

# BORDERCROSSINGS



## PHOTOGRAPHY

Nan Goldin

William Eakin, Lori Blondeau, Sandra Brewster, The Otolith Group,  
Chuck Samuels, Barry Schwabsky, Canisia Lubrin

ISSUE NO. 157 \$13.95



7 25274 86024 1

02

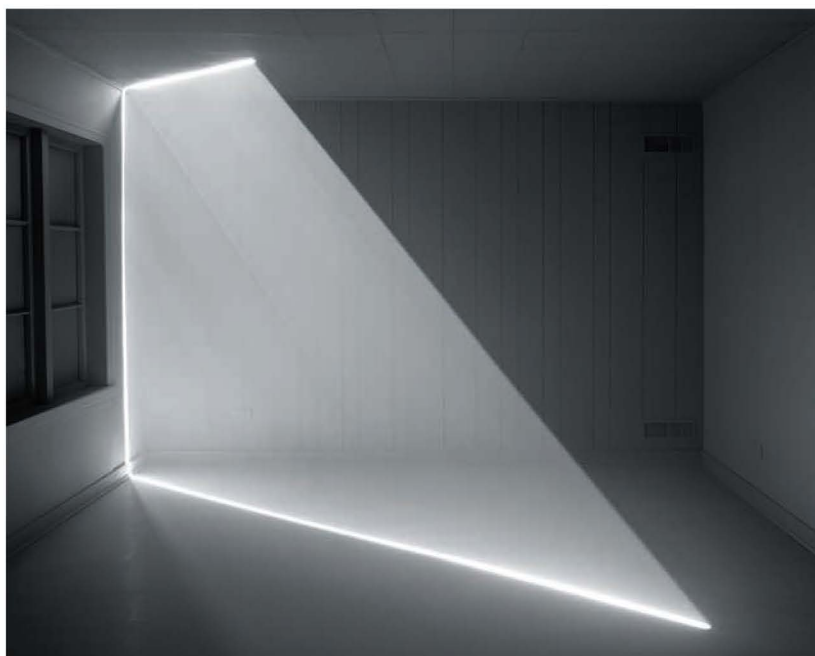


1

## Light Space Camera Language The Work of James Nizam

by Rodney LaTourelle





2



3

1. James Nizam, *Frieze*, 2016, LightJet print, dimensions variable. All images courtesy of the artist, Gallery Jones, Birch Contemporary and REITER Galerie.

2. *Shard of Light*, 2011, archival pigment print, variable dimensions.

3. *Thought Form (Cube Deconstruction)*, 2011, archival pigment print, variable dimensions.

Characterized by a fluid relay between sculptural and photographic media, James Nizam's art practice has developed according to what he has called a "braided logic" moving between representational formats and spatio-temporal contexts, matching conceptual freedom and technical rigour with an unrelentingly poetic attitude. In fact, Nizam's interest in photography arose while he was documenting his early sculptural works made from provisional arrangements of recycled building materials set in temporary locations, influenced by the generation of site-specific installation artists from the late sixties and early seventies who relied on photography to disseminate their work. Accordingly, Nizam's photographs are often based on extensive

on-site experimentation as opposed to digital post-production, employing hands-on and time-sensitive processes demanded by his interest in transitional or liminal locations where socio-cultural memory and the ephemeral traces of time play vital yet enigmatic roles.

Nizam's earliest exhibited photographic series, titled "Dwellings," 2004, explores themes, techniques and a sensibility that informs much of his work to date, albeit in a raw emergent form. Photographs for the "Dwellings" series were made during frequent forays into abandoned single-family homes in Vancouver, structures slated for demolition and replacement with condominiums, the result of a development boom in the wake of the city's successful bid to host the Winter Olympics. Nizam explored these domiciles during nighttime *dérives*, occupying and photographing a seemingly unconscious zone of civic and psychic ruin. By using long exposures and a flashlight as the only source of interior illumination, Nizam's images reflect both a sense of unease and discovery. The partly destroyed interiors are lit with luminescent swaths as the film registers thick wandering lines where the flashlight was aimed. In one of the "Dwellings" images, an exterior wall is torn away, revealing the glittering tower lights of the city beyond under a gradient blue sky—emphasizing the contested nature of domestic architecture, the value of which is tied to location and views.

