

On display: Seeing stars (and planets) at the Tang Teaching Museum

By Indiana Nash | October 19, 2022



PHOTOGRAPHER: INDIANA NASH

Display of photos from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, on view at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College.

The latest exhibit to open at the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College invites viewers into the space.

With a captivating display of photos from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, as well as constellation prints dating back to the 1800s and contemporary works inspired by the cosmos, it's a trip worth taking.

Titled “Parallax: Framing the Cosmos,” the exhibit uses outer space as a foundation for exploring what is universal and what is particular. The term parallax refers to the way an object can appear to change position when viewed from different points. Among the Tang, it also refers to the idea that no two cultures or peoples share the same “universal” views.

Upon entering the Wachenheim Gallery, it’s hard to miss the planet hanging from the ceiling at eye level. Wrapped around the silver globe are the dark silhouettes of trees, extending from the dark lower half of the room. Made by Russell Crotty and titled “Milky Way Over Ponderosas”, it’s a fitting introduction to the show.

Further on is a collection of blue and white cyanotypes depicting solar eclipses, displayed in a wooden box, with the phrase “The Dismantled Sun”, etched into a mirror on the back of the box. The small prints, created by Dario Robleto, are based on historical astronomer drawings of solar eclipses and are both charming and melancholy.

“. . . I wondered, was it possible for the sun to reflect on its own youth? . . . I wanted to use the current energy of the sun to allow him to etch on paper an image of himself from centuries ago. In this way, past and present are in the pictures,” Robleto writes in an artist statement.

At the heart of the exhibit is a massive wall of NASA press photographs spanning the period from 1959 to 2002. There are shots of astronauts in full gear, politicians meeting, and distant views of Earth and the moon.

Some of the shots are breathtaking, including ones that show the swirling blue, green and white Earth, or one that shows skydivers about to land in a piercing blue ocean, the distant horizon blending into the water.

However, the collective effect of the photographs is not merely impressive. They are reminiscent of the ripple effects of US efforts to be the first to explore (and in some cases conquer) outer space under the guise that it is all in the name of “all mankind”. It’s also a reminder that space exploration not only impacts the scientific community, but also politics and the stories told about the United States.

Not too far from the NASA photos are celestial maps that date back to the early 1900s and reflect the work of European astronomers Johann Palisa and Max Wolf, who helped develop the first photographic star atlas.

“Parallax” also includes textile work, documentary photography and painting, many of which are recent Tang acquisitions. It’s on view until next year (June 19, 2023, to be exact), but get there today at noon and you’ll get a guided tour with Rebecca McNamara.

Other exhibits featured at the museum include “Where Words Falter: Art and Empathy” and “Lauren Kelley: Location Scouting.”

Host first performances by playwrights

Next Thursday, October 27, the museum will host first performances of works in progress recently commissioned by playwrights Lanxing Fu, Julia May Jonas, and Andrew Rincón in response to “Where Words Falter.”

The three new works will be performed at 6 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Skidmore College students from the Theater Department will perform under the direction of Skidmore faculty members Artist-in-Residence Teisha Duncan, Visiting Assistant Professor Ji Won Jeon and Lecturer of Dance Hettie Barnhill.

The exhibition features photographs, paintings, textiles and moving images from the Tang collection to explore the ways art can support empathetic feeling. The collaboration between Tang’s and Skidmore’s theater departments is organized by Tang’s associate curator, Rebecca McNamara, curator of the exhibition, and Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, associate professor and director of the theater department.

“When Rebecca first spoke to me about the exhibition and how it explores ideas of empathy, image and body experience, I was immediately inspired because theater and performance also grapple with these complicated aspects of meaning-making,” Jackson-Schebetta said. “I am thrilled to be able to invite such esteemed playwrights to work with our students and faculty to present something new, surrounded by the breathtaking and thought-provoking work of the exhibition. It has been a wonderful opportunity to learn and explore together, an opportunity that we are now extending to the wider community.

Performances are free. Reservations are not required. Masks are optional. For more information, visit tang.skidmore.edu.

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