ARTS | POUGHKEEPSIE

Depicting the Heavens With Paint, Pencil, Even Cocaine

Artists in a Vassar exhibition use media of many types to explore the stars.

By SUSAN HODARA

With an imposing stance, the astronaut Gordon Cooper towers over visitors to the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College. Everything about him glows: his metallic spacesuit, the soles of his shoes, the helmet he clutches in the crook of his arm. His head is an otherworldly blue, his hair and eyes blaze white.

Mr. Cooper was one of the seven astronauts who participated in Project Mercury, America's first manned space program. His giant image, at the entrance to the museum's atrium gallery, is a site-specific mural created by Mungo Thomson, who manipulated the colors in a photograph from NASA's public archives. Part of the Los Angeles-based artist's continuing series "Negative Space," the mural covers a 23-foot-high wall where, near the ceiling, a small circular window suggests a celestial orb in the distance.

Mr. Cooper is an apt ambassador for "Touch the Sky," an exhibition of 51 works by 19 artists, each responding to the awe-inspiring mysteries of the universe. The show presents an array of approaches, on a spectrum from factual to imaginary, in media including paint, pencil, printmaking, video, assorted photographic techniques and a bit of powdered cocaine.

"There is a deep human desire to know more about our surroundings," said Mary-Kay Lombino, the museum's curator of contemporary art and photography and the organizer of the exhibition. "But human understanding has its limits. We can't really see the universe. We can't conceive of its vastness. We can't truly understand it. Still, we have this desire to do so."

That desire is manifest throughout the galleries. It is there in a grouping of astrophotographs, shot through telescopes. The oldest, "Moon in First Quarter," was taken by Lewis M. Rutherfurd, an amateur scientist in New York, who invented the device he used. It shows the moon's maria (lava plains) in remarkable detail, considering it was made in 1865.

Technological leaps are evident in the images of much higher resolution produced by two contemporary artists. Four black-and-white photographs by David Malin, an Australian astrophotographer, include a similar view of the moon's maria as well as other dramatic — and beautiful — interstellar events. Michael Benson, an artist and writer in New York, stitched together raw digital data collected by NASA to create his

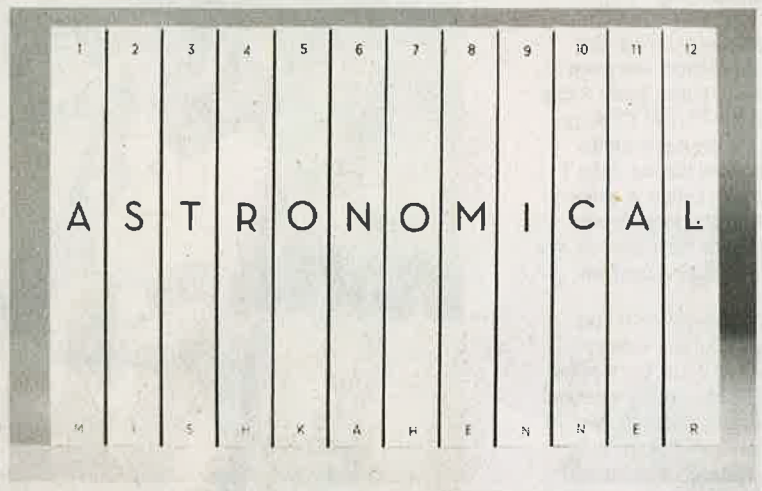
composite version of Jupiter's moon Io. The dazzling gold sphere, pockmarked with craters, pops against a black background, red flames from two volcanic eruptions visible near the top.

Like Mr. Benson and Mr. Thomson, other "Touch the Sky" artists mined the expressive potential of appropriated imagery. The source materials for a suite of 10 lithographs made by Nancy Graves in 1972 were NASA's color-coded geologic maps of Earth's moon. Using pointillist marks, Ms. Graves abstracted the maps into dotted expanses of color.