If both a dark, empty (and emotionally charged) domestic space and the probing light that allows it to be seen are simultaneously pictured in the evocative "Dwellings" series, the physical optics of the photographic process itself is explored in Nizam's subsequent work. For the "Anteroom" series, 2007, Nizam turned the interiors of soon-to-be-demolished houses into room-sized camera obscurae by carefully piercing their boarded-up windows, creating colourful projections of the surroundings inside their domestic space. The upside-down images that resulted often present views of neat suburban houses or manicured landscapes overlaid on decrepit domestic interiors, creating a poignant spatial frisson.

I am reminded of fellow Vancouverite Rodney Graham's ecologically minded use of a walk-in pinhole camera to photograph trees in 1979 and his majestic images of upside-down oaks produced years later. While both artists' work references the history of photography and the viewer's own

retinal experience, Nizam's images produced with the camera obscura are in fact doubly reflexive since they picture both the projected image and the (ravaged) "camera" or room it is projected in. In this way he concentrates a metaphorical sense of interiority, bringing together domestic architecture, the photographic apparatus and the function of the eye, while further picturing architecture as a mental and even cosmic symbol.

In *Techniques of the Observer*, 1990, Jonathan Crary writes, "The camera obscura is paradigmatic of the dominant status of the observer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," serving to differentiate and separate the subjective observer from the object observed. According to Crary, succeeding technologies, such as the stereoscope, broke this static mode of vision and thought by accounting for the moving body in the process of seeing, establishing the basis of the current proliferation of visionary devices. However, by picturing the subjective view inside the camera obscura itself, Nizam breaks the binary notions of viewer and viewed and focuses on a performative approach to vision, one that he explores in subsequent photographic series.

While creating the images with the camera obscura technique, Nizam noticed dramatic shafts of light coming through the improvised apertures at certain times of day. Shifting his attention to the physical beam of light rather than the projected image, he began a line of inquiry examining light itself as an artistic medium. In 2011, *Shard of Light* was created by cutting a slice up one wall and across part of the roof of an abandoned house to form an expanded aperture, allowing a thick shaft of sunlight to appear. The resulting image attains the drama and awe of light that we feel for example in painting by Caravaggio, expressing a sensibility that ties the material with the supernatural. The house cut may be reminiscent of a Gordon Matta-Clark intervention, yet it transgresses the separation between inside and outside in a very different way, producing a relation between architectural and photographic devices in focusing on the dynamics of the chamber and interiority in general. With patience and precision Nizam produced further work using aperture placement, this time in the blackened windows of his studio. Here he directed occasional sunbeams in and around the room using small mirrors mounted to the walls. For the series of works titled "Thought Form," 2011,



1

he used a system of mirror placement, employing multiple exposures to create images of light beams that seem to form volumetric shapes with clearly defined geometries. While it is absolutely surprising that these images are analogue and not digitally constructed, what is compelling is the sculpting of a moving, ephemeral sunbeam into a seemingly static yet glowing formal geometry.

A related photo using sunlight titled *Frieze*, 2016, is similarly awe-inspiring, not for its arrested geometry of reflected sunbeams but for the imaging of the sequential movement of a sunbeam in a room, using timed exposures. With these series and others, Nizam explored the sculptural qualities of light as a plastic element. Reflected light-beam formations are further developed in works such as *Pyramid*, *Thought Form (Icosahedron)* (both 2014) and others that employ the geometric precision of thin laser light. Again, light figures appear otherworldly against their liminal architectural

1. *Thought Form (Icosahedron)*, 2014, archival pigment print, 60 x 48 inches.

2. *Illuminations (Railing)*, 2015, archival pigment print, variable dimensions.

3. *Illuminations (Screen Door)*, 2015, archival pigment print, variable dimensions.





2

backgrounds, this time in empty gallery spaces, as if they have been drawn or Photoshopped, mesmerizing because they record real phenomena.

