

JAMES NIZAM

APPARENT MOTIONS

Our organs are no longer instruments; on the contrary, our instruments are detachable organs. Space is no longer what it was... I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me.¹

James Nizam works around the moon and opposite the sun. He tracks their heavenly dispositions to inhabit the night from the remote forests of British Columbia. Drawing upon thorough notations and experience accumulated over years of direct observation, Nizam anticipates the ancient galactic explosions that swarm and whirl around the North Celestial Pole tonight, echoes of unimaginably deep time.

With a camera and a watch, he documents, tracks and clocks the diurnal cycles of the night sky. In opening his mechanical aperture, he invites remnants of those massive cosmic bodies to find their final resting place, drawing lines in layers of celluloid. His capacity to control light not only illuminates vast new architectures and virtual geometries; it also enables him to transfer and poetically overlay our bodily dimensions and spatial thinking processes upon the visible universe. The combined revelations and obfuscations mirror and map the nodes of our minds to the constellations above, coalescing the volumes of the camera, the body and the stars. The result of this fieldwork is *Apparent Motions*, an exhibition of photographs, sculptures, drawings and sound media that invites viewers to move between the acts of thought, perception and embodiment to consider the appearance and materialization of space.

Knowing the cycles of the moon is one thing; working by them is another. Depending on the lunar phase, time of year and regional weather patterns, Nizam's circadian rhythm becomes nocturnal and is forced to expand and contract for periods of production. But this information only establishes the durations of the labour; the specific workflow and task list still needs articulation.

The *Field Transcripts* (2019) are notations of journeys taken and documentations of the course of a night's work. The changing weight of each line represents the motions that the artist's customized camera controls execute in the field. These graphic lines, reminiscent of mysterious glyphs, are in fact illustrations of various curves used in architectural detailing (such as the *Crown*, the *Ogee*, and the *Cusp*), orienting one aspect of the drawings' focus upon intimate forms of buildings and how space is constructed. When applied to the camera as indices of focal length modulations over time (zooming in or out in specific temporal increments), the schematic drawings are blueprints for exploring and charting stars, movements and velocities. They are the building blocks to articulate deep space(s) in the sky; keys to illuminate otherwise invisible forms and relations as outlined by the stars' tireless procession. Hand-drawn over grids and measurements inscribed in non-photo blue ink, the layers of exacting empiricism have the potential to disappear in relation to the reproducible forms and directions inscribed upon them. This phenomenon underscores the primacy of visual form over technical specifications and geo-spatial coordinates.

Every *Field Transcript* has been realized as a part of the *Drawings with Starlight* (2018) series, though not every transcription has a counterpart in the exhibition. This artistic decision disrupts a direct impression of didacticism and opens the door for speculation and projection as viewers move between rooms trying to find each translation through formal similarities. The photographs draw upon the essential qualities of analog photography, as light, space and time are the method and the means. Drawing inspiration from early experiments in chronophotography, such as those by 19th-century pioneer Étienne-Jules Marey, Nizam supplants Marey's multiple exposures with one of a longer duration to pictorially index elapsed time. The exposures of the photographs in *Apparent Motions* lasted as long as five hours – a feat unto itself considering the odds of finding a sky in the right phase of moon, free of clouds, planes and other occlusions, for such a long period of time.

The camera is an instrument to be used (a “detachable organ”), but it is also a translator of a universal subtext. As art historian and critical theorist Kaja Silverman observes, photography is regarded as “the world's primary way of revealing itself to us – of demonstrating that it exists, and that it will forever exceed us. Photography is also an ontological calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies.”² Silverman's description of photography seems particularly apt for a body of work that explores the intricate similarities of spatial thinking and visualization with the symphony of the stars and the many possible dimensions that reveal themselves to the camera.

Apparent Motions is an incredibly generous exhibition. In various forms and media, the artist presents viewers with an amount of information that borders on the excessive. Tactfully managed and beautifully embodied, the myriad degrees and types of text and context constitute not a dizzying field of authority, but rather a surprisingly friendly gesture embracing viewers on a journey with the artist. There is space to embody these dimensions for ourselves.

The process of perception can be a multi-sensory experience wherein a distal stimulus (some object in the real world) affects the body's sensory organs through light, sound, and/or other physical processes. This input becomes neural activity through transduction and is processed in the brain, resulting in a mental re-creation of the original distal stimulus. This latter re-creation, or imprint, is the percept. It is like a fleshy virtual reality, a mental interpretation and imagination of space, at once a solid and a void.

By engaging the image and text of *Apparent Motions*, viewers can begin to piece the process together, understanding the role of the camera, directions of the transcripts and products of the photographs. And with these various inputs, we can re-create that photographic process at the site of the percept, where “the invisible seen is the invisible of the visible itself.”³ I imagine the carbon black lines of a *Field Transcript* being distorted by velocity, stretched into amplitudes and latitudes, multiplied and overlaid around itself, mentally expanding to traverse an entire universe, if only for a moment.

