

Au-delà de la terre *Landless Longitude*

Pavitra Wickramasinghe

April 16 – May 28, 2016

We are drawn into the darkness by flickering lights. The cave-like gallery hosts a constellation of rotating forms. They act as beacons and pull us towards them, serving simultaneously as a warning, of the space they inhabit that might not be welcoming to us earth dwellers, and a call towards it. Once alongside, we can see that these are mechanical entities, careful automata that control their individual orbits and the illumination of one *meteor* each. These celestial rock forms are suggested through the assemblage of multiple layers of paper connected with tiny armatures, but their planar surfaces are slashed through to allow the light of the apparatus to travel beyond them. This does more than illuminate their immediate configuration as the moiré effects it produces amplify their forms onto the gallery walls as illusionary dimensional shadows. The rotation of the machines animates these seemingly new forms so

that their size and shape appear to shift as they travel around and through the room. Pavitra Wickramasinghe has made space. She has moved *beyond earth* as the French title of the exhibition suggests, and yet she has maintained the idea of orientation, the *longitude* of the English title. Without land to anchor us, we must orient ourselves within an active environ, guided by these falling stars. Wickramasinghe has moved her creative references from the earthbound *islands* of her earlier works to what she sees as their parallels in the sky, the *meteor*. It is a gesture towards the universal but she has made for us a cosmos.

In ancient Greece, the cosmos was believed by the Stoics to be the sphere that surrounded the earth that separated us from the unknowable universe. From this intermediary sphere we would draw *logos* – both creative potential and order. The term cosmos came to refer as well to all of humanity for access to this sphere was something that we shared. It also described the activity of making a space attractive and welcoming to an other, a kind of world making. *Au-delà de la terre | Landless Longitude* offers a spatialization of these ideas, suggesting something both apart from our everyday yet fully internalised as somehow reminiscent of that which we already know. A kind of déjà-vu of night skies viewed when we were children, or the wonder of the planetarium and the magic lantern show, each are conjured as the bricolage of these illusions are evident and endearing.

There is effort and desire to show us this new world but its references are anterior, almost ancient. Time and its travel have been present in Wickramasinghe's work for a while now. She was inspired by the work of physicist Ronald L. Mallett and his theories of time-travel based on laser technology – in a sense using light as a time machine. Light is transportative in this exhibition as well but instead of mobility, of going from one place to another, or from this time to that, there is a suggestion of connectivity. In my imaginings, Mallett and time travel are here entwined with the quantum physics of Einstein. His now famous phrase, "spooky action at a distance" addressed behavioural irregularities when particles split into two locations. Einstein's mathematics

denied the interconnection of the particles, but contemporary physics have proven that entanglement is actual, and the breakdown of the mathematical description of this relationship opens to other possible knowledges.¹ It is in these other sites of knowledge production – the experiential, phenomenological, and the material – that Wickramasinghe welcomes us. But these gestures too are entangled and responding to what we are coming to know of the world that we are collectively bringing into being.

American astronomer, astrophysicist, astrobiologist, and science popularizer Carl Sagan said “the surface of the earth is the shore of the cosmic ocean”.² *Au-delà de la terre* | *Landless Longitude* also calls to the nautical. Round video projections of waves and seascapes appear as portholes, making the membrane of Wickramasinghe’s space seem especially porous and mutable. The shadows of the meteors require the walls to hold solid for us to believe that they are there, for us to see them at all. While the surface is of course constant to allow for the reflection of the projections, the suggestions of interior and exterior provided by these two ways of luminescent image production is compelling. It adds to our sense of being within and confirms the exhibition as space. In offering us a landless longitude, an orientation of our bodies and our selves that moves beyond the earth, Wickramasinghe suggests we might consider the cosmos a site within which we can potentially reorient and refigure. Carl Sagan made this more overt, stating that the cosmos was not external to us. “Somewhere in our being we know this, we want to return. The cosmos is also within us. We're made of star stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.”

Historically artists’ production has assumed three forms: mirror or mimesis of the existing conditions of our world, critique as a means to translate these conditions into a new kind of order, or cosmology, the production of new worlds.³ Pavitra Wickramasinghe seems to have engaged all three in a necessary hybrid. I say necessary as I think the material underpinnings of the work are urgent and political. Her earlier work addressed her personal displacement as a Sri Lankan immigrant through metaphors

of the sea and impossible islands as she engaged travel as temporal and oscillating. While mobility was a marker of modernity, displacement is a marker of now. The distinctions of how and why we humans move are both markers of privilege and its methods of construction. Wickramasinghe’s move beyond her personal mythology is an acknowledgement of too many spooky actions that we currently try to distance. She has made a space for entanglement.

jake moore

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1. Howard M. Wiseman with Maria Fuwa, Shuntaro Takeda, Marcin Zwierz & Akira Furusawa. “Experimental proof of nonlocal wavefunction collapse for a single particle using homodyne measurements”. *Nature Communications* 6, Article number: 6665, Published 24 March 2015.
 2. From the introduction to *Cosmos, A Personal Voyage*, a television series written by Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan, and Steven Soter, with Sagan as presenter. First episode aired September 28, 1980.
 3. I am indebted to Nikos Papastergiadis and his presentation, “The Cosmopolitan Scene in Contemporary Art” during the Media@McGill Colloquium, Aisthesis and the Common, March 19, 2016.

Presented as part of the International Digital Art Biennial (BIAN)
and the Montreal Digital Spring 2016.



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