The Turner-tipped artist who's literally out of this world

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Fossil beads, future forests, dying stars: Katie Paterson tells
Mike Wade how space and time have inspired her work

Like an exotic buyer in a jewellery shop, Katie Paterson is casting a
bewildered eye over a
park's daily catch of shells.

I love the way on some of those beads," she says.

"There are some very
tiny ones, an extinct snail and the rare
bear. And it's like a blue coral from west-coast Africa. You look closely, some of them are the size of a
raisin, you know, the size of a
raisin." Fossil Necklaces, like all the works in
"Katie Paterson's new show in Edinburgh, is out of this world in its ambition.

Pleasant 100 beads, hand-carved from fossilised coral as she literally
serials the whole of geological time.
The work begins with yet another
immortal legend: the 2.5
billion-year-old fossil of a 450-meter
organism discovered in what we now
call Africa. The story of the remarkable
plays out along a sterile player through every era of deep time. From the
complexity of life in the first forests through to the collision of
continents to form Pangaea, the great
fold range. Later, future the very
earest to the earth, the moment at last
arriving when humans began to
appear, marked in a burst of copal and
from Kenya.

It's a moment, a moment in time, even
to the artist herself. "Our DNA
literally links back to the very first
thing," she says, almost to herself.

"We are all just related to those go..." other species on Earth.

Paterson, 32, has already been
tipped as a potential Turner
protégé by this newspaper. Her
big themes of time and space and the
specifies of human, that link them
deadly resonate as much for her as
they did once for Douglas Adams
and the "Hitchhiker's Guide to the
Galaxy.

There's the beginning of
time, right there
in front of us.

She adds that she never excelled
at science in school, but as a child
would digger in a kind of
"satisfaction" and set aside time to enter
her own little world. "I found it
probably an easier escape than now," she
thinks. These days, surrounded by
a succession of ecological artists in
residence, the Big Idea is performed as
a kind of metaphysical and
globally, surrealists and
mathematicians, but the theme
comes to wonder at their creations.

"Something that made me very
impressed was going to the
Mauna Kea observatory in Hawaii," says
Paterson. "There's this huge
mountain above the clouds, and I am looking back billions of years at the
universe by reflection after the Big
Bang. You can look alive on the screen
and say, 'There's the beginning of
space and time in front of us.' That kind of thing is so intimidating, so
immense and persistent, but yet we can, see it. That's what
intrigued me.

The exhibition records a
fascinating period a few years ago when
Paterson left Edinburgh for College and spent on a comprehensive
tour of the island of Nauru to research
northern Ireland. She had a room with
a view over the Scottish coast through
the glass ceiling and a blue sky of
distance. "It was like nowhere else on
earth," she says. On Tuesday, she
described the ground "fused with the
sea in front of me, and the way, the layers of
blue, the length of the
way."

She came to visit the planet
aeon, "into something that was
underneath us. It was
something inside the sun." There were
other worlds in other galaxies, some of
the deep universe. She felt this was a planet,
that was floating, that is full of energy.

Eight months later, she had
packed her things and arrived at State School
of Fine Art, London, with the
confidence to express her new ideas.

Inspired by Nauru's largest glacier by
the name of "Katie Paterson, she tackled an
intermediate machine ('The
Glacier of Time') that could
link people into the world to the
glacier, allowing a photographer to
see a glacier in the universe, and
sent on the phone to Virgin Mobile and they
promised it. "In the event E3000
people from 47 countries were
trying to listen to the sounds of the glacier. She had
created her first world figure.

Since then, her ideas have
proved very
real, online. Inspired by a resonance of University College London, she
made a map of all the dying stars in
the universe, all 20000 of them.

"I am the most excited," she
says, unnecessarily. "Something that
always struck me was that, if a star died, all the material objects in
that base explosion were made up
earth and all the other planets. They are actually in our blood. The elements
are in our body.

I was interested in the correlations that were so
intimate and yet so much more distinct.

"It's a wonderful thing, to
be able to put your ideas into
space."

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James Cohan

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We are all related in the most intimate way through a stellar explosion, and through fossils from millions of years ago. I get drawn to these distant events.

This summer Paterson's obsessions manifest themselves all over Edinburgh. To the west of the city, at Jupiter Artland, her Earth-Moon-Earth transmits Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata to the Moon and back, playing out its lunar-altered score on a self-playing grand piano. In the city centre, confetti cannons will mimic gamma-ray bursts, the brightest explosions in the universe, blasting out all 3,216 colours that correspond with the colours of these astonishing astronomical events.

The main exhibition, her show at the Ingleby Gallery, has a certain universality. "This whole ground floor is material, earthly works." She takes in the space with a sweep of her arm. "Upstairs it becomes cosmic; climb the stairs and go on a journey into space."

The effect is mind-boggling. Among the earthly delights, the curious visitor can attempt to engage with the notion of a grain of sand from the Sahara, carved by nanotechnologists into "a minute version of itself, just a couple of atoms", and then re-released invisibly into the desert, the moment caught on camera.

In the gallery above are scores of images of darkness, captured at the edge of the Universe. On one wall, set out as they might be in the foyer of a hotel, nine precisely calibrated clocks tell the time on the planets of the solar system; scattered across the floor are meteorites found in the Campo del Cielo area of Argentina, older than the Earth itself, cast, melted and recast by the artist, "inhabit"; as the guidebook says, "with cosmic history".

Details of Paterson's latest work hang in an annex. Future Library is a collection of 100 manuscripts, one to be commissioned every year from a well-known writer until 2114. Managed by a trust, the works will remain unread until a century hence. At that moment, each will be printed on paper from a Norwegian forest planted this year by the artist near Oslo. It goes without saying that most of the authors will never see their writing published; nor, of course, will Paterson witness her work come to fruition. That does not matter, she says. A "quite contemplative" room is being incorporated on the fifth floor of the new Oslo City Library to house the collection. She says: "People can come in and sit with the manuscripts and, even though they can't read them, they can make the imaginative leap over the centuries, over the decades, to the future."

Those out of love with contemporary art may find the show challenging — unpublished books, an invisible grain of sand, photographs of blackness will spell futility to some. Paterson sees her works very differently: interconnected, full of hope and beauty, mysterious and awe-inspiring and in its scope utterly universal. Above all, her art shines through not the science. She says: "I have not got close to answers, but I don't think I've ever been looking for the answers."