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## Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's Cosmic 'Polyhedra' at Tiwani Contemporary

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | APRIL 06, 2016



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Polyhedra, Tiwani Contemporary, 2016 © Sylvain Deleu

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"Polyhedra" at Tiwani Contemporary in London is a solo exhibition of new work by Johannesburg-based artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum.

The exhibition includes a number of new drawings, a large window drawing, and a new, previously unseen video animation.

Born in 1980 in Botswana, Sunstrum's multidisciplinary practice encompasses themes of mythology, geology, and theories on the nature of the universe

Motivated by her experiences in the diverse range of locales that she has called home over the years, Sunstrum investigates the development of identity within geographic and cultural contexts.

"Polyhedra" at Tiwani Contemporary is titled after Sunstrum's animation of the same name, which is described as "a poetic cosmogony and personal interpretation of the order of things."

The animation combines time-lapse photography of the Milky Way with Sunstrum's own watercolor paintings and the work of Tempest Anderson, a pioneer in volcanic photography.

To find out more about "Polyhedra," BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with Sunstrum and asked her a few questions.

**Polyhedra at Tiwani Contemporary is your first solo exhibition in the UK. Could you explain the meaning and significance of the title of the exhibition?**

'Polyhedra' is the plural of 'polyhedron'. The word polyhedron comes from classical Greek with the roots poly- (meaning 'many') and -hedron (meaning 'base'). In basic geometry a polyhedron is a three dimensional solid: essentially a shape with many 'bases' or many 'faces.' This idea of a thing having many faces appealed to me: I am interested in cross-cosmological references to a many-faced god. I am interested in theories in speculative physics of the existence of many dimensions. The polyhedron also encapsulates an idea that has persisted in my work for many years: that an individual identity is made up of many selves

**Mythology, geology, and theories on the nature of the universe are key themes in your work. What is your interest in these themes and how do you engage with them in your work?**

I have always had an interest in how the advanced sciences and ancient mythologies are both preoccupied with the same questions: What is our place in the universe? How did we get here? What are we meant to know? I am interested in how both contemporary theories in science and ancient cosmological thinking attempt to explain the phenomena of time, space, and the structural workings of the universe. Out of these interests, my work represents my own imagining of what I call 'mythologies of a future'.

**You were born in Botswana, currently live in South Africa, and have lived in a number of other locations around the world over the years. What influence has this had on your work?**

I grew up living in many different places around the world and as a result, I think, from an early age I began to imagine myself as a space traveler. As I think back on some of the memories of my childhood, those experiences became easy fodder for a fantastical narrative where landscapes, events and characters take on mythological significance. I think this is where the allusions to time travel, parallel dimensions, and alternate realities emerge from in my work.

**The exhibition includes a number of new drawings, a large window drawing and a new, previously unseen video animation. What do these works reveal about the nature, context, and character of your practice?**

In developing the work for the exhibition, I began with the notion of 'seeing through': seeing through the earth, seeing through bodies, seeing through to the stars. Just before I began developing the work for Polyhedra, I had done a series of large figure drawings. In each drawing a single figure blurred between one physical gesture and the next. These intertwining gesture drawings also 'contained' mountain forms. I considered 18th-century European philosophers' fascination with mountains in their meditations on 'the Sublime'. Their early treks through mountain ranges inspired both immense beauty and mortal terror. In layering and intertwining the figures and making their scale boundless in comparison with that of the mountain forms, I proposed the sublime as an experience of the simultaneous small-ness and endless-ness of the universe. Through this overlapping I tried to imply a compounding of space, or a 'seeing through' space.

While making the drawings and animation for the show, I had these notions – of 'seeing through' and the terrifying beauty of the sublime – in my mind. The drawing on the gallery window represents a literal attempt at 'seeing through'. On the 'recto' (exterior) view I have layered my own landscape drawing with a historical map of the constellations of the southern hemisphere. I think of mapping the stars as one of the earliest attempts at trying to see through space: a way of observing the regularity of cosmological events to try to construct a glimpse of the larger universe. I am often thinking about how far I can push drawing, or how far my drawing can push into space. I read these early tracings of star movements as similar attempts at pushing drawing into space. I think of the 'verso' (interior) view of the window drawing as bridging the cosmos with the ground. I'm interested in the way theories in geometry attempt to distil the complex dimensionality of the earth into a system of flat shapes. It's a rigorous practice of the imagination, for instance, to present a deep cross-sectional view of the earth. In the window drawing I make reference to the architectural project by Vicente Guallart, Howtomakeamountain. In the project he proposes how to rebuild a hill in a town in Costa Blanca, Spain. He suggests that a crystalline structure (or 'rhombohedral system') generates a geometry that could become the basic 'gene' or building block for regenerating the hill.

### **What do you want to convey and reveal with the exhibition Polyhedra?**

The recurrence of geometric shapes and plotting lines throughout the work in the show point to Plato's ideas about the building blocks of the universe. In *Timaeus*, Plato asserts the triangle to be the building block of the universe. Triangles make up five solids, five polyhedra which are now known as The Platonic Solids. These polyhedra make up the four earth elements with a fifth element assigned to heaven. On this fifth element, this fifth polyhedron, heaven, Plato wrote: "There still remained the fifth construction, which the god used for embroidering the constellations on the whole heaven." [Plato, "The *Timaeus*"].

Later Greek philosophers assigned the dodecahedron to this fifth polyhedron. Dodecahedra have 12 faces. The number 12 is embedded in many of the elements in the work, in the gestures of the figures in the large wall-sized drawings titled *Panthea* and also within the small framed drawings. I think of these small drawings as 'schemata': fantastical, lyrical, and technical renderings of the theories and concepts encoded throughout the work.

Finally, the exhibition takes its title from the new animation, *Polyhedra*, which contains references to star mapping and the superimposition of mythological characters into the movements of celestial bodies through the sky. The animation includes archival photographs by 18th-century pioneering volcanic photographer Tempest Anderson. Imagery of volcanoes ties in quite well with the notion of 'seeing through': the body of a volcano becomes a portal through which we might glimpse the inner workings of the earth. That those inner workings present themselves as so powerfully destructive again recalls notions of beauty and the sublime.

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