When thinking about these virtual images, the percept, or the invisible elements of the visible, one imagines spaces, dimensions and architectures. We imagine three-dimensional quantities. *Orrery* (2019) is such a solid in its representation of movement through space over time. Traditionally, an orrery is a

mechanical instrument used to model the Solar System, its movements and celestial alignments at a given time, typically based on a heliocentric model. The modelling existed on an overwhelmingly flat plane as planets and moons neatly circled one another. What the orrery wasn't able to capture was the immense velocity of our Solar System on the third axis of a vertical plane flying out into the universe.

Nizam's *Orrery* is a multicomplex, helical form that embeds the epicycles of the historic devices with a propulsive velocity. It is a block of time with an encrypted astronomical logic. The work interprets two-dimensional images as a three-axis coordinate system, and proceeds to move into the chronometric realm of the fourth dimension. *Orrery* was such a complex form to produce that no subtractive means would have sufficed. Instead, Nizam 3-D printed the work and carefully finessed it into its final form. This method of production has a surprising similarity to the photographs, as both the 3-D printer and the artist's camera are understood as multi-axial drawing machines. In both cases, a flat plane (the negative in the camera or the bed of the printer) receives input from a Cartesian set of x, y, z coordinates. The camera's orientation along the North Celestial Pole is akin to the printer head positioning itself on the print bed, while the action of the lens zooming in and out mimics the printer moving left-right and front-back. By understanding these inputs, the artist produces complicated forms from both instruments, ultimately realizing incredibly intricate spatial expressions.

Hovering in the gallery space, *Orrery* represents the amount of time that it takes Pluto to make one revolution around the Sun, with all of the planetary orbits overlaid simultaneously. It represents the Solar System that we inhabit as it blasts out into the space being documented and made visible throughout the rest of the exhibition.

Regarding movements and velocities, *Earth Spin Moon Orbit* (2019) is a device of further introspection and meta positionality. As an equatorial mount, this instrument typically holds a camera and provides mechanized motion to counteract the rotation of the Earth in relation to the stars and other celestial objects. In this case, Nizam has installed a laser on his mount in place of the camera. This laser has been fixed to the moon and marks its position in relation to the gallery at all times. The gesture is reciprocal as *Drawings with Starlight* required the artist to work around the moon – to track its relative position in order to avoid its reflectance.

Here, the moon's location is inscribed upon the interior architecture of the gallery. The invisibility made visible is not actually the moon's movement but the rotation of the Earth itself. Further, the room in which viewers stand is also rotating at a velocity that is both incredibly great and imperceptible. The body navigating the exhibition – moving from one room to the next and cycling back again – can be appreciated as a living optical instrument maneuvering the spatial coordinates of the contemporary art gallery. Such a process becomes yet another alignment and mirroring of the multi-axial explorations of the camera and productions of the printer, as the human body navigates through literal and theoretical architectures.

Finally, a suite of works sonifies and materializes cosmic starlight, extending an investment in the ways visual information can engage different sensory inputs when redeployed through various media. *Disc* (2017)



is a polished nickel stamper used in the production of the 12” vinyl record *Score* (2017). The audio embedded in the wax disc is the product of an image-to-sound translation software that made audible one of Nizam’s previous works, *Starlight Sequenced into Morse Code* (2017). It is played on a customized turntable that completes sixteen orbits per minute. *Disc* is the physical antecedent to audio, containing the raw information to produce records while remaining silently reflective. One final inter-medial translation occurs when *Disc* was used as a spherical reflector, bouncing sunlight into a camera body from the quarried landscape of *Heliographic Scale* (2017). In the process of creating the image, Nizam engaged in a sort of heliotropic communication with himself, flashing bursts of light into his camera with the shiny nickel. As seen in the final photograph, the camera further orchestrates this cosmic debris into a constellation of star formations laid upon the compromised landscape.

Prof. Eduardo Cadava suggests that thousands of years ago, stars “not only inspired imitation but were already objects whose mimetic character announced their relation to the possibility of meaning.”⁴ Nizam creates anonymous glyphs as instruments and parameters for spectral explorations. The stars in turn send encoded information toward Nizam’s camera, creating ambiguous figures and depths. The detachable optical organ of the camera embeds information in its body, translating an underlying (and otherwise invisible) meaning and signification of the universe into a visible form.

In *Apparent Motions*, Nizam became immersed in a universe that at once surrounded and exceeded him – a universe that continues to speak in tongues embedded in starlight.

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¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James E. Edie, trans. William Cobb (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 178.

² Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or the History of Photography*, Part I (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2015), 10-11.

³ Francois Zourabichvili, “Six Notes on the Percept (On the Relation between the Critical and the Clinical)” in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996), 190.

⁴ Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 26.

