

*Imaging Saturn (Modeling Views)*

Risa Horowitz



Presented by Video Pool Media Arts Centre  
in collaboration with PLATFORM centre for photographic + digital arts

Opening reception 29 January, 7pm  
Gallery walk-through Saturday, 30 January, 2pm

29 January - 12 March 2016, at PLATFORM: 121-100 Arthur St. Winnipeg MB

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### STATEMENT

I saw Saturn through a telescope for the first time in spring 2010 and it brought me to tears. I became immediately aware of the real-ness of the planet, its simultaneous closeness and distance, and the incomprehensible scale of the universe. We are, for the most part, Earthbound, forgetting that we are hurtling through space, along with a multitude of other bodies also hurtling through space. Despite appearances it isn't the stars that we see move when we look up; it is us down here, on Earth.

I have become an amateur astronomer as part of my art practice. I want to nurture, across disciplines and media, our shared desire to know ourselves and be known. The project deals with themes of participatory science and data-visualization, and explores crossovers and distinctions between training that defines an expert and enthusiasm that defines an amateur.

*Imaging Saturn (Modeling Views)* is a selection of images and objects that depict what Saturn looks like throughout its orbit. The exhibition is not illustrative; the viewer does not need to know the science. Within the exhibition there are photographs, and there are some lines and circles that refer to the paths of the sun, stars, and Saturn. There are some apparently Modernist sculptures on the wall that swing back and forth. There is a kinetic sculpture that propels a model of Saturn around the gallery. And there is a video of that object in motion.

### BIOGRAPHY

Risa Horowitz is a visual and media artist and associate professor of visual arts at the University of Regina. She has lived and worked in seven Canadian provinces as an artist, educator, writer, and gallery programmer and is represented in Toronto by MKG127 Gallery. Horowitz's art practice tends toward blurring the boundaries between the expert and amateur, hobby and work, and leisure and productivity. Her current long-term project, *Imaging Saturn*, has involved becoming an amateur astronomer and astro-photographer. Horowitz is photographing the planet each year of its 29-year orbit (2011-2040), and creating works in drawing, video, cross-stitch, and kinetic/electronic sculpture. The project has been supported by the Saskatchewan Arts Board and the Canada Council for the Arts. She is also a tournament Scrabble competitor and vegetable gardener.

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## Risa Horowitz – Imaging Saturn

In 1662, the French mathematician Pascal confessed dread in *Pensée 201* over the "eternal silence of these infinite spaces" that exist between the stars. This is perhaps the best known expression of the transcendental terror of the infinite. Since the work on transfinite sets by the German mathematician, Georg Cantor, however, the infinite has become secularized; no longer the source of a quasi-religious fear, the infinite is in principle subject to calculation, to human ratiocination. While on the one hand this might seem like another moment in the post-Weberian "disenchantment of the world," from another perspective this is, as Ray Brassier claims in *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, a situation that "deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment." The difference between the two alternatives is stark: on the one hand, we have the danger of the power of human reason becoming its own myth of enchantment (as per Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which the liberation promised by ratiocination becomes its own trap). On the other hand, we have the potential for a positivist nihilism, in which human rationality, defined as the reason of strong, escapes any sort of immanent critique and whose legacy of domination and destruction is apparent. How is it possible, then to navigate between these two unpalatable alternatives: between recidivist myth and eliminativist nihilism? In between these two alternatives falls the *Imaging Saturn* project undertaken by Risa Horowitz.

The variety of works of art that make up the present iteration of this project incorporate photography, video, 3D modelling, kinetic sculpture, cut vinyl, and computer assisted design. The works are based on real astronomical investigation undertaken by the artist in a manner which combines the legacy of the amateur stargazer and the visual databases produced by professional astronomers in the course of their research. The core of this project generally and this exhibition in particular—a response to viewing Saturn—is the production of Saturn's image, the long duration of its "year" (comparable to 29.42 terrestrial years), and the nature of parallax and the terrestrial-centric relation between human viewers and the celestial bodies (the movement and position of Saturn, indeed all celestial bodies, being recorded relative to the position of the Earth). As befits such a complicated dynamic system of contingencies and necessities, *Imaging Saturn* consists of many intricately related parts. There are five photographs of the as-yet-unfinished *Imaging Saturn (2011-2040)* series, a series which consists of a photograph taken every year for the entirety of the planet's rotation around the Sun (thus, there are photos for 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, with 2016 to 2040 forthcoming). Using digital cameras, webcams, and iPhone cameras attached to telescopes, the images that we see are the stacked composites of the clearest

available frames; the greater the resolution and detail afforded by the video, the greater percentage of stacked frames were composited.

The second, complimentary component, *Rings*, consists of twenty-nine kinetic servomotor sculptures, each one representing, as with the aforementioned photographs, a single year of the project's duration, and moving back and forth along a vertical axis to represent the appearance of Saturn as it traverses the terrestrial sky each evening.

A third component, *Ecliptic, Stars and Saturns (2011-2040)*, interprets a Mercator projection map of a part of the celestial night sky as seen from Earth, in which large open circles refer to the position of Saturn relative to the ecliptic on a specific day of each year, full circles represent the stars of the zodiacal constellations through which Saturn passes, and a solid line represents the apparent path of the Sun "moving" across the sky. This stellar cartography is supplemented by the photograph *Hydrogen-Alpha Filtered Sun*, revealing solar sunspots and prominences as photographed in August 2015, grounding the former pieces in the physical reminder that, while so many human measurements necessarily take the Earth as their frame of reference, these measurements can more properly be taken from a heliocentric frame.

The final components, *Orbiter* and the video based on it, *Viewing Models*, explore the relative movement of Saturn as it corresponds to our terrestrial viewpoint. In the former case, a kinetic sculpture moves around a ten foot diameter rising/falling along a ninety degree axis. In the case of the video, references to the imagery of astronomical science in popular culture corresponding to the second largest planet in our solar system, whose distinctive rings and myriad moods resonate in the collective imaginary.

One thing of note is the degree to which Horowitz does not activate the mythic potentials of "Saturn" in the public imaginary: e.g., the Titan Saturn of Greek antiquity, the pernicious astrological influence of the planet on the melancholic (as per Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*). The imagery deployed in this exhibition is rigorously grounded in contemporary scientific procedure: both in terms of the content of the art works as well as the techniques of their creation. But does this lead to the sort of eliminativism discussed in the opening paragraph? The answer is, obviously, no: Horowitz navigates the recidivism/nihilism divide by developing a mode of rationality that is not, as in the case of the eliminativist position, fetishistic towards technological science. Instead, the secular infinities of the vast distances of the celestial bodies and the nonhuman durations are called together to produce opportunities for imaginative response. Thus, we might look upon the thirty-year project of *Imaging Saturn* as a refusal of both eliminativism as well as conservative anti-rationalism: a contribution to a speculative inhumanism.

- Tom Kohut

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