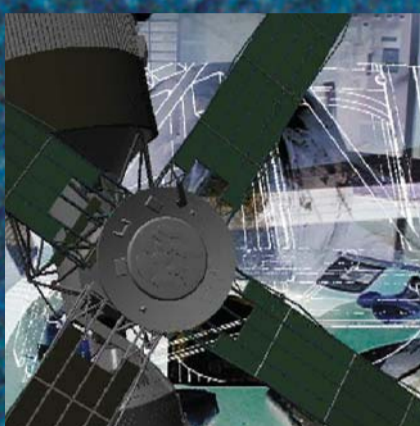


Skylab Crash Trajectory
Shire of Esperance Municipal Museum
Photo courtesy of: David Carson/Brian McClave



Last Orbit 3-D Video Still
Photo courtesy of: David Carson/Brian McClave

The first SKYLAB residency was undertaken by Carson at the Cannery Art Centre Gallery at the initiation of Centre Coordinator Andre Lipscombe. There he documented and liaised with the Shire Museum and documented the museum's collection of Skylab artefacts, where possible inwith 3D photography and video.

Garnering the support and assistance of local artists and the nearby Cannery Arts Centre, Carson rigged up the Museum's model of Skylab enabling it to slowly rotate and be photographed. Visits were made to farms in outlying areas, where Skylab had passed overhead, to record eyewitness accounts of its plunge to earth.

Carson listened to farmers describe how a ball of fire the size of a two storey house roared over their heads, others spoke of buildings shaking while for some there was total eerie silence and a spectacular fire work display.

The research material, consisting of photographed Skylab fragments, anecdotal accounts and newspaper articles, was sent electronically to McClave in London, who a bit like the scientists at the earth-based space centres regularly receiving new data from Skylab, sifted through the information, analysed it, played with it and presented it in a way that hadn't been done before.

In the haunting and complex 3D SKYLAB video McClave has layered a rotating computer generated image of Skylab, developed from the photographed Esperance Museum model, with hand-written anecdotal accounts of Skylab's fiery descent and newspaper reports of the event. It is a poetic take on one of last century's more embarrassing moments for NASA in the race to inhabit space.

The SKYLAB artists planned their second major research gathering mission, this time to Wolfe Creek Crater and the Balgo Hills Community in far north Western Australia. Wolfe Creek Crater is believed by astronomers to have been formed by an iron meteorite weighing millions of tonnes. The impact of the meteor caused a massive blast forming a circular crater almost 900 metres in diameter and 150 metres deep.

Carson, this time joined by Millward and assisted by fellow travellers, stayed at the Wolfe Creek Crater site for 10 days, gathering information using photography, video, audio recordings and drawings. During the day a series of video time-lapse sequences of sunrises and sunsets over the crater was made and at night time-lapse photographs of star constellations were made using long exposures on slide film.

Sound experiments were carried out on the floor of the crater, recording sounds simultaneously on three separate digital recorders and using simple methods for distorting sound against the background of the crater's natural ambience. These were to provide Millward with the material to develop his 3D surround sound-scape for McClave's video.

David Carson, a Perth based artist, has used 3D imaging skills to promote sustainable agricultural and environmental practices in the Western Australian wheatbelt. David trained as a fine artist at the Kent Institute in the UK, moving to Australia in 1995. Since arriving here he has worked as artist in residence with Kalgoorlie Consolidated Gold Mines, LandcareVision Incorporated and JumboVision International.

Brian McClave is an experimental video artist, working in stereoscopic digital imaging, and stereoscopic video. He is currently working on a year long project, funded by the UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and Art (NESTA) with George Millward, to film the Aurora Borealis stereoscopically. He is currently based in Brighton in the UK.

George Millward, a UK based sound artist, is also an atmospheric physicist at University College London and is currently involved in a NASA funded project to build a computer model of the atmosphere of Saturn. George gained his Ph.D in the UK at Sheffield University, before moving to The Space Environment Center, NOAA, Boulder Colorado.

It seems that things that fall to earth inspire an array of interesting responses in us: fear, curiosity, anger, awe and that age-old feeling that we may not be totally alone in the universe.

It was the impact of two things that crashed to earth, which sparked the imaginations of David Carson, Brian McClave and George Millward, the artists' behind SKYLAB.

Employing old and new technologies, research techniques and art forms the SKYLAB artistic team set out to examine the impact of these two objects: a massive meteorite and an experimental space station, one ancient and cosmic, the other man-made and technically sophisticated.

SKYLAB's ideas and stories revolve around the two remote sites in Western Australia in which these things landed and form a kind of matrix connecting the ancient with the modern, the poetic with the scientific and the real with the imagined.

A chance visit to the Shire of Esperance Municipal Museum, which proudly displays a sizeable chunk of Skylab, the ill-fated NASA space station that had descended upon the region during a cold July night in 1979, appealed to the artists' interests in space-age technology, astronomy and museology as well as to their sense of the absurd.

Ideas starting forming for this new project and Carson, McClave and Millward planned a series of residencies, with one or two of the artists assigned to gather information. The SKYLAB project would require the artists to undertake the types of tasks that might normally be the domain of astronomers, geologists, physicists, acoustic engineers, historians and anthropologists.

This multi-disciplinary approach was not unlike that of the Skylab astronauts whose brief it was to conduct extensive research on the make-up and changing nature of the earth, the sun and the stars and the effects zero gravity had on their bodies, those of other animals and the production of crystals and alloys.

Carson, McClave and Millward are no strangers to the convergence of art and science. Carson, a Perth based artist, has used 3D imaging skills gained through his art practice to assist agricultural and environmental scientists with Landcare projects in the Western Australian wheatbelt. He as collaborated with numerous industry bodies and companies in Australia and overseas. UK based sound artist Millward is also an atmospheric physicist at University College London and is currently involved in a NASA funded project to build a computer model of the atmosphere of Saturn. McClave, also UK based, is an experimental video artist, working in stereoscopic digital imaging and stereoscopic video. He is currently engaged, together with Millward, on a year long project funded by Britain's National Endowment for Science, Technology and Art (NESTA) to film the Aurora Borealis or 'northern lights' stereoscopically. This will form the basis of the next joint project by Carson McClave and Millward

The artists are also used to collaborating at a distance. Geoderma, a project they all worked on from 1997-8, required the transfer of information, digital images and dialogue between three different continents. Geoderma was an exploration of the relationship between our bodies and the earth's surface. For SKYLAB, however, the artists have turned their heads skywards for their inspiration and source material.



Skylab Mission
Photo courtesy of: NASA Photo Archive



Stereo Series
Digital 3-D image
Photo courtesy of: David Carson/Brian McClave



Solaris Series
Painting oil on mdf board
Photo courtesy of: David Carson/Brian McClave

During the Wolfe Creek expedition a side trip was made to the Halls Creek Aboriginal Language Centre. The co-ordinator of the centre generously gave introduced the research gatherers access to traditional Jaru language accounts of the origins of Wolfe Creek Crater and other mythologies surrounding the crater's origins. Interestingly, one of the accounts strongly resembles our current understanding of how craters are formed by referring to an overheated 'evening star' which fell to earth.

The sights, sounds, stories and views of space from Wolfe Creek Crater so impressed themselves on Carson that immediately upon his return to Perth he began producing a series of large-scale circular paintings, his *Solaris Series*.

With his interest in the mysteries and myths of the universe and man's attempt to master it, it is not surprising that Carson named his series of paintings after the disturbing science fiction film *Solaris*. Based on a novel by Polish writer Stanislaw Lem and first made by director Andrei Tarkovsky in 1972, prophetically one year before the Skylab space station was launched, *Solaris* is a reflection on the themes of cosmos, humankind, consciousness, life, death and our responsibility for the future.

The description of the planet Solaris and its' mysterious ocean by cosmonaut Andre Berton fits well beside Carson's filamented and foamy spheres that loom toward us from black or white voids. His powerful, platonic forms are as mesmerising as they are sublime and his experiments with swirling oil paints are reminiscent too of the images of earth sent back from Skylab and featured with regularity in popular publications like National Geographic.

SKYLAB, an exhibition drawn from hard facts, evidence, scientific readings and recorded myths, stories and press beat-ups, is a gentle and poetic exploration of our curiosity, ingenuity and desire to make sense of what surrounds us. The universe is a strange place. We may never fully understand it.

Amy Barrett-Lennard
Director, Linden St Kilda Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne 2003

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