Kiki Smith's photogravure "Europa" underscores the correlation between female and celestial bodies. Twin found images of Jupiter's icy moon are printed in mottled tones on linen-hued Japanese paper. Crinkly and slightly raised, the moons' roundness conjures orbs, but it also conjures breasts, and the creaminess around them evokes lingerie or bare skin. Below, inscribed in red, are the words "I am the flesh of the full moon."

In an effort to depict the magnitude of the universe, the Belgian artist Mishka Henner made "Astronomical," a scale model of the solar system in the form of a 12-volume, 6,000-page artist book. With the sun on Page 1 and Pluto on Page 6,000, and the width of each page equivalent to a million kilometers in space, the work, completed in 2011, contains page after page of blackness. "When you finally come to a planet, it's just a speck. In this context, it's almost possible to get your head around it," Ms. Lombino said, emphasizing the word "almost."

The serene multitude in Vija Celmins's



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: VIA FRANCES LEHMAN LOEB ART CENTER, VASSAR COLLEGE; MISHKA HENNER; SHARON HARPER; MUNGO THOMSON

Clockwise from left: Lewis M, Rutherfurd's "Moon in First Quarter" (1865), Mishka Henner's book "Astronomical" (2011); Sharon Harper's "Moon Study and Star Scratches" (2005); and Mungo Thomson's "Negative Space."

Using art to satisfy the 'deep human desire' to explore the universe.

etching "Untitled Galaxy," from 1986, is an imagined realm where the stars are actually absences of black ink. "Every star is a tiny area where you are seeing through to the paper," Ms. Lombino said. "You can see the human hand in the markings on the plate."

The multilayered universe in Laura Battle's "How Long Is Your Past, How Far Is Your Future" is also invented. The 16-foot-long, site-specific painting is filled with cosmological symbols: a north star, a blood moon, a reference to the Fibonacci sequence, the suggestion of a black hole (albeit a colorful one). A subtle but overarching spiral pays homage to Vera Rubin, an astronomer (and a 1948 Vassar graduate) who studied spiral galaxies. In an email, Ms. Battle, who teaches painting and drawing at Bard College, attributed her fascination with astronomy to "my interest in the profound connection between knowing and imagining, the basis for all artistic and scientific research."

"Touch the Sky" was organized as part of a yearlong, campuswide celebration of the sciences. Ms. Lombino dedicated the exhibition to Maria Mitchell, one of America's first professional female astronomers and the first professor hired at Vassar. All of the works challenge visitors to the museum to reconsider, and perhaps expand, their conceptions of the cosmos.

This is what Sharon Harper aimed to do when, in Clearmont, Wyo., in 2005, she brought her large-format camera outside nightly to photograph the sky. She chose different locations, shifted the orientation of her camera, altered her exposures from eight seconds up to 30 minutes and repeatedly re-exposed the same sheet of film.

In the resulting print, which is part of a body of work titled "Moon Studies and Star Scratches," a cobalt blue sky is flecked with radiant orbs, fingernail moons and slender white lines tracing the paths of stars. In a second piece from the same series, gleaming spheres and crescent moons seem to be frolicking among smears of light. During a telephone interview, Ms. Harper, a professor of visual art at Harvard, described her process as a "call and response" and a "partnership" incorporating her movement, the astronomical movement, the camera's optics, the film's properties and, ultimately, the viewer's perspective.

"Photography is such an observational medium," she said. "Usually it tracks things that are culturally referential, or that show veracity, or that are a window to reality as we see it. I'm trying to turn it inward and look at the process of perception."

As for the cocaine, Matthew Brandt, who lives and works in Los Angeles, sprinkled it onto photographer's velvet, the vivid white against the rich black mimicking a distant galaxy. The accompanying label quotes the artist as stating that the piece "hints at altered perceptions, and making pictures of nebulas and stars is a way to talk about that." (The label also includes a legal disclaimer.)

Mounted behind Plexiglas, the surface of the dark work, from a series called "Night Skies," is reflective. Noting her image in its surface, Ms. Lombino said, "We are able to look into it and see ourselves."

"Touch the Sky" through Aug. 21 at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie. "Late Night at the Lehman Loeb: Observatory Night" on June 23; gallery open until 9 p.m. fllac.vassar.edu or 845-437-5632.