Since Nizam's distinctive sculptural approach to photography is grounded in a fundamental fascination with light itself, his work is reflexively engaged with the essential nature of vision, perception and the photographic process. It could be said that Nizam's images concentrate on "that which allows us to see": often portraying the sensual qualities of light structured by the creative use of key camera functions such as exposure and aperture. It is this enchantment of the elemental with the marvellous that allows his work to speak on profound levels.

We could compare this analogue interpretation or extraction of the existing visible environment to the ecological concept of a niche. It is currently believed that animal species do not in fact adapt to their environment but that they fit the environment to themselves through use. Thus, as biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll has described, species see only their own interactive bubble of use, abstracted from the overall web of environment, just as we can see only part of the overall reality by the projection of



3

our own meaning. Perception is an action, and it is this action, modulated by light, that guides our vision, and which James Nizam explores as a medium in itself. For example, in Nizam's series titled "Illuminations," 2015, elements of domestic architecture such as porch railings are wrapped in reflective tape and photographed at night. The result is an otherworldly extraction of everyday suburban house elements, glowing eerily like a film negative. By focusing on a niche element, Nizam lends an expanded meaning to these normally banal and common architectural features, tying the domestic to the cosmic, widening our attention and our perception.

The ethereal sensibility of Nizam's photographic work, achieved with elemental means by creatively engaging basic camera functions, is nowhere more evident than in his series of work "Drawing with Starlight," begun in 2017 and ongoing. Starlight is depicted in these photographs using a modified analogue camera that employs timed exposures synchronized with the earth's rotation to draw with star trails using a mechanically operated zoom. Not only do the long exposures render the ancient starlight in beautifully subtle grades of blue, the creative camera operations





1



2



1 & 2. *Dwellings*, 2004, LightJet print, 30 x 42 inches.

3. *Heliographic Scale*, 2017, archival pigment print, variable dimensions.

Pages 96-97

1. *Score*, 2017, 12-inch vinyl record, turntable modified to play at 16 RPM, plinth, amplifier, speakers. Variable dimensions.

2. "Celestial Telegraphies," exhibition view, 2020, REITER Galerie, Berlin.

3. *Drawing with Starlight (Failed Star)*, 2020, archival pigment print, variable dimensions.

create a new aesthetic language across vast scales of time, space and emotion. The earliest photographs in this series are titled *Startrails Sequenced into Morse Code*, 2017, and employ recursive exposures to form Morse patterns—yielding primitive yet sublime prints of apparently infinite variations.

