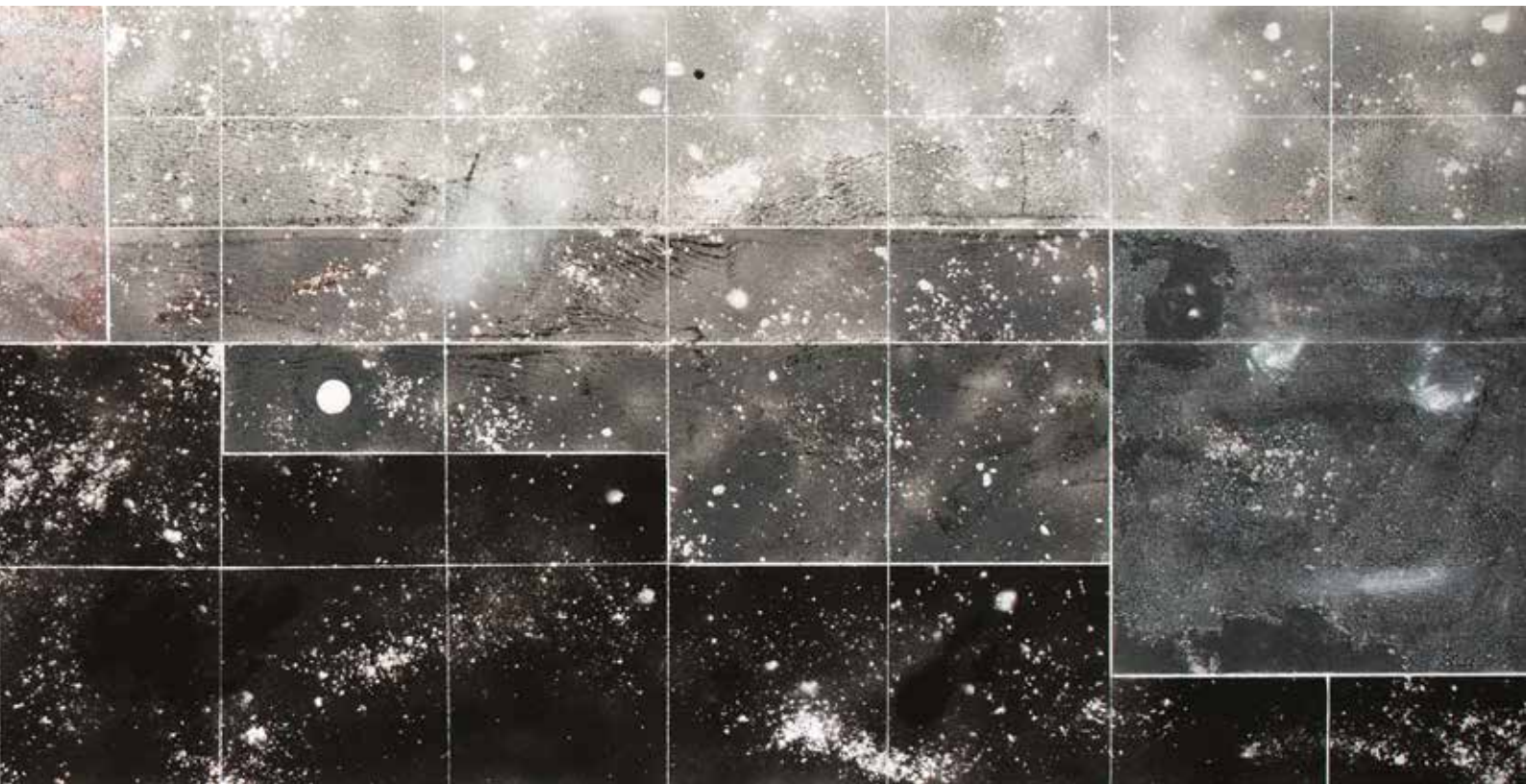
The fugitive but precise nature of Nel’s works are created layer upon careful layer: broad washes of colour in browns, lilacs and greens; the rubbing of wooden grain; the subtle effects of marbling in small areas; the distinctive airy forms which suffuse space, traced with fingers through grains of sand; emphatic use of high-key colour to set off the muted tones of the drawings and the meticulous linear optical projections, which remind the viewer these are not simply interiors, but a considered mapping of the interior worlds of a thinker and maker.

