

Fiona Annis

a portion of that which was once everything

“But the moon, dear Fiona,
it is always there.”

(Personal correspondence between Deniz Cenk Demir and the artist, May 2018)

An exchange between artist Fiona Annis and
curator Vicky Chainey Gagnon, June 2019

What is your specific interest in so-called antiquated technologies and how did you employ your residency experience in Naples, Italy and Banff, Alberta to carve out a present view of these technologies?

My initial interest in antiquated technologies came into focus almost a decade ago when I started exploring historic photographic processes. By means of this investigation, I realized how much I enjoy approaching history from a materially-driven perspective. Since this time, I've often included dated technologies in my work. I find it an interesting way to better understand the development of a technique or tool over time and to get a sense of what attributes persist and what changes.

This initial exploration of historic photographic processes led me to completely unexpected trajectories, including a growing interest in astronomy, or perhaps I should say astronomical themes, as I haven't studied astronomy closely. However I resonate strongly with what I see as shared intersections of interest: light, time, mediated vision, the exploration of the unknown. This, to me, is really fascinating territory. And, by extension, I appreciate astronomy's curious position as a science that is also deeply entangled with the public imagination. Because astronomy contributes to shaping cosmological principles, it informs and sometimes completely destabilizes religion, philosophy, and beyond. Currently, with new frontiers of quantum physics, once again, these fields of research are revolutionizing our understanding of reality.

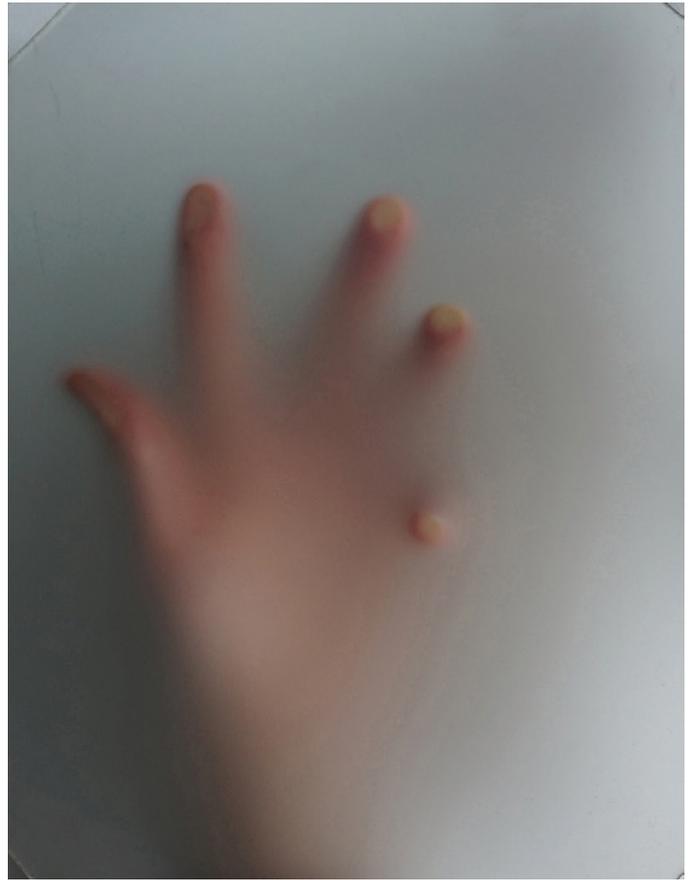


Image: Fiona Annis, *View finder (the room of time)*, Museum of Astronomical Instruments (Naples, Italy), C-print, 10" x 8", 2019.

Coming back to the subject of this exhibition, I've been planning a residency at an observatory and museum of historic astronomical instruments for almost two years, and much of this exhibition was created as preparation studies for the residency experience. It is curious what rich territory preparing for a destination can be — an open space for imagination and experimentation, without the same pressure to produce, which can sometimes impact the free association of a creative process.

This exhibition includes for example prints made in response to an unexpected encounter with an alchemist, which in turn contributed to a meditation on the development of optics. A major focus is also disassembling the camera, even abandoning the camera body altogether, and exploring the potential of the darkroom as a place of apparitions. This contributed to the creation of more abstract images by using processes that favor a temporal record in the place of a figurative depiction. This method of working informed an exploration of the themes of disaster (*dis-astre*) and the mythological potential of chaos through image-making. These are all studies that are part of my research. The exhibition title, *a portion of that which was once everything*, is chosen to evoke a notion of that which is beyond good and evil, and the proposition (that in our daily lives we perhaps tend to forget) that at the heart of things we are simply (and extraordinarily) complexified star dust.

