

There but not there: the significance of absence

Karel Nel

Gallery opening hours

Tuesday – Friday: 10am–6pm

Saturday: 11am–4pm
and by appointment

Art First

21 Eastcastle Street
London W1W 8D

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Photographs by John Hodgkiss





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the significance of absence

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There but not there: the significance of absence

A thought came to me.

Karel Nel

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

*The death of heliocentrism: Galileo's tomb,
Santa Croce, Florence (detail)*

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric

175 x 175 cm 2011

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.

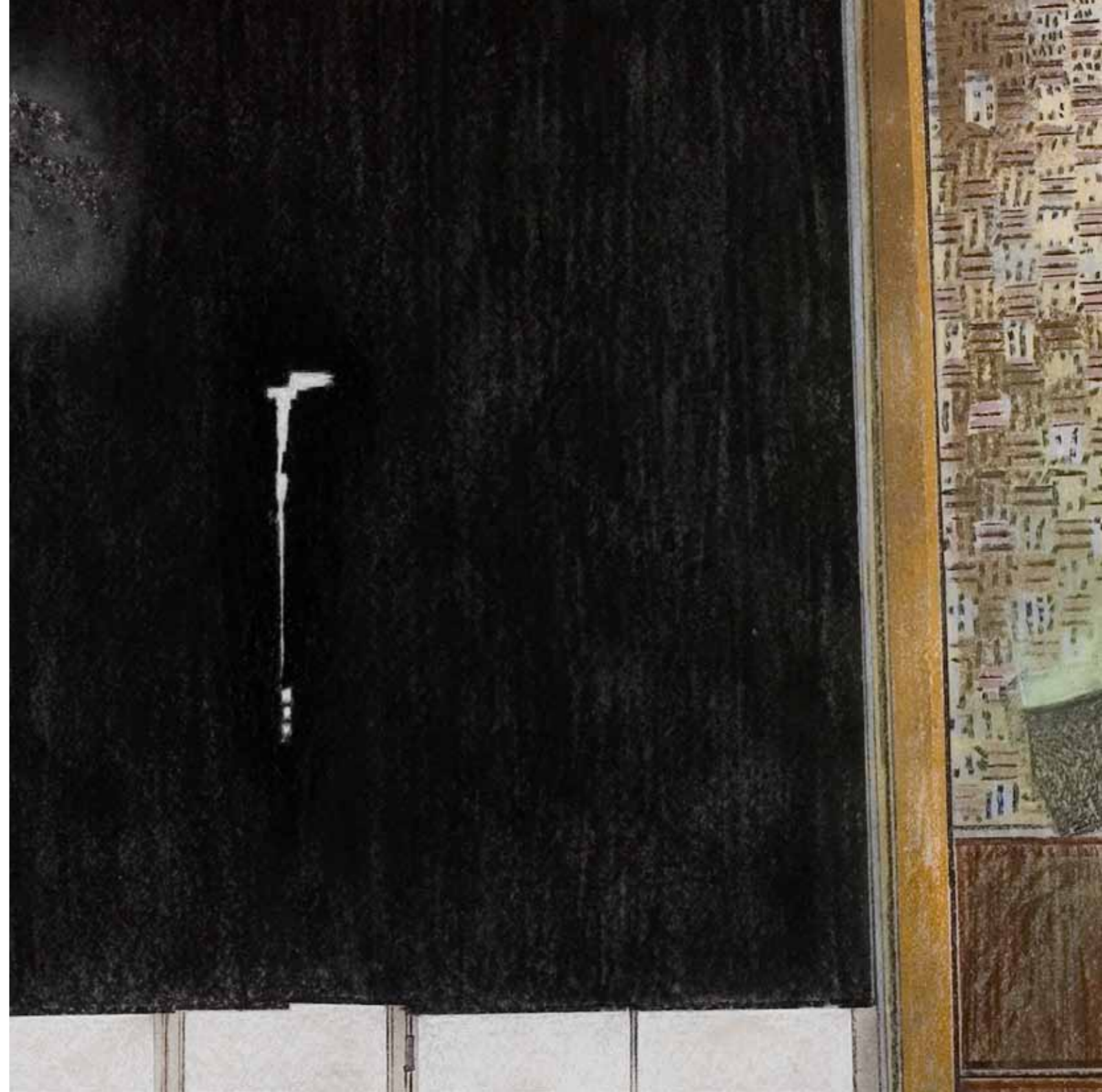
The Centre for Astrophysics in Paris is the subject of four of the drawings on exhibition. It has been a centre where things which are difficult to think about have been thought. *Keeping out the light* refers to one of the meetings of the astrophysicists of the COSMOS project where the group sought darkness to be able to observe the faintest traces of light, caught 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.