In this exhibition, focussed observation and meditation work together to create the capacity to look both outwards, upwards and inwards. Nel once again presents a visual case for the intimacy of scientific exploration of the universe, of which we are inescapably part, and of the internal seeking after the nature of what can be understood.



Stepped stellar messages

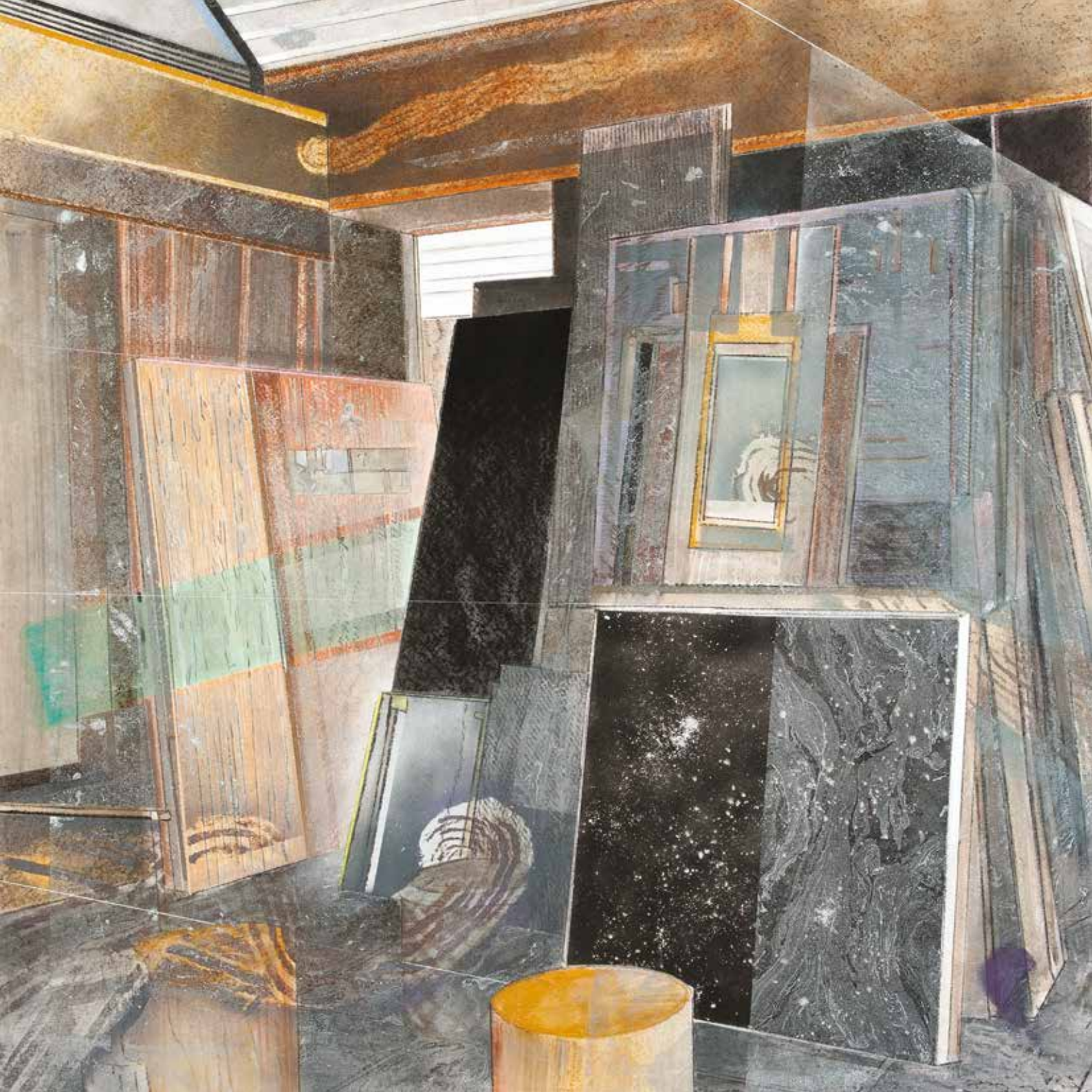
2015 Pastel, metallic dust, specularite and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 850 x 2950 mm





