

True North
Katie Paterson

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The light collector

by Dale Berning Sawa

The Scottish artist Katie Paterson was on a tram once, back in November 2007, traveling through Fukui, Japan, when a Buddhist monk struck up a conversation with her. He was kind and curious and when he found out she was headed to Daihonzan Eiheiji, the Soutou Zen Temple of Eternal Peace, he asked if he might show her around. After the visit, the monk arranged for his personal taxi driver to take her to dinner and then drive her on to the nearest city. It was the driver who finally explained that the monk was in fact Master Tyouetu Endo, one of Eiheiji's head priests.

Upon her return to London, Paterson sent Master Endo an artwork in thanks. It was a record she had pressed of the sound of snow shot from 100 trees. A year later, while struggling to make *All the Dead Stars*, a map of the 27,000 extinguished suns humankind had ever recorded, for the Altermodern: Tate Triennial exhibition, she returned home from the studio one day in tears, to find a parcel with Japanese stamps waiting for her. Master Endo had replied. He'd sent gifts and a letter in which she remembered him describing her "as the girl with the rhinoceros horn."

With its enchanted layers of chance and marvel, this story, which Paterson relayed to me on a windy day in March last year, perfectly captures what makes her oeuvre magnetic. She was messaging me from a bus stop, where she was waiting to go back to Eiheiji for the first time in a long time. She was in Japan to, among other things, tie up her latest project, *Star Sphere*, made in collaboration with Sony Japan and Jaxa, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency. Over the week that followed, we exchanged texts and voice messages, and spoke several times too, I pounding London pavements and Paterson, doing overnight stays in Zen temples. For an artist who once set up a phone line to a glacier, traveling together apart in this way felt somewhat appropriate. She sounded — as she always does — moonstruck, her mind seeing far beyond not just the clouds but the firmament. "I can't even begin to describe," she said, not finishing her sentence. "It's just been amazing."

Critics have long reached for this word and its synonyms — "a modern-day cabinet of wonders", "wide-eyed wonder", "moon-eyed but hard-nosed", "unblushing mysticism", "collective daydream", "miraculous" — to adequately account for what Paterson does. Her work stretches things out. It draws lines between uncanny detail and ancient truth. It uses commonplace basics as motifs (a lightbulb, a sand pail) all the while taking as its subject everything — the Earth, the solar system, the universe, all of time. And like the very best picture books do, it only ever triggers more questions. The wonder it elicits is directed not at the work itself but the beyond. Her *Ideas*, which she published in her 2019 book, *A Place that Exists Only in Moonlight*, might be perfectly formed literary pearls, but they're also just trigger points in multidimensional thinking. They're markers, hesitations, departures, ellipses, devices by which to access, as she put it, "the non-rational, the non-linear, different scales,

shifting between the micro and the macro.”

In 2023, Sony named Paterson as one of five artists, alongside Hiroshi Sugimoto, Vik Muniz, Yukimasa Ida, and Mago Nagazaka, to partner on this “space inspiration project”, a collaboration with Jaxa and the University of Tokyo. The team had launched a nanosatellite with an onboard camera to an orbital altitude of 600km. The artists were invited to download a simulator app in order to track where the satellite would be, and send over the coordinates for what they wanted to photograph and when. On February 28, 2025, the satellite reached the end of its lifespan and returned to Earth, burning up in the atmosphere above New Zealand.

With a 35mm detector and a 28-135mm lens, the camera was domestic, not spy-grade. Sony’s Yusuke Muraki, who has the enviable title of “strategic space producer”, explained the idea was to allow the general public to feel “as if they were bringing their own digital camera to space and taking photos as they wanted to.”

Paterson saw using it as a precious opportunity to be able to “wander the Earth”. She loved that the satellite was the size of a large bird (it weighed about 12kg) and that it was called “Eye”. She decided to focus on where things began for her: the polar ice.

For her MFA degree show at the Slade, Paterson submerged a microphone in Iceland’s Vatnajökull glacier to broadcast the sound of it melting, and convinced Virgin to set up a cell phone so you could call, from anywhere, to listen in. That piece was, she said, “the first feeling of collapsing distance and how to bring the very, very distant into an intimate kind of space.” Some peers jokingly questioned at the time whether what you heard when you called the number she exhibited (07757001122) wasn’t “just you in the bathtub, you know, splashing around with a microphone?”. She was horrified. “I was like, Nooooo, are you serious? Do you know what it’s taken to get a signal and all the equipment out there?” Of her exacting technically challenging process, she said, “I kind of set myself up from the beginning, I think, to just be like this and I can’t lighten things up anymore. It’s strict and it’s real.”