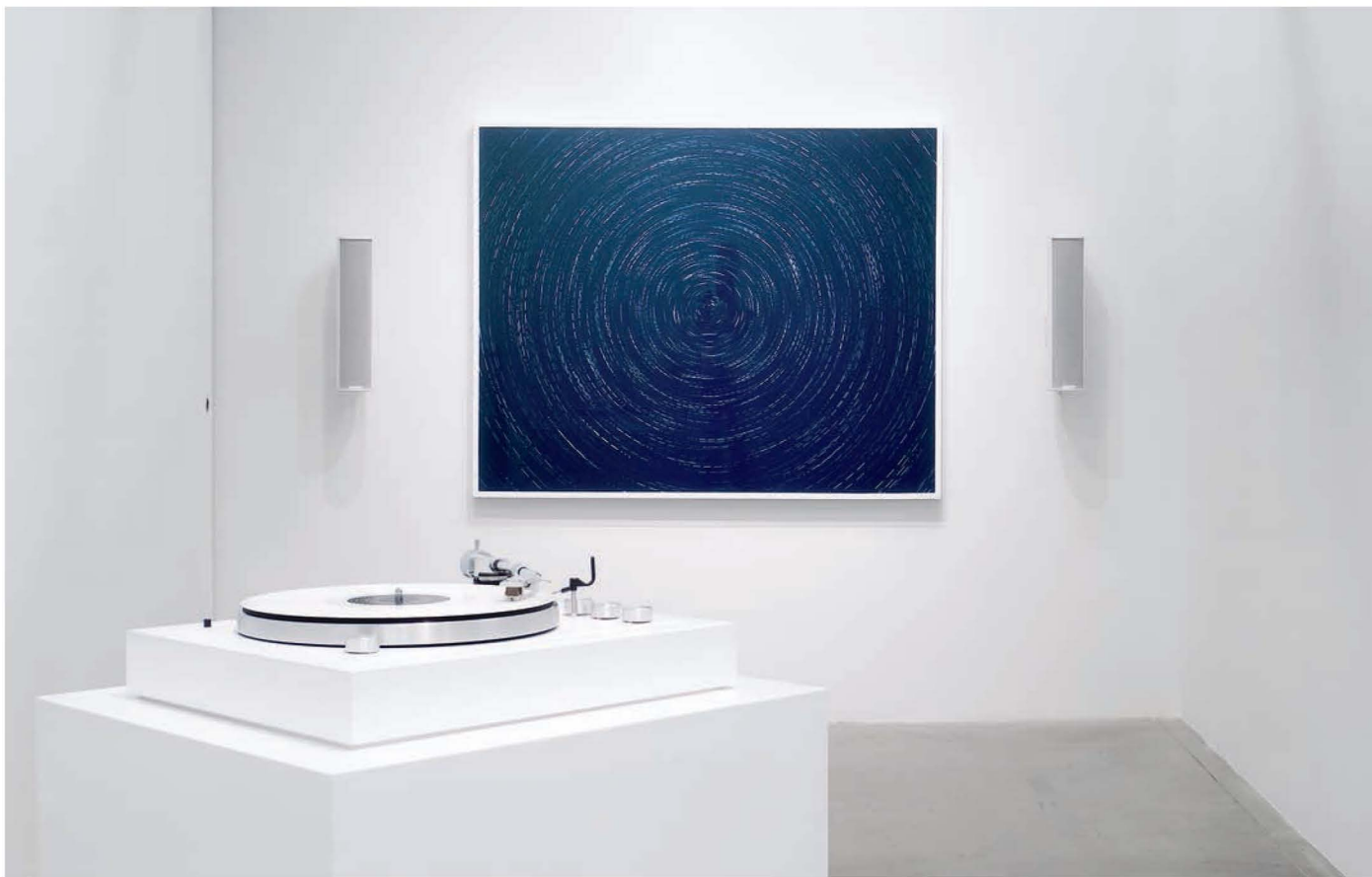
Across this seemingly infinite scale of time and space, Nizam combines cosmic transformation and earthly translation in these photographs, emphasizing the constructed nature of perception in the creation of meaning. The re-mediation of communicative codes became conceptually important to Nizam, who used the Morse-coded star

images to transfer sets of immaterial information among visible, sculptural and audible media. For the work *Score*, 2017, the artist used image-to-sound conversion software to sequence the SOS starlight drawing from Morse code into audio files that were then pressed into white vinyl. Continuing the process of transference, he employed the reflective platinum vinyl stamper used to form the record to create a series of sun flares across an abandoned quarry for the photograph *Heliographic Scale*, 2017, further reiterating the tautology of this information-aesthetic regime. The heliograph's name comes from the Greek *helios*, "the sun," and *graphein*, "to