Studio as observatory

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 1800 x 1800 mm





Initiate ascent

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 1800 x 1800 mm





Stacked images

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 1800 x 1800 mm

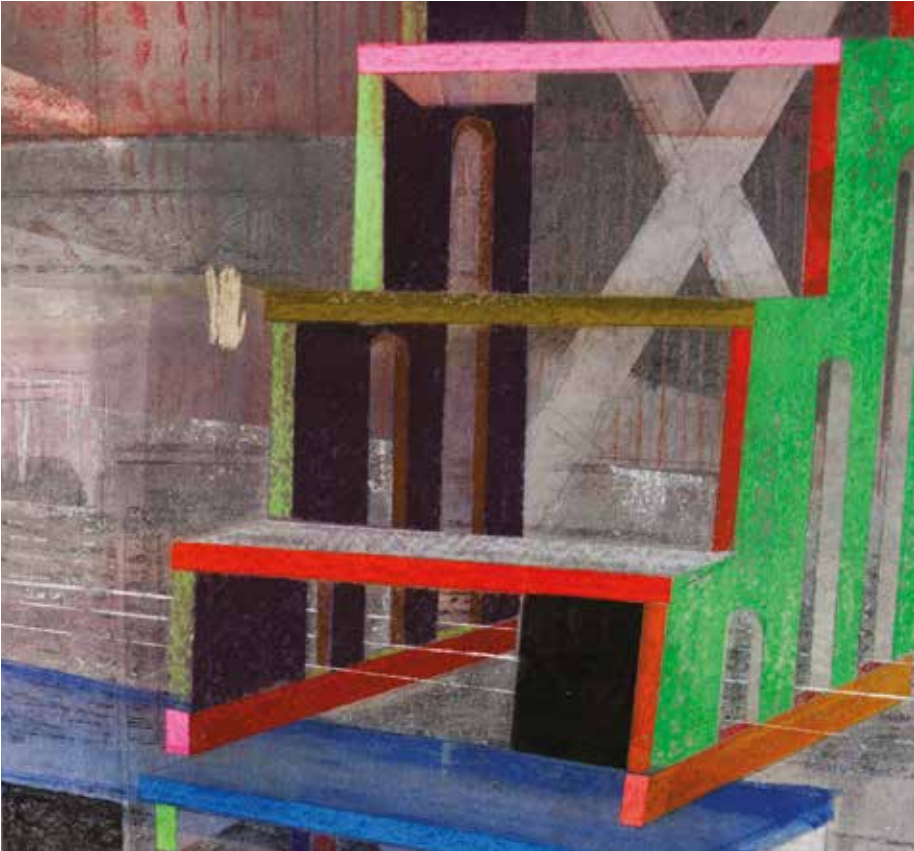






Dish

