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GOOD SEEING

California artist **RUSSELL CROTTY** aims for the stars in a new exhibition at SJICA, of works created in collaboration with UC Santa Cruz and the Lick Observatory.

By Kim Beil

Russell Crotty has spent his career in search of “good seeing,” astronomy jargon for a clear, dark sky, or the conditions that favor viewing, which is at the core of his artistic practice. The exhibition, “Look Back in Time: Russell Crotty and Lick Observatory,” on view at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art (SJICA) through February 26, represents the culmination of a multi-year artist-in-residence project organized by John Weber, director of the Institute of the Arts and Sciences (IAS), an interdisciplinary exhibitions and events forum that is part of the Arts Division at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). Over the course of the residency, the IAS arranged for more than two dozen meetings between Crotty and members of Theoretical Astrophysics Santa Cruz, a faculty working-group at UCSC, and coordinated multiple visits to Lick Observatory on Mount Hamilton, a research site managed by the University of California. The result is an unusual exhibition that combines a mini-retrospective of Crotty’s astronomical drawings since 2002, as well as a new installation inspired by his conversations with physicists, plus a side gallery containing instruments and logbooks, which recreates the antiquarian atmosphere of the Lick Observatory’s historical collections. Completed in 1888, Lick was the first permanently occupied mountaintop observatory in the world, according to Tony Misch, director of the Lick Observatory Collections, who co-curated “Look Back in Time” with Weber and Crotty, in collaboration with Cathy Kimball, the SJICA’s executive director. Drawing together these disparate elements and sites of Crotty’s practice makes visible the degree to which his art-making involves much more than marks on paper.

The exhibition’s co-curators all emphasize the fact that Crotty’s work is rooted in direct observation, a practice and set of skills that has all but disappeared within the world of astronomy. Today, many professionals and even amateur astronomers observe remotely, relying on digitized telescope images that can be accessed from computers anywhere in the world. Even when working on location, telescope images are often streamed



“LOOK BACK IN TIME,” 2016
MIXED MEDIA

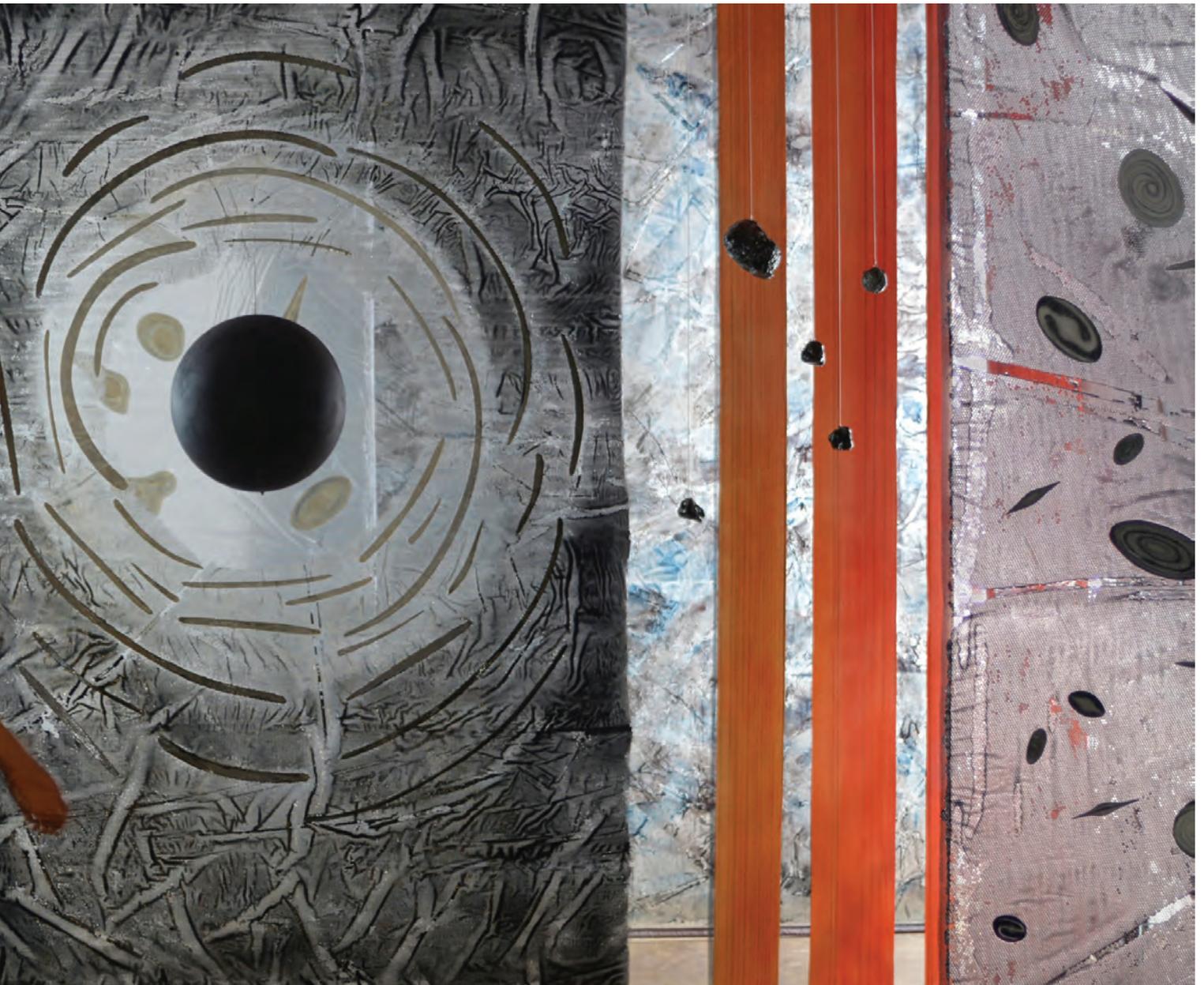
SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION
PHOTO: MAIA LANDAU, COURTESY SJICA

through other screens, expanding the visible area for observation or enabling color and contrast changes to enhance viewing. This level of mediation may seem negligible when compared with the vast spaces and times under consideration: some of Crotty's subjects are nearly 20,000 light-years away from earth. Yet, the decision to pursue direct observation also represents one of the very few choices that we are capable of making when observing the cosmos from earth. By claiming this practice, Crotty situates himself in the lineage of classical astronomy and accentuates the particularly human elements of the quest to know what lies beyond ourselves.

The handmade nature of Crotty's drawings also emphasize the physicality of his practice. The large drawings are monochrome, built up from painstakingly small marks made with ballpoint pen and pencil. Crotty only started showing this work publicly in 1990, following more than a decade of working as a painter. After receiving his BFA in painting from the San Francisco Art Institute, Crotty completed an MFA at UC, Irvine in 1980. Although he'd been keeping what he calls a "hidden" surf journal, he thought of these sketches as separate from his professional practice. Then, Jan Tumlir and Kevin Sullivan included some of the surf drawings in a show at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) called "Frontier Tales." Participation in other group shows soon followed, among them "Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s" at MOCA in LA in 1992, as well as exhibitions in the United Kingdom, Austria, and Germany.

At the time, the introduction of these humble materials into the gallery space was something of a radical act, and it represented a significant departure from Crotty's own training. Crotty says, "It was sort of an agenda that I had to take something classical, like drawing, and to push it in these weird directions." In his early work, Crotty pushed at all the limits, not only through his elevation of common materials, but also in the sheer quantity of work that he produced. No longer small, private sketches in a notebook, the surf drawings filled entire rooms. One of his works, included in the Museum of Modern Art's 2002 exhibition, "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions," featured a staggering 40,000 tiny sketches, which transformed these minute fragments into a wall-sized monument.

Facing eviction from his sprawling space in the Rampart District of Los Angeles, where he had run an experimental exhibition program and featured installations by Tumlir, Frances Stark, and others, Crotty left the downtown core, for a caretaker's cottage in the mountains above Malibu. At the edge of the Pacific Ocean, surrounded by the darkness of the Santa Monica Mountains, Crotty rediscovered his love of the night sky. Growing up in Northern California, he'd spent summers in Mendocino, sleeping out under the stars, and even borrowing a small telescope from his high school. He describes the thrill of seeing Jupiter for the first time, "I just couldn't believe it. It was low in the sky, so the seeing wasn't good, it was just this fuzzy blob, but you could see the four moons." Looking out into the empty space





of the gallery, he counts off the four moons, as if they are as present here in San Jose as they were almost fifty years ago in Mendocino. "It was subtle, the color of it. It's kind of a cream color with a little bit of burnt sienna, through a telescope. You can see Jupiter with your naked eye, but you can't see that detail. And, you can't tell how massive it is. If Jupiter was as close to us as the moon, it would take up more than half the sky. It's huge." This breathless excitement is present in all of Crotty's work, from the minute details to its prodigious quantity. By translating these vast and awesome phenomena into accessible materials on a smaller scale, Crotty opens them up for human connection. Through his eye and hand, the drawings communicate a sense of what it is like to touch the stars.

In Malibu, Crotty built a small observatory, complete with a rollback roof, and outfitted it with a ten-inch telescope and several other instruments. It became an extension of his studio. He recalls, "I'd do the drawings up there, thumbnail drawings, positional things, stars, planets, parts of the moon, whatever I was looking at. Then I'd take all that down to the studio. I made my own little archive, in a sense." He'd get a call from one of his galleries (CRG Gallery in New York, Shoshana Wayne in Santa Monica, or Hosfelt in San Francisco) or an invitation to participate in a show and return to these sketches, supplementing his own notes with astronomical research, then expanding the sketches into highly detailed drawings.

In 1992, he began drawing on large globes covered in Japanese paper, two of which are included in "Look Back in Time." The inspiration came, as usual, from the practice of observing; at the time, Crotty was concentrating on stars called "globular clusters," which exhibit a powerful three-dimensional effect when seen through the telescope. Crotty's paper-wrapped spheres, some of which are as large as six feet in diameter, are covered in tiny marks and require exceptional precision and patience. In one of those on view at the SJICA, *M28 Globular Cluster in Sagittarius* (2000), the glossy black surface suddenly gives way to a white circle, which reads alternately as a crater or a brilliant reflection. Crotty points to it, "Even in the middle here, there are actually marks. You just have to hold your breath." He takes a sip of air, steadies himself, and mimes putting pen to the smooth paper surface. "Hold your breath, blot the pen." The globe measures two feet and is overlaid with tens of thousands of marks.

Also on view at SJICA is one of Crotty's large-scale books, *Field Charts for Nocturnal Recreations* (2005), which measures nearly five and a half feet in length. Inspired by a 19th-century volume, "Recreations in Astronomy," Crotty's enormous book is a catalogue of the astronomical objects that he has observed, everywhere from Mount Wilson to his own private observatory in the Santa Monica Mountains. As such, the *Field Charts* represent a point fixed in space and time, while the perspectives he's taken on the sky have been varied. Seeing is rarely so convincingly described as a physical process. *Field Charts* is also a reminder of the temporality of Crotty's project; shortly after he completed the book and sent it off to CRG Gallery, his Malibu home and observatory were destroyed in a wildfire. He has since relocated to Ojai; the book and artworks from this earlier period now represent an irretrievable past.

The exhibition at the SJICA deftly highlights the many timescales that come into play when thinking about the cosmos. His new room-sized installation, made of floor-to-ceiling sheets of bioresin molded onto mesh and interspersed with hanging sculptures, was inspired by a teaching chart called "The History of Everything," which the astrophysicist Greg Laughlin shared with Crotty on one of the artist's visits to UCSC. Not only does Crotty's work pay homage to his own history, to the lineage of classical astronomy and the advances in direct observation that took place in California in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but every glance at the night sky also involves a much more radical temporal distance between the present moment



INSTALLATION VIEWS AT
SAN JOSE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART
PHOTOS: QIAN WANG





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and the "old" light that we see transmitted through the universe. Astronomers call this "lookback time," a numeric representation of the time it has taken light to travel from its source to an observer, which is also a way of describing the distance between two objects that is never fixed in the expanding universe.

Ultimately, all of Crotty's work primes viewers to share in his experience, whether it is outside with a telescope or at Lick Observatory, poring over notebooks made by 19th and 20th century astronomers. Crotty's straightforward materials, pen and paper, lend the project an air of asceticism. Even his gestural vocabulary—short hatch marks and angular, scratchy text—at times recalls a scientific logbook. UCSC's John Weber warns, though, "In this show, we have people doing the same thing: looking through a telescope and drawing. But, the meaning of that act is quite different for Russell than it was for the 19th-century astronomer James Keeler, whose beautiful drawings of spectra or of Jupiter we have in the Focus Gallery. Superficially, the act is similar, but the meaning of the act is quite different in each case. To me, that's part of the excitement of this exhibition, that we can juxtapose these kinds of work and look at ways in which they *feel* similar and ways in which they *are* different." Tony Misch, of Lick Observatory, agrees, "There is a similarity, but it's largely because we bring a contemporary aesthetic to those historical objects."

Leaving aside the question of formal beauty, both halves of the installation celebrate the very human and intensely personal act of making meaning, whether it is through scientific measurement or artistic inquiry. Between the marbled covers of the turn-of-the-century logbooks, the unique personalities of the observers is expressed in the distinctive scrawl of their notes. Standing with the notebooks, one gets the sense that each new page, each night of "good seeing," held forth a promise of connection to something larger than what

could be seen or even known by just one person. As Misch describes, "You don't just go up to a telescope and look through it and make a discovery. Even in the 19th century, there were many, many people involved, sometimes working over a period of thirty years or more. It is that texture that is so beautifully expressed here."

What is, perhaps, most striking about this exhibition and certainly what unites Crotty with his 19th-century forbears, is that all of these objects provide rich documentation of human effort and the desire to know something of the universe. That any individual would deign to embark on such a huge and ultimately impossible endeavor—to know the cosmos—is inspiring, as much as it is daunting. As the inclusion of obsolete instruments from Lick's Historical Collection makes clear, an observer's relationship to the cosmos can never be one of mastery. Crotty's modest materials and tentative lines express perfectly this tension between skill and humility, and they locate beauty in the very human spaces between certainty and the unknown.

INSTALLATION VIEW AT
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PHOTOS: QIAN WANG