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Kate Shaw
LUMINOUS WORLD

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Kate Shaw
LUMINOUS WORLD



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Standing on
the shores of
a frozen
lake:
Kate Shaw's
Science
Fictions



SIMON GREGG

IMAGES

- Cover** Charcoal (*Maralinga: UK*) 2013
Acrylic and resin on board; 120 x 240cm
- 1** *Aphrodite* 2013
Lithograph on paper; 57 x 7
- 2** *Ice Drift* 2011
Acrylic and resin on board; 90 x 180cm
- 3** *Framtío* 2013
Acrylic and resin on board; 120 x 180cm
- 4** *Nightingale* 2013
Acrylic and resin on board; 120 x 180cm

The problems faced by Kate Shaw are less likely to be shared by other artists, than by scientists and physicists. Through her work she imagines life on a sub-atomic level, located somewhere within that mass which is itself missing from the known universe. It cannot be identified with telescopes or microscopes, but exists as a form of pure energy, whose incalculable force has the power to influence the trajectory of stars and planets.

Shaw's paintings are lit with an energy that is neither made by man nor known by man. However its discovery may be imminent; the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) now operational beneath the Swiss-Franco border is the highest-energy particle collider ever made. Developed by over 10,000 scientists from over 100 countries, it lies in a tunnel with a circumference of twenty-seven kilometres, and is located 175 metres underground. Its purpose is to address the unsolved questions of physics, including but not limited to, the birth of the universe.

If such a machine – the largest and most advanced of any so far devised by humankind – sounds like science fiction, then prepare to suspend your disbelief. It belongs to a peripheral divide between science fiction and science fact, whose properties are still being hypothesized. While the scientists work with supersymmetric theories, Shaw works with poured paint and resin. Each of her explosive and immersive panels dissolves and gestates in rivers of toxic ooze, both chemically enhanced and singularly pure. While luxuriating in their potent materialism, the panels, critically, explore the unseen. This is that dark matter of the unknown

universe; the fallout of nuclear radiation; the throbbing electricity of the dawn of time. Chasing the unseen has led Shaw to the poisoned slopes of backwater China, and the crystalline fields of distant Iceland. While these are real, physical places, she depicts metaphysical experiences: the flash of nuclear light, or the aching groan of continental shift. Without specific indicators or the signs of man, time and space becomes fractured and immeasurable.

For points of reference we must navigate that slippery interstice of science fact and fiction. On 10 September 2008, after more than ten years under construction, the LHC was switched on. Recalling HAL in Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, or Deep Thought in Douglas Adams' *Hitch-Hiker Trilogy*, the LHC twinkled into life, its electronic brainwaves surging at impossible speeds. Nine days later a liquid helium enclosure ruptured, causing both a magnet quench and several tons of helium gas to escape with explosive force. Fact or fiction?

In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film *Solaris* the protagonist Kelvin returns to his father's house, as if in a dream. A dog runs to greet him, and he enters the house, only to find it is raining inside – a fact to which his father seems oblivious. Stepping outside, father and son embrace on the shore of a frozen lake, and as the camera pans back, we discover we are not on earth, as thought, but on an island in the middle of an ocean on the distant planet Solaris. Fact or fiction?



Iceland – the subject of Shaw's most recent series – embodies many of these paradoxes and puzzles of science. Located on the ridge of two continental shelves, Iceland is home to the purest ecosystem in the world, and the purest gene pool. It is the closest we mortals will get to the beginning of time. There is a sense that the dark matter has parted, leading the space clear to 'luminous matter' – the stars, gas and dust that emits and absorbs light. Shaw's *Ice Drift* amplifies the luminosity of this genetic plasma, where pyramids of ice protrude from sticky oceans of succulent ooze.

Other works, such as *Lava Lake* and *Milford Sound*, recall 'The Zone' in another Tarkovsky film – 1979's *Stalker* – where the normal laws of physics are absent, and act as a gateway to 'The Room', where impossible wishes can be granted. The paint in Shaw's panels is like a living organism – it swirls and surges, ebbs and flows. To be caught within its sticky, visceral sludge would be to slowly asphyxiate in a hallucinogenic delirium. And the colour; the colours of Kate Shaw's palette transcend all that is earthly, suggesting instead an encounter with a pre-life, post-death, or extra-terrestrial phenomena. Science and nature here has no place – this is the realm of anti-science and super-nature, a place where events on a molecular level dictate the cosmological passage of planets.

As humans we detect only a fraction of the known universe. The energy that surrounds and consumes us is beyond our ability to apprehend, therefore to imagine the impact of a particle beam as it smashes into another, opposing particle beam, as the LHC is capable of doing, is to imagine the big bang itself. Only the scale has changed. The possibilities of

inhabiting a planet where such events occur every nanosecond is both a bewildering and wondrous proposition, and thankfully we have Kate Shaw to reveal to us this very bewilderment and wonder that inhabits our very essence and existence. That the magic of these split-second spectacles have come to her attention allows us all to imagine – if only for a moment – what it is to stand on the shore of that frozen lake, where science fiction has become science fact. ■