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 1800 x 1800 mm



Stepping up to the speed of light

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 1800 x 1800 mm



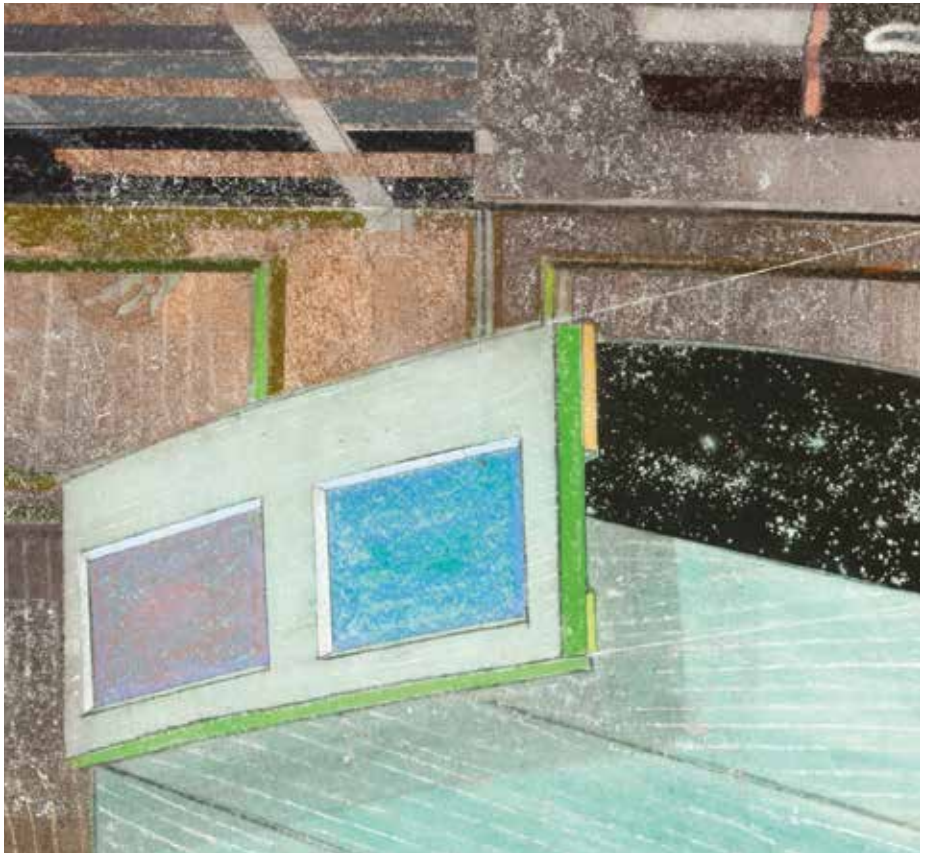


Orbicular presences

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 1800 x 1800 mm



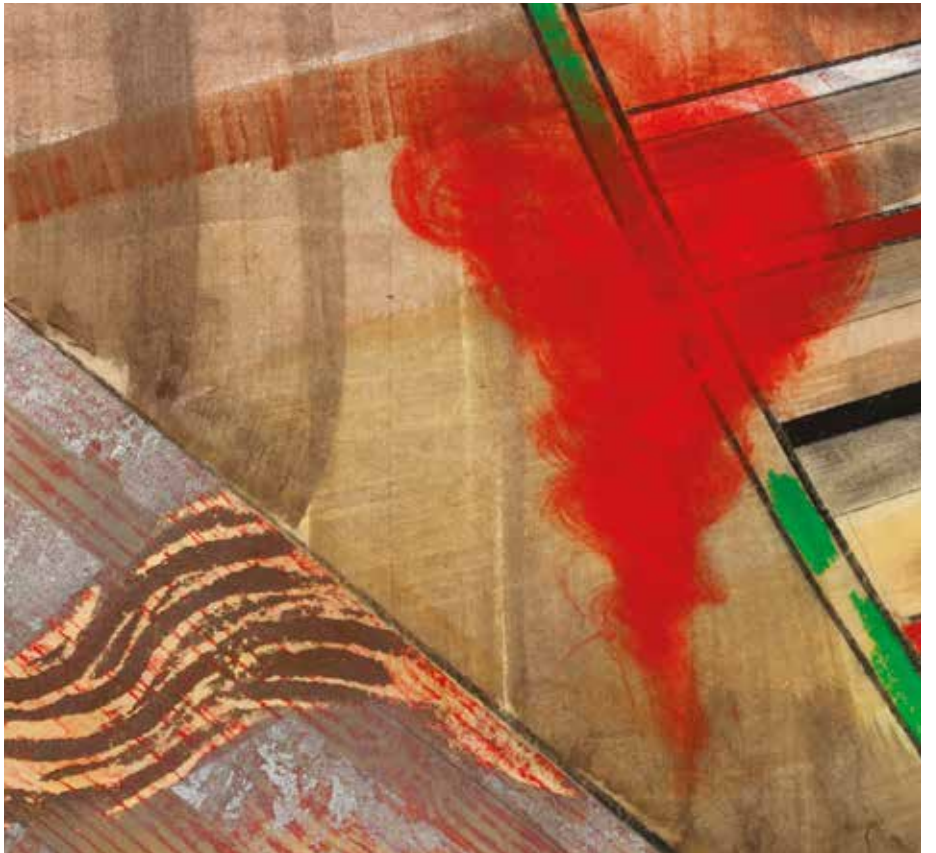




