

KAREL NEL

There But Not There: the significance of absence

23 June – 6 August 2011

Within the remarkable works assembled for this exhibition, Karel Nel grapples with the paradox of 'being there', while 'not being there'; of being able to use the physical co-ordinates of place to project himself momentarily and imaginatively, into the mind-world of others who have extended the realm of man's consciousness. Through these images, Nel begins map some of the key sites where human thought has taken a quantum leap forward to reach new frontiers of understanding.

From the Centre for Astrophysics in Paris, to Galileo's tomb in Florence's Santa Croce, to Kealekaku Bay, where Captain Cook died on the big island of Hawaii, and on to Ryōan-ji in Kyoto, with its 15th Century Zen garden, the artist has extended his travels, branching out from his annual visits to London, Paris, New York, and Sydney, before returning home to his studio in Johannesburg to prepare for this exhibition.

Nel's life-long interest in the relationship between art and science informs his large scale drawings which continuously explore the startling, marvellous meeting points of both disciplines. He draws on his experiences of being in and contemplating particular places where the unthought has manifested itself. How does one work out the earth's circumference and the distance of the sun? How does one demonstrate that our universe is heliocentric? What tools can be used to determine the speed of light and under what circumstances do such intellectual epiphanies take place?

Four drawings are based on The Centre for Astrophysics in Paris, because for a long time it has been a centre where things which are difficult to think about have been thought. *Keeping out the Light* belongs to this group, and refers to the findings of the COSMOS Project, whose astrophysicists' mission is to measure two square degrees of the universe. Nel is their resident artist.

On a recent visit to Galileo's tomb 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, Nel, made a connection between a section of the tomb's black marble inlay and the two degree expanse of deep space that the COSMOS project is currently mapping. In a sumptuous drawing, *The Death of Heliocentrism, Galileo's Tomb*, it is not what is there - some vestige of Galileo's mortal remains - that is important, it is the thought he gave life to, which lives on; a rational structure which he believed magnified rather than diminished, the glory of God. In some sense, this final resting place memorialises the end of the Ptolemaic universe and marks the vindication of the pursuit of understanding.

On a visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Nel looked at Marcel Duchamp's final work, *Étant donnés*, in which Duchamp challenges the artistic conventions around propriety, and as it were, opens the doors to the overtly pornographic works of Jeff Koons. Duchamp's role in the development of new ways of thinking in art positions his work as the most serious challenge to the traditional notion of art as a window into another world; of art simply as an optical rendering. In Nel's view, Duchamp's work, as much as that of the scientists that he works with, is about the representation of thought, and of the creation of meaning in the face of the unknowable.

This exhibition presents powerful drawings that embody the diversity of Nel's interests, and cover some of the themes which are being extensively recorded and explored in a book. It will be published in time for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Arts's exhibition in 2012, called *The African Cosmos*.

Nel is an associate professor of Fine Arts at the Wits School of Arts, Johannesburg and a respected collector of African, Asian and Oceanic art with a particular interest in currencies. He advises and consults with museums in South Africa, the UK and the USA, and his work is extensively represented in museums and public collections throughout South Africa and worldwide.