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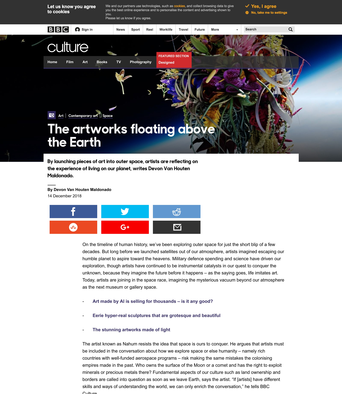

The artworks floating above the Earth

By launching pieces of art into outer space, artists are reflecting on the experience of living on our planet, writes Devon Van Houten Maldonado.

By Devon Van Houten Maldonado
14 December 2018

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On the timeline of human history, we've been exploring outer space for just the short blip of a few decades. But long before we launched satellites out of our terrestrial biosphere, artists imagined escaping our humble planet to explore toward the heavens. Military defence spending and science have driven our exploration, though artists have continued to be instrumental catalysts in our quest to conquer the unknown, because they imagine the future before it happens – as the saying goes. This initiates an artistic undertaking of art in space, one that is now, imagining the mysterious vacuum beyond our atmosphere as the next museum or gallery space.

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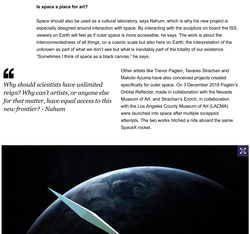
The artist known as Nahum reads the idea that space is ours to conquer. He argues that artists must be included in the conversation about how we explore space or else humanity – namely rich countries with well-funded aerospace programs – risk making the same mistakes the colonising empires made in the past. Who owns the surface of the Moon or a comet and has the right to exploit minerals or precious metals there? Fundamental aspects of our culture such as land ownership and borders are called into question as soon as we leave Earth, says the artist. "If [artists] have different skills and ways of understanding the world, we can only enrich the conversation," he tells BBC Culture.



Nahum's work The Contour of Presence was launched from Cape Canaveral (Credit: Nahum)

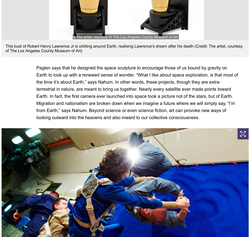
Artists are, for the first time since scientists overcame the incessant pull of gravity to break free from Earth's atmosphere, beginning to imagine outer space as a platform for art. What does art look like after Earth? On 29 June 2018, years in the making, Nahum's long-time dream came true when he launched a one-of-a-kind interactive sculpture into orbit aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket bound for the International Space Station (ISS). Back on Earth, the artist orchestrated performances that allowed the audience to interact with the sculpture on the ISS, bringing the audience here on Earth closer to space, says Nahum.

Is space a place for art?

Space should also be used as a cultural laboratory, says Nahum, which is why his new project is especially designed around interaction with space. By interacting with the sculpture on board the ISS, viewers on Earth will feel as if outer space is more accessible, he says. The work is about the interconnectedness of all things, on a cosmic scale but also here on Earth; the interpretation of the unknown as part of what we don't see but what is inevitably part of the totality of our existence. "Sometimes I think of space as a black canvas," he says.

> *Why should scientists have unlimited reign? Why can't artists, or anyone else for that matter, have equal access to this new frontier?* - Nahum

Other artists like Trevor Paglen, Tavares Strachan and Makoto Azuma have also conceived projects created specifically for outer space. On 3 December 2018 Paglen's Orbital Reflector, made in collaboration with the Nevada Museum of Art, and Strachan's Encoder, in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) were launched into space after multiple scrapped attempts. The two works hitched a ride aboard the same SpaceX rocket.



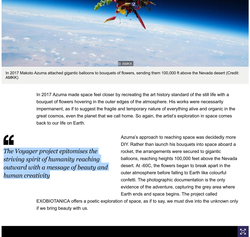
© Courtesy of the artist and Nevada Museum of Art

Trevor Paglen's sculpture might look like a scientific satellite, but it is in fact purely aesthetic and aspirational (Credit: Courtesy of the artist and Nevada Museum of Art)

At first, Paglen's sculpture might look like a scientific satellite, but it is in fact purely aesthetic and aspirational. The project sparked protest among astronomers who claimed that the highly reflective object would obstruct scientific observation. Nahum refutes their claim, though the project is among the first that calls into question the issue of who has a legal right to space or who owns Earth's orbit. Why should scientists have unlimited reign? Why can't artists, or anyone else for that matter, have equal access to this new frontier?

> *What I like about space exploration, is that most of the time it's about Earth* - Nahum

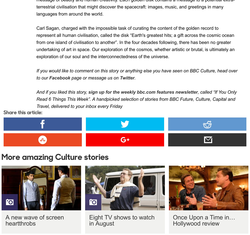
Strachan's space sculpture looks more like what you might expect to see in a museum — a bust of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr, the first African American ever selected for the US space program. Lawrence died in a plane crash while still in training to become an astronaut and never realised his dream of going to space, until Strachan's sculpture put him there after the fact. The launch of Nahum, Paglen and Strachan's space sculptures marks a turning point for artworks in outer space, with three works by three separate artists orbiting around our planet at this very moment.



© Los Angeles County Museum of Art

This bust of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr is orbiting around Earth, realising Lawrence's dream after his death (Credit: The artist, courtesy of The Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Paglen says that he designed the space sculpture to encourage those of us bound by gravity on Earth to look up with a renewed sense of wonder. "What I like about space exploration, is that most of the time it's about Earth," says Nahum. In other words, these projects, though they are extraterrestrial in nature, are meant to bring us together. Nearly every satellite ever made points toward Earth. In fact, the first camera ever launched into space took a picture not of the stars, but of Earth. Migration and nationalism are broken down when we imagine a future where we will simply say, "I'm from Earth," says Nahum. Beyond science or even science fiction, art can provoke new ways of looking outward into the heavens and also inward to our collective consciousness.



© Courtesy of Space Affairs

Nahum and other artists travelled to Russia to experience the closest thing to zero-gravity on Earth (Credit: Courtesy of Space Affairs)

Art in space: A 50-year history

Nahum, originally from Mexico City but now working in Berlin, has been exploring space as a subject matter and a destination in his art for nearly a decade. "As artists, we have the responsibility to engage in whatever our subject matter is," he says. For a 2015 exhibition in Mexico City, The Matters of Gravity, Nahum along with a small group of artists travelled to Russia to experience the closest thing to zero gravity that we have on Earth: parabolic flight. Conceived as part of astronaut training and for scientific research, parabolic flights allow for short 30-second near zero-gravity experiences. Through a specific series of manoeuvres aboard a specially designed airplane, Nahum and the other artists were the first to undertake artistic experiments in a zero-gravity environment. The results were displayed at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in the form of audio, video and sculpture.

In 2017 Makoto Azuma attached gigantic balloons to bouquets of