Enfolded space

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 1800 x 1800 mm

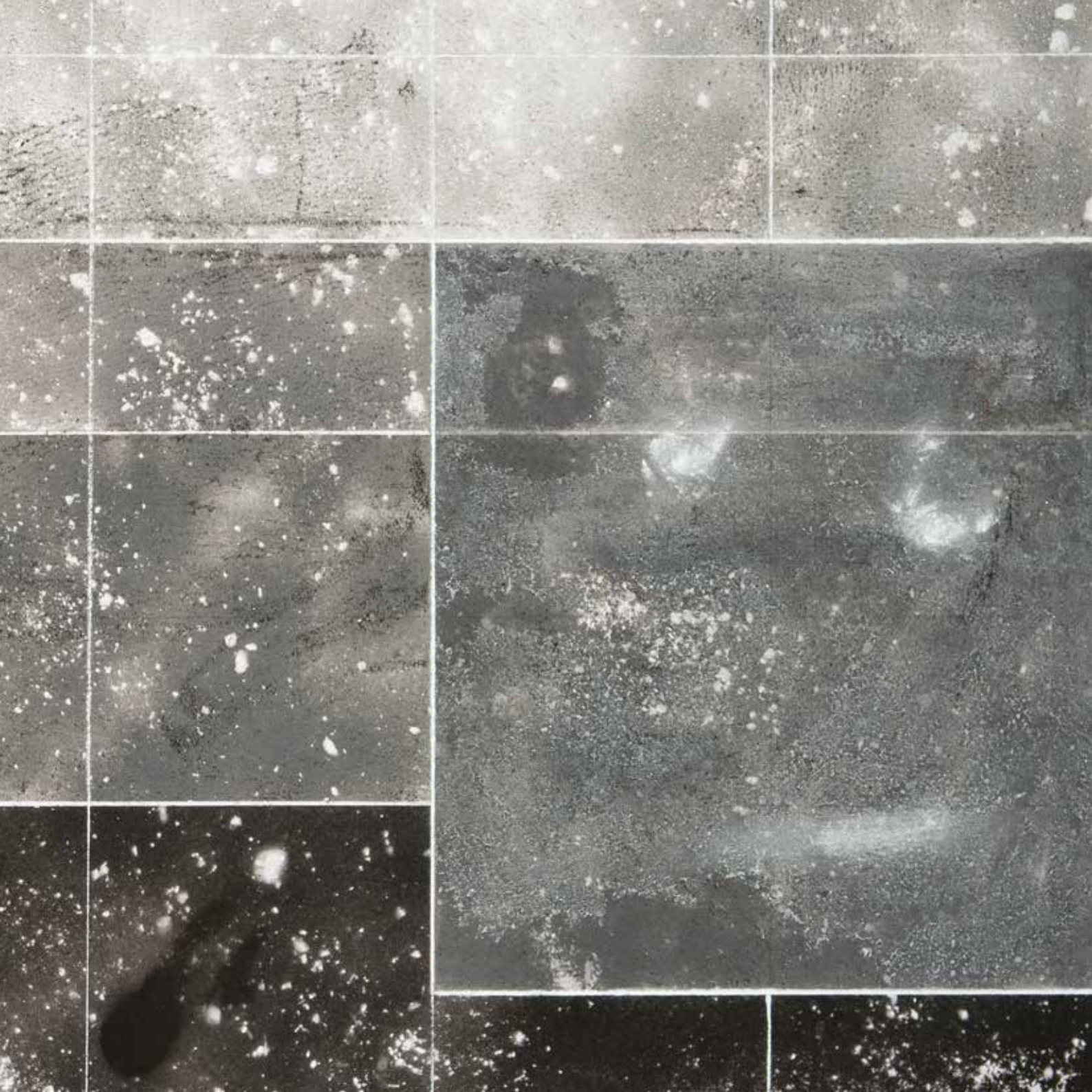




Ladder of lights

2015 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 2550 x 1890 mm









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.

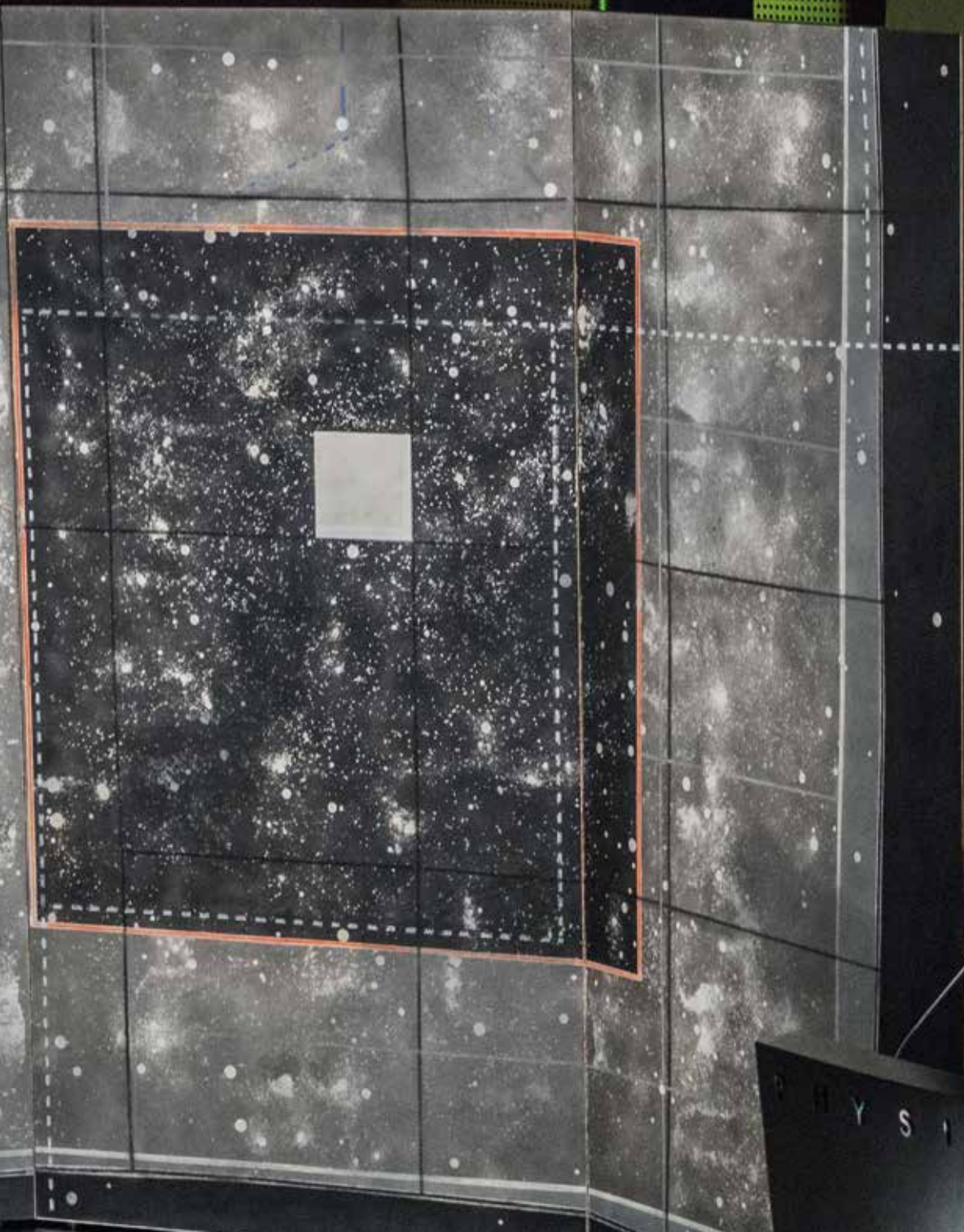
Karel Nel is a practicing artist and over many years has been interested in the interface between art and science. This ongoing investigation has led to his inclusion in the COSMOS project as artist-in-residence. Nel is also a respected collector of African, Asian and Oceanic art with a particular interest 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