3





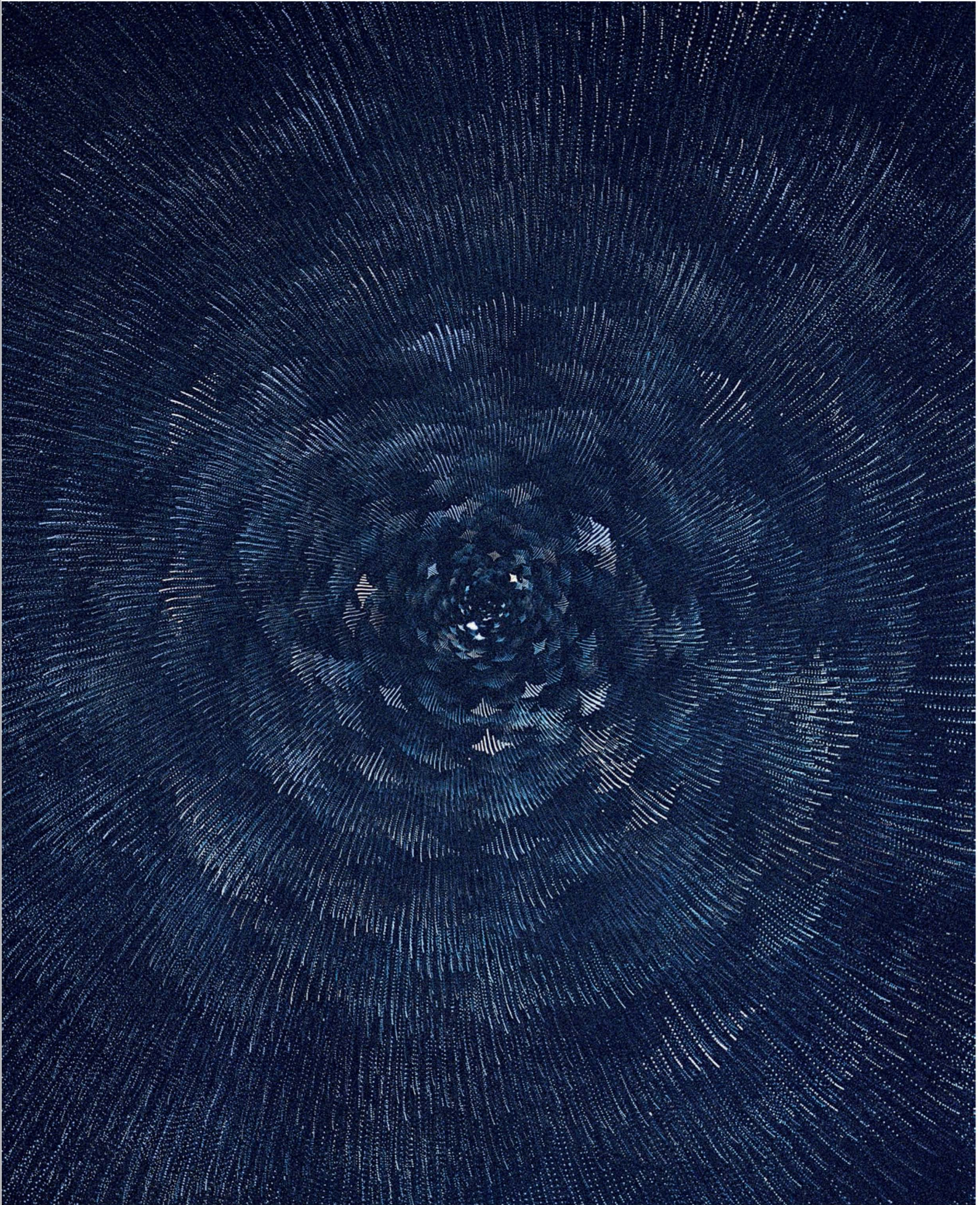


1



2





3



write,” succinctly summarizing Nizam’s obsession with devices that consolidate light and language. In the photograph, the solar flares are dwarfed by a deeply excavated landscape, evidently a desolate former mining operation whose stripped vegetation is just starting to regrow: a liminal space between culture and nature that extends Nizam’s preoccupation with the space of alienation and possibility.

Nizam’s creative experimentation with the mechanics of the camera has allowed him to create increasingly elaborate figures with star trails in the “Drawing with Starlight” series. Because of the earth’s rotation, long exposures reveal distant stars as streaks of light, and by Nizam’s mechanically modulating the camera zoom, the star trails can actually be recorded as geometric shapes or glyphs, which are then composed into unique graphic characters. The work “Uranographic Figures” is a series of diagrammatic transcripts that map the time signatures used to calculate these iterative star motifs. For his exhibition “Celestial Telegraphies” at REITER Gallery, Berlin, in 2020, Nizam translated cosmic figures from the recent “Drawing with Starlight” photographs into further codes, creating both a 3D image and audio files that are used to produce further works. *Beyond Violet*, 2020, is a crystalline structure produced with information that represents an algorithmically treated translation of *Drawing with Starlight* (Ogee), alongside which it is presented. The name “Ogee” refers to the formal similarity of this particular star trail motif to an eponymous double curve that is characteristic of Gothic doorway shapes, which, when digitally rendered and 3D printed, takes on the form of a delicate double helix pattern of flower-like petals.