Kealekaku 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,

Keeping out the light:
Centre for Astrophysics, Paris (detail)

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric

175 x 175 cm 2011





Étant-donnés: the birth of Jeff Koons, Philadelphia (detail)

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric
240 x 179 cm 2011

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 donné: 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 Widow: Duchamp's obscurity is not over-rated*. Nel regards Duchamp's work as the most



Ryōan-ji: The significance of absence, Kyoto (detail)

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 66 x 236 cm 2011

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 Ryōan-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 artifice 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 coordinates 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

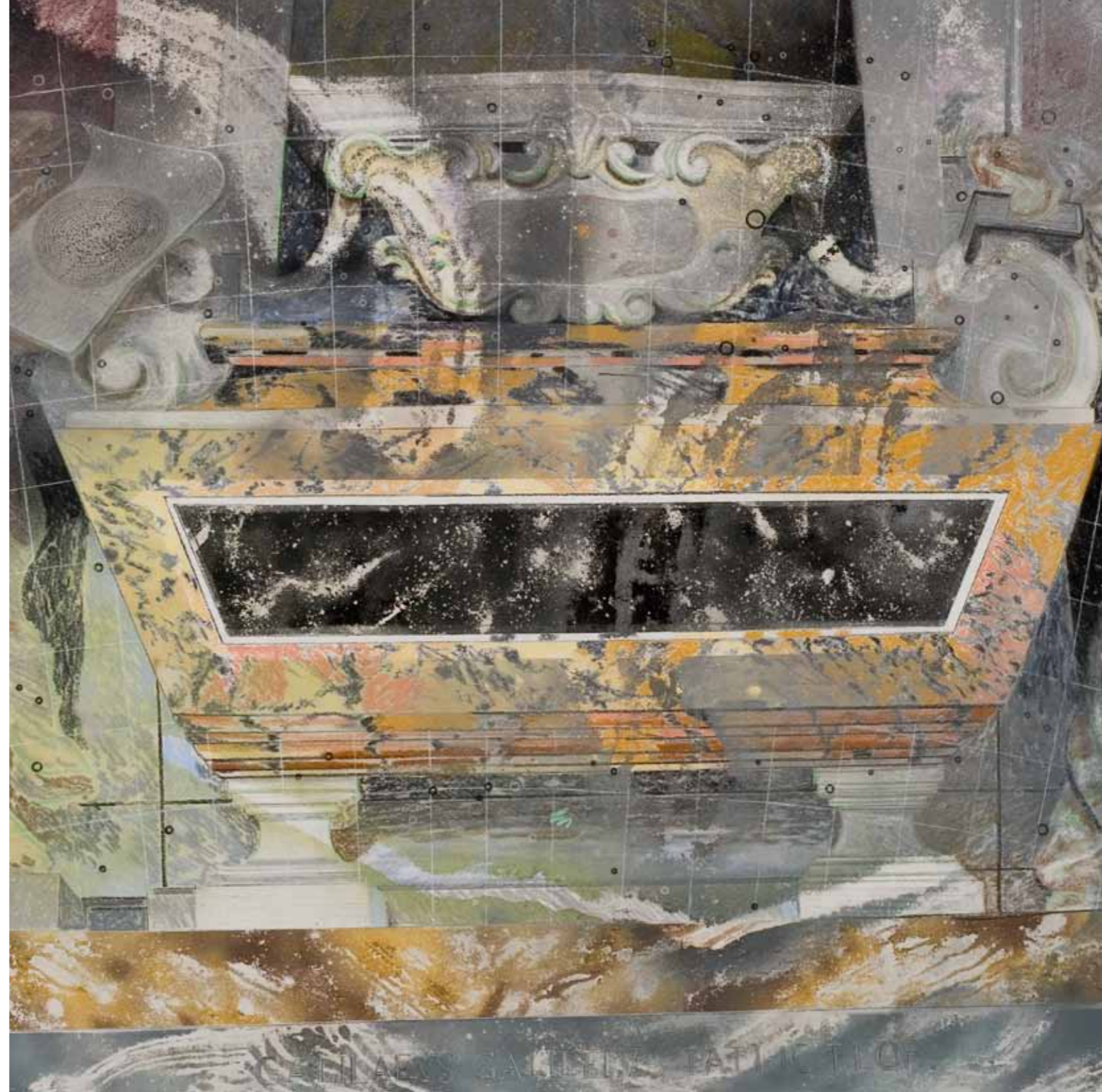


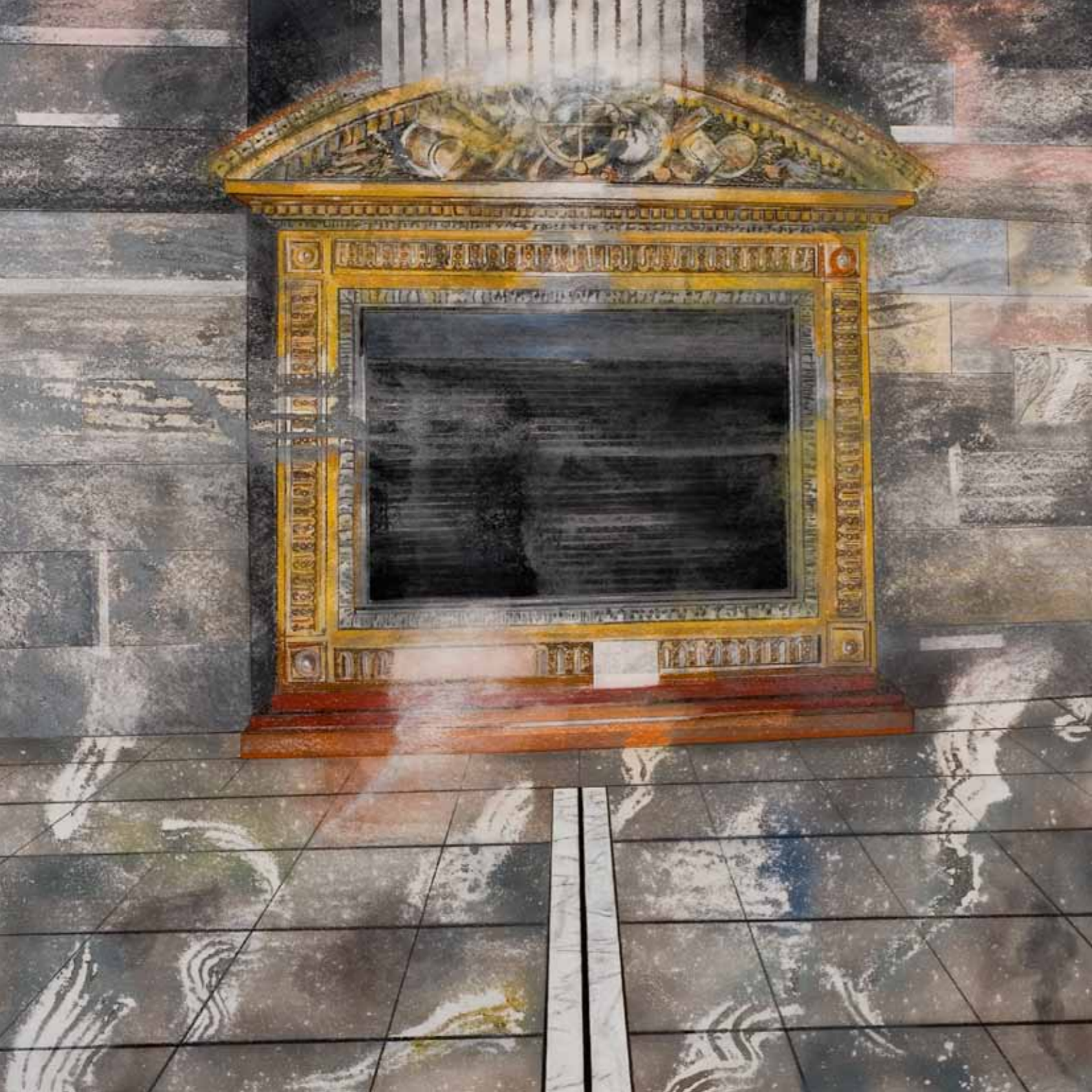
COSMOS: Two square degree field Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 63 x 219 cm 2011



The death of heliocentrism: Galileo's tomb, Santa Croce, Florence

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 175 x 175 cm 2011



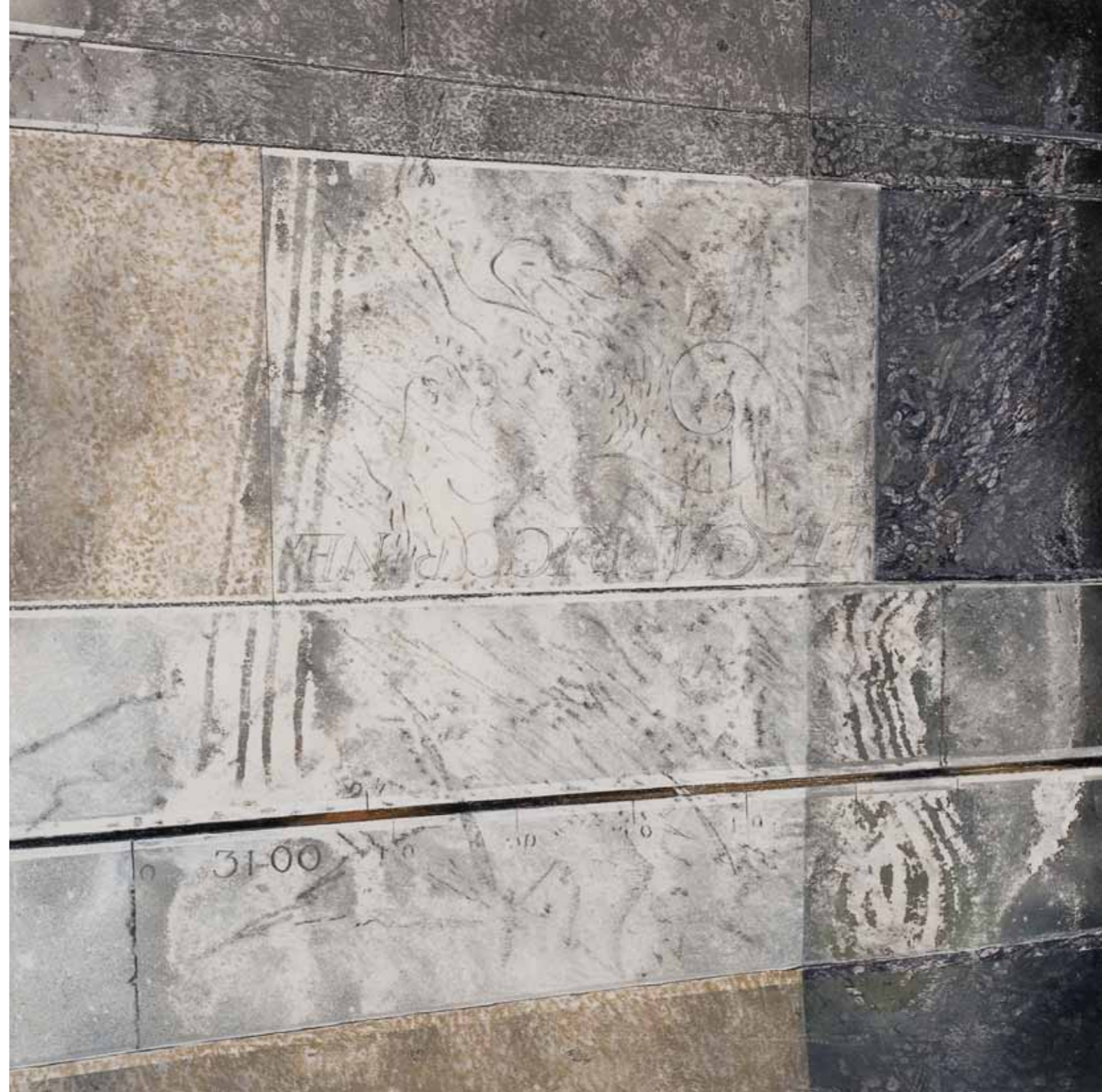


Arago's erasure: Centre for Astrophysics, Paris
Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 175 x 175 cm 2011



The end of the line: 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

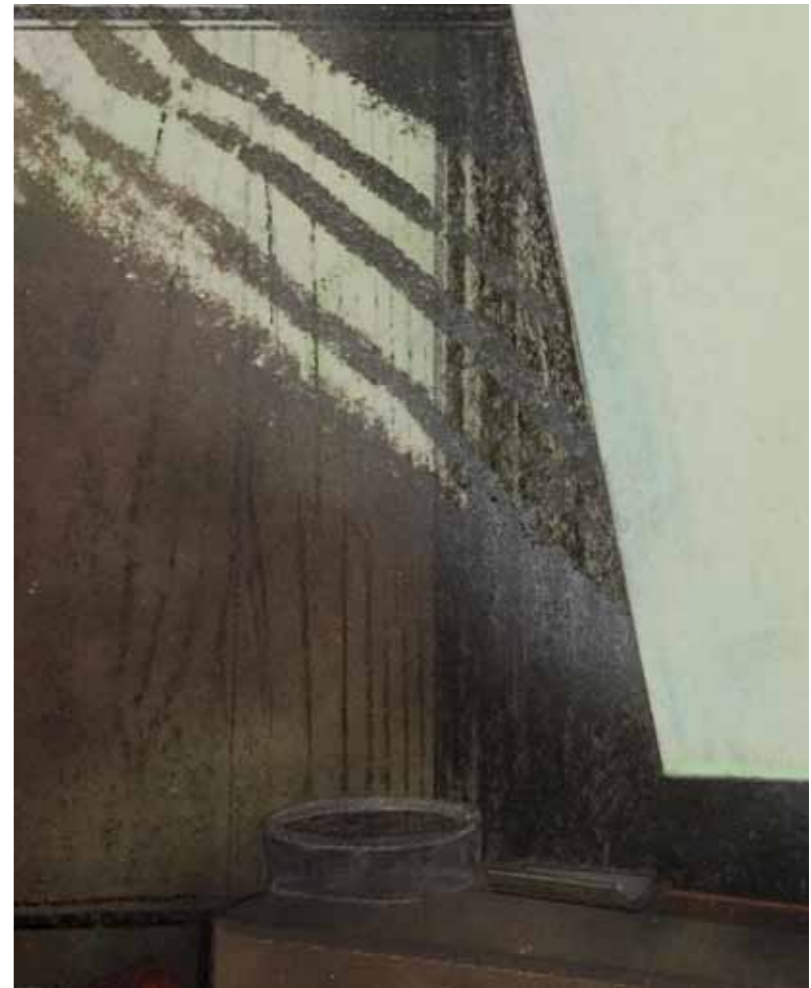
Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 175 x 175 cm 2011



Fraction: COSMOS deep survey

Pastel 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

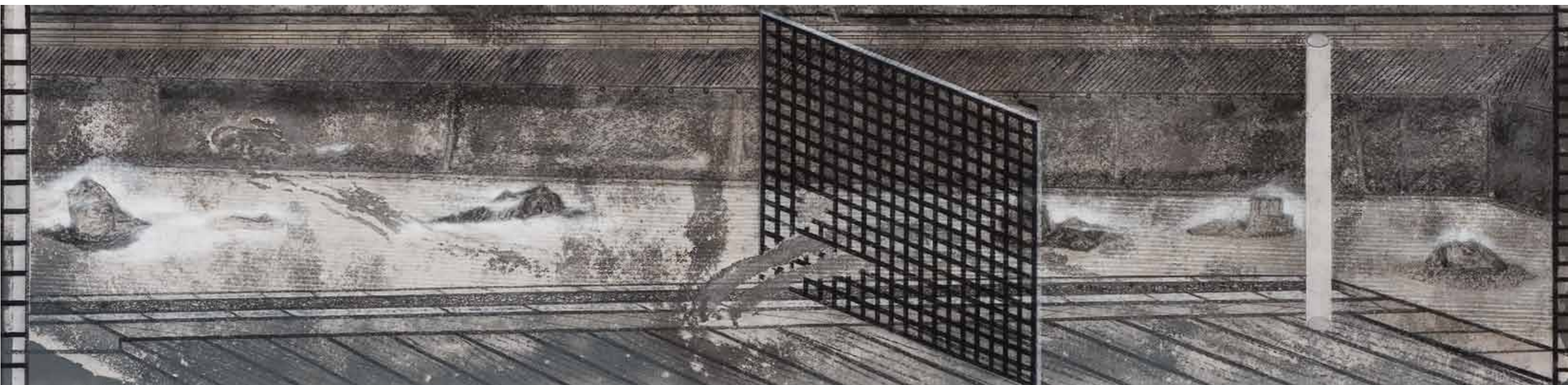


Cook's death and the way of the gods: Kealahou Bay, Hawaii

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 172 x 172 cm 2011



Ryōan-ji: The significance of absence, Kyoto Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 66 x 236 cm 2011



Ryōan-ji at dark moon, Kyoto Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 66 x 236 cm 2011



Fresh Widow: Duchamp's obscurity is not over-rated. Century, New York

Pastel and sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric 172 x 172 cm 2011



Étant donné: 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 *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

- 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
- 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 *Temenos 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-Board-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
- Barlworld 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 Gammeldok 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 Alrnaks Prize
- 1979 Montague White travel grant
- 1978 Montague White bursary
Afrox Prize (open category)
- 1977 Afrox Metal Art Sculpture annual competition (student award)