- 2013 *Silent Thresholds* – Art First, London
- 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 *Last light: fugitive images from deep space*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2005 *In the Presence of Leaves*, Art First, London
- 2004 *Unfathomable Depths*, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 2003 *Status of Dust*, Art First, London
- 2002 *Status of Dust*, Art First, New York
- 2000 *Volcanic Texts*, Art First, London
- 1999 *Solo Journeys*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 1998 *Images of Paradise and Death*, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 1996 *View on the Inner House*, Art First, London
- 1995 *Isles and the Inner House*, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 1994 *Inner Province*, Art First, London
- 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

- 2015 *Delineations*, Art First, London
- 2014 *Exact Imagination – 300 Years of Botanically Inspired Art in South Africa*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2012 *African Cosmos – Stellar Arts*, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington
- 2011 *Life of Bone – Art Meets Science*, Origins Centre, Johannesburg
- 20 Years* – Art First, London
- Water: The delicate thread of life* – Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg



PHYSICUM

- 2009 *The Discerning Eye*, Mall Galleries, London
- 2008 *Angaza Afrika. African Art Now*, October Gallery, London — Dialogue, Art First, London
- 2004 *Ten Years of Democracy*, South African National Gallery, Cape Town
- 2003/4 *Place*, Galerie Asbaek, Copenhagen and Kastrupgardsamlingen, Kastrup, Denmark, Touring to Pretoria Art Museum and Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa
- 2001 *Art First at 10*, Art First, London
- 2000 The Schachat Art Collection, SASOL Art Museum, Stellenbosch, South Africa
- 1999 *Claiming Art/Reclaiming Space: Post Apartheid Art from South Africa*, Smithsonian, Washington DC
Emergence, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown and touring exhibition
- 1998 *Divided City Installation, In Nearer than Bronze* Exhibition, Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg, S.A
- 1996 *Three Years On*, Art First, London
Insights, Wright Gallery, New York
Vita Art Today, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1995 *Temenas Installation*, Johannesburg Art Gallery for the Johannesburg Biennale
Common and Uncommon Ground, South African Art to Atlanta, City Gallery East, Atlanta, USA
- 1994 *Artists Under the Southern Cross*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Giholte-Baard-Breda Fonden, Copenhagen, with Doris Bloom and Marlene Dumas
- 1993 Resident Artist, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown
Affinities, Contemporary South African Art, Venice Biennale (and Rome)
- 1992 Institute of Contemporary Art, Johannesburg
Art Meets Science, Grahamstown Festival of the Arts
- 1991 University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, USA
Three South African Artists: A Contemplative View, Midlands Contemporary Art, Birmingham
- 1988 Cape Town Triennial, SA National Gallery, Cape Town and national tour
Fort Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California (prizewinner)
- 1987 *Vita Art Now*, Johannesburg Art Gallery
National Drawing Competition Exhibition, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown
Valparaiso Biennale, Chile
Tapestries, Linda Goodman Gallery, and tour to South Africa National Gallery
- 1986 The Volkskas Atelier Award (and 1987, 1988)
Selections From a Century, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1985 *Tributaries A View of Contemporary South African Art*, BMW Exhibition, touring Germany and Europe
Cape Town Triennial
Paperworks Group Show (prizewinner)
- 1983 Tatham Gallery, Pietermaritzburg Association of Arts, Natal
- 1982 Cape Town Triennial (gold medallist), SA National Gallery, Cape Town and national tour
- 1980 *Durban Arts '80*, sculpture exhibition
Young Artists, Olivetti Gallery
Sculpture '80, University of Pretoria
- 1977 University of Witwatersrand

Commissions

- 2004 Oval Carpet, South Africa House, London
- 2002 Field of Value, Nedbank headquarters, Sandton
- 1999 ABSA, Johannesburg, Place of Nurture (Entrance Mural)
- 1997 B/M/D Headquarters, Cape Town, Signs of Fire (drawings)

- 1996 *The Way of Stone*, Reunion, Indian Ocean
- 1995 Four Core Tapestries for the Mining Group Gencor, Johannesburg
- 1992 Grahamstown Festival of the Arts: Three Lithographs
- 1988 Anglo Vaal: Mural
African Oxygen: Tapestry for new hospital complex
- 1986 Johannesburg Art Gallery: Intact — graphic
- 1984 Anglo American: Trance Atlantic — mural/drawing
Sandt Du Plessis Theatre, Bloemfontein: Inner Dance — mural/drawing

Collections

- Anglo American Corporation, Johannesburg
- Barloworld Corporate Collection, Johannesburg
- BHP Billiton Art Collection, Johannesburg
- Bloemfontein University
- Durban Art Gallery
- General Electric Company, USA
- Johannesburg Art Gallery
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- MTN Collection, Johannesburg
- National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC
- Pretoria Museum
- Rembrandt Foundation, Stellenbosch Sanlam, Cape Town
- South African Broadcasting Corporation, Johannesburg
- South African National Gallery, Cape Town
- Standard Bank Collection, Johannesburg
- Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg
- Trust Bank, Johannesburg
- University of South Africa, Pretoria
- William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley
- Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg

Awards and residencies

- 2004 Artist in residence — the COSMOS Project (ongoing)
- 2003 Gammeldak Copenhagen artists residency
- 1991 The Old Mutual Vita Award (overall winner)
The Simpson Fellowship, University of California, Berkeley
- 1989 Art Gallery Founders Prize of the University of California, Berkeley
- 1987 Fulbright Placement (University of California, Berkeley)
University Council Fellowship (University of the Witwatersrand)
- 1982 Olivetti Travel Grant
- 1981 Almaks Prize
- 1979 Montague White travel grant
- 1978 Montague White bursary
Afrox Prize (open category)
- 1977 Afrox Metal Art Sculpture annual competition (student award)

With thanks to:

Elizabeth Burroughs and Joni Brenner, for insight and help on every level that made this exhibition possible.

Clare Cooper, my gallerist, for the journey long travelled, the encouragement and pleasure in making exhibitions for her specific space in London.

Benjamin Rhodes and Matt Incedon, for their invaluable assistance.

Astronomer Alexis Finoguenov who shared the astronomical institutes of Helsinki with me, and to the director of the Helsinki Observatory, Paivi Harjunpaa, who gave us access to the early observatories, which form the basis of this set of works. Thanks also to Nick Scoville and the COSMOS team who, over the past years, have attempted to guide me through the complexities of the universe through the circumscribed 2-square-degree field.

Brett Piper and David Andrew from the Wits School of Artsw, whose support and encouragement enabled me to quietly focus on the challenges of the creative process.

Photographers Graham De Lacy, Bob Croops and Henry McCracken.

Anthony Schmidt for his impeccable and thoughtful framing; and

Kevin Shenton, my designer and friend, who shaped the catalogue and has been, as always, an invaluable contributor.

Ladder of lights (detail)

Gallery opening hours

Tuesday – Friday: 10am–6pm

Saturday: 12am–5pm
and by appointment

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