Using spectrographic conversion to audibly portray selected photographs from the “Drawing with Starlight” series similarly creates serpentine and geometric-shaped sounds, often producing the auditory illusion called the “Shepard tone,” a superposition of sine waves that gives the impression of continually ascending or descending in pitch. In a work that refers to Alexander Graham Bell and Sumner Tainter’s invention of the photophone (1880), a device that could send sound on a beam of sunlight, the sonified stars are further encoded so that they can be carried by a laser beam, zigzagging from a transmitter across the gallery, between mirrors and on to a receiver where the sound is amplified. The resulting soundscape, heard throughout the gallery, returns the light of the stars as a path through the exhibition space. Transported and transporting, this droning “alien chant” is otherworldly and uncanny, a cipher for interweaving the cosmic and the intimate that Nizam’s work and the exhibition “Celestial Telegraphies” provoke. If the “Drawing with Starlight” series fashions a figural language from imponderable star trails, the star source sustains a profound engagement as its delicate displacement from form to format echoes a parallel transformation in the viewer’s metaphysical associations.

Forging a network of interlinked energies that reverberate across dimensions, Nizam’s work is a complex combination of push and pull between vertiginous immensity and earthly intimacy but whose sense of alienation is a source of wonder and yearning. Nizam’s process itself is a study in an alternate form of attention, far from the swiping and scrolling of today’s digital nomads. Jenny Odell claims in her 2019 book, *How to Do Nothing*, that attention is our most precious resource; maybe then, Nizam’s insistence on painstaking on-site processes using analogue photography and little post-production means that his work moves towards a sensibility of care and empathy, both personal and political. If Odell writes about awareness strategies that aim to connect with natural processes to escape the attention limiting by social media regimes, in which attention itself is a commodity for expanding corporate profit, Nizam’s sojourns into remote areas to produce the “Drawing with Starlight” series travel even further into the ritual territory of spiritual purification. In fact, the starlight photographs can be captured only during long new moon nights in a handful of remote locations and with extreme patience; the dedication required to construct these contemplative tableaux reflects the artist’s own insistence on a situated sense of wonder. Taken during expeditions under the night skies of British Columbia’s coastal mountains and the Canary Islands in Spain, the stellar formations are arrived at after exhaustive research, since these photos can be seen and assessed only later in the lab and not on location. During this monthly window of maybe a few nights, notwithstanding bad weather, clouds and animals, Nizam is shooting “blind,” alone and in total darkness, a process of image finding that is necessarily soul searching: a performance of deep attention in which site must be absolutely remote and subjecthood itself becomes intimately liminal.

The overall effect of Nizam’s work and approach is an intuitive apprehension of primordial energy across aesthetic and emotional dimensions, the significance of which is articulated by the dynamic relation of perception and observation to play-back, re-presentation and revisualization. Through his indexical yet productive relation to the photographic, Nizam inhabits the physical and conceptual space of the camera, allowing architecture to become a perceptual apparatus, giving the camera spatial agency. The artist’s work opens a conceptual portal for the reciprocal relation among reception, transmission and dwelling, crafting new formulations for planetary-scale communication. It is through novel yet modest medial processes arrived at by lengthy trial and error that his works are folded into endlessly poetic constellations. His work is truly an alchemical act of transformation, expanding structures of attention to reveal that how we see constructs what we see. ■

*Rodney LaTourelle is an artist, writer and designer who works with Louise Witthöft in Berlin. Witthöft & LaTourelle are included in an upcoming exhibition about colour and space at the Alberta Gallery of Art.*