With *Star Sphere*, she requested images from throughout the northern polar zone (the empty Arctic Ocean, Svalbard, Ellesmere Island), always from a bird’s eye view. “Then we’d wait a period, and then I would get emailed a link.” Opening them, she said, was both delightful and nerve-wracking. In a sleepy late-night voicemail I received one morning at 3am, Paterson told me she’d landed on a description, in Samantha Harvey’s novel, *Orbital*, of the northern hemisphere as seen from the International Space Station, that resonated with her own perspective. The territory flooded with daylight Harvey described as “luminous and humanless”. “That’s exactly what I felt like from looking at these images,” said Paterson. “Of course, there’s something about just being totally awestruck by the beauty.” But beneath the sparkle is that unfathomable depth of the aliveness of the world. From the Eye’s exospheric perspective, all life on Earth — “the 9 million species”, “all the billions of years of the Earth’s existence” — is shrouded in cloud but it is all there.

Contrary to almost all Paterson’s works to date, *True North* did not start as a fully-formed idea. It is instead an extrapolation of a thought she had to collect light from sacred places: mosques, cathedrals, churches, temples, “by which I just mean,” she said, “taking a solar panel around with me, and kind of gathering the energy of the sunlight and using that energy to make something else.” She imagined several different things that could be, “such as making a pure white image,” she told me by email. “I began to imagine collecting this light from the Arctic regions, light refracted and reflected through ancient

crystalline ice, and using it to develop the photographs themselves. Images that may, in time, outlast the glaciers themselves”.

Adapting this to the *Star Sphere* commission, she now resolved to make photographic negatives of the satellite images, then collect solar energy from the Arctic, which she would use to power traditional darkroom equipment and develop the photographs.

“Light gathering!” Paterson duly texted me, in early June, accompanied by a fully zipped selfie, blond locks straying from beneath a beanie and a hood, that indomitable gaze holding me in its grip. Artica Svalbard had proposed she do a residency, during which she could head out on to the ice with her solar panel. In a subsequent video shot on one such daily session, she panned around a monochrome landscape from a roadside, whispering like a gleeful toddler into her phone, as the occasional car boomed past: “Dale! I have to show you this, on our journey around the world ...” Camera hovers over a white animal in the near distance. “A reindeer, it’s crazy. Just here. By the side of the road.”

Solar tech as a tool for collecting light is both logistically challenging (you can’t just airfreight a lithium battery) and highly conceptual, “a bit too conceptual for me, even,” Paterson said. At the same time, actually doing it, like all her gestures, unlocks all kinds of questions in the way a philosophical prompt or a Zen koan might.

When Akiko Miki, international art director at Benesse Art Site on Naoshima, nominated Paterson for *Star Sphere*, she wrote at the time that it was because, to her mind, Paterson’s works “expand our consciousness of the workings of nature across the vastness of spacetime, but also encourage us to contemplate the connections between each of us living in the ‘here and now’.”

It is this exact point Paterson herself had gleaned from the Zen ceremonies she was attending last year in Japan. She sent me photographs of notes she had been taking in talks. Underlined in red was the term “engi” (referencing the Buddhist concept of cause and effect) with “everything is connected” scribbled beside it. “I love this,” she texted.

Back in March, just as she was leaving Eiheiji, Kai, the young monk who had served as her interpreter, came running over. “Nishi-san wants to see you, quick, run” he said. And so she ran, behind him through the temple to meet the head priest. “He wanted to learn about the artwork,” she said. They spoke for 45 minutes. “The thing that stuck with me so much is he said, ‘Katie-san goes beyond art’,” Master Nishi thereby echoing what Master Endo had written to her after her very first visit. She sent me a photograph of that letter. “You are traveling alone from afar country Scotland,” he writes. “I feel you what you looking for the way of truth. Buddha say You don’t devour. You don’t disguise. And You turn on mercy mind to all living things. And You walk alone like rhinoceros’s horn.” He is quoting the Buddha’s words as written in what is known as the Rhinoceros Sutra or Khaggavisana Sutta, one of the earliest Pali scriptures, about the solitary pursuit of truth and enlightenment.

I asked Paterson if her visits to temples was part of a private spiritual practice. “I’ve never even really talked about it before,” she said. “I’m wary of generalising, or of approaching it through a simplified Western lens. But I’ve always felt drawn to Zen — to the practice of paying attention, from the most minute details to the largest scales.” To her mind, the koans used in Zen aren’t riddles so much as provocations, “that are to break your mind out of rational thinking. And I think that’s what I try to do in my work.”