This cycle of work deeply contributed to my approach and experience of the residency, where I created a series of portraits

of the instruments housed in the museum. I find instruments aimed at making sense of the vast unknown as fascinating artifacts of a collective desire to apprehend something quite mysterious. These portraits, a series entitled *La Stanza del Tempo* (The Room of Time) is the next chapter of this ongoing project and will be presented in Naples in the fall. I see these two chapters, *a portion of that which was once everything* and *La Stanza del Tempo* as being in close dialogue, as they rotate around questions of the simultaneous desire and skepticism of knowledge.

What does it mean to you to represent ways of seeing and / or knowing through these images you have created?

I recognize that these images participate in some kind of queering of science, and that the work is both appreciated and treated with suspicion from the perspective of scientific museums and collections. I say “treated with appreciation”, as the work can bring new attention to a collection, but also (without creative thinking) can pose conflict in a traditional perspective of how scientific museums fulfill the mission of presenting didactic programming. It is a difficult question: what knowledge do the images convey? Do they? I guess, if nothing else, they problematize the connection between art and knowledge. I find that there is a very standardized and recognizable formula of how astronomical data is translated through images, or in other words, astronomy has developed a conventional aesthetics in its imagery, and as an artist, I see part of my job as undoing or destabilizing that formula.

And perhaps somewhere, in all of this, I should also admit that I tend to have romantic impulses, and a central axe is perhaps safeguarding the notion of the sky, the stars, outer-space, as still a place of deep mystery, and a place to pose potentially unanswerable questions.

Wall Quotes:

The camera, like the museum, isolates objects from their environment, and they become in a sense symbolic of themselves. Somethings want to be photographed, as they want to go to a doctor or fortune teller — to find out how they are.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 1977, 187.

Knowing must therefore be accompanied by an equal capacity to forget knowing. Non-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, xxxii of introduction.

We cannot read the darkness. We cannot read it. It is a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try.

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*. Seattle: Wave Books, 2009, stanza 130.

To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*. Collector's Library, 1931, 100.

Because we were dealing with the mystery of the universe, and with powers and forces greater than man's comprehension, then by definition they could not be totally understandable.

Arthur C. Clarke, interview with Stanley Kubrick, originally published in 1968.

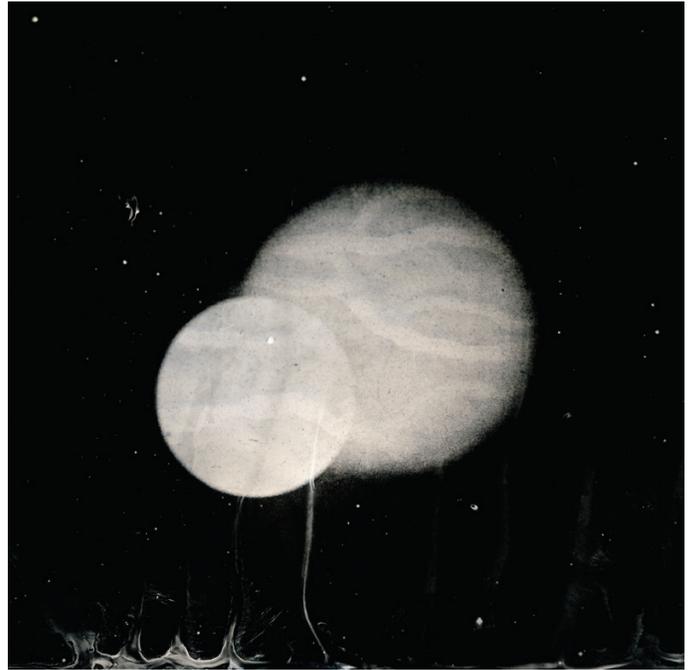


Image: Fiona Annis, *Double Moon Crossing*. C-print enlargement of wet plate collodion, 30" x 30", 2016.

Fiona Annis Acknowledgments

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CAMPBELL RIVER ART GALLERY

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The Campbell River Art Gallery acknowledges that it is located on the unceded traditional territory of the Lígwiłda'xw people; the We Wai Kai, Wei Wai Kum, and Kwiakah First Nations, whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.



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