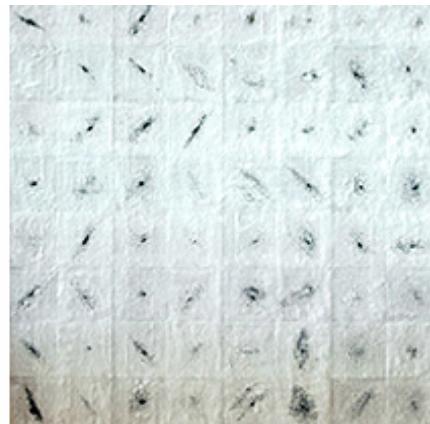
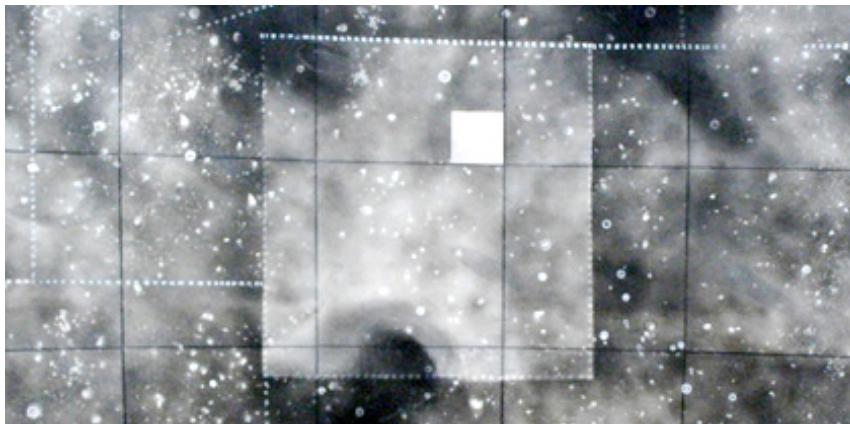


# KAREL NEL

THE BRILLIANCE OF DARKNESS

9 September – 9 October 2008



Karel Nel is the appointed project artist for COSMOS (The Cosmic Evolution Survey), arguably the most comprehensive astronomy project ever undertaken.

Put simply, its goal is to measure 2 square degrees of the universe. With deep astronomy imaging, it studies the evolution of galaxies, galaxy clusters and dark matter structures, moving through greater and greater distances and hence further back in time. Effectively, they are turning back the clock to observe the universe as it was near the beginning and as it evolves, coming forward in time to the present epoch.

Nel has worked with this growing team of astrophysicists over four years, attending their conferences in New York, Kyoto, Munich and Paris. He has travelled great distances with them to view the firmament from isolated points on the planet that are free from light pollution. From the *Subaru* telescope on Mauna Kea, a 13,000 ft high volcano on the Big Island of Hawaii, to the plains of St Augustine in New Mexico, the site of *The Very Large Array Telescope*, they have viewed the stars as our ancestors once did.

ART FIRST is privileged to present the first exhibition of work to emerge from the COSMOS Project.

**'The Brilliance of Darkness'** writes Nel, "*is my response to the process of looking into darkness to find light, and in finding light, to start looking at and understanding galaxy formation alongside our capacity to map and grasp the vastness, and our place within it. Darkness is revelatory, clear, all encompassing and is the nurturing matrix of manifestation itself.*

*Working with the COSMOS team has exposed for me, the triviality of the human bound values that equate darkness with evil and lightness with good. Images now viewed from our telescopes were formed long before we emerged as a species and long before we constructed such values. Using the Hubble and Chandra satellite telescopes and many land based radio infra-red and x-ray telescopes the COSMOS team has found that a mere two square degrees of darkness has revealed a million new galaxies as large as the galaxy in which our solar system exists.*"

Nick Scoville, astrophysicist and leader of COSMOS, who appointed Nel, remarks that “in ‘The Brilliance of Darkness’ Karel Nel recognizes and highlights a new insight to the cosmos above us, signalling that the darkness of space is central to both the human spirit and to our emotional health - indeed, to our very existence.

*The salts and carboniferous dusts he uses on the surfaces of his work were expelled in the distant past from the brilliant stars we see lighting up the night sky. In fact, all the heavier atoms within our bodies were synthesized from the primordial hydrogen at millions of degrees, deep in the interiors of stars.”*

Throughout his artistic practice, Nel has explored concepts of art and science, grasping the manner in which they envisage one another, pushing towards the edge of new knowledge. His materials reflect his innovative visual thinking, emphasising the substance of his art. ‘*The Status of Dust*’ is the title given to an earlier body of work in which volcanic sand, burned ochre, gold-extraction residue, and carboniferous dust form the rich textured surfaces of each work. Now sparkling pure white salt crystals, are placed side by side with dense, 5.5 million year old black carboniferous dusts. They echo the galaxies in clusters and in grids, as Nel envisions the findings of infinity emerging from the data and concepts released by the COSMOS Project itself.

Illus: Left: **Two Square Degrees** (detail) 193 x 193, charcoal, specularite, pigment on bonded fibre fabric.  
Right: **Light Fossils** , 80 x 80 cm, 5.4 million year old carboniferous dust & Atlantic salt crystals.

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Karel Nel is Associate Professor in Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He studied the links between art & science on a Fulbright scholarship in 1989 at The University Of California, Berkeley, and later worked with a team of scientists including palaeo- anthropologists, historians and astronomers on the rim of Reunion’s volcano. His work in the field continued with biologists, anthropologists and archaeologists on a number of expeditions in Micronesia, where he explored isolated cultures and collected traditional Oceanic currencies. His personal collection focuses on traditional African artefacts, the forms of which influence his own artistic practice. A forthcoming book on his art and his collections will be published in 2010, to accompany an upcoming major exhibition in the USA.

Nel’s work is represented in the major museum and corporate collections in South Africa and in the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Angaza Afrika, African Art Now, written by Chris Spring, curator at the British Museum and published this year by Lawrence King, includes Nel amongst the 60 dynamic contemporary artists practising now in Africa.

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies this exhibition with essays by Nick Scoville, Leader of the COSMOS Project, and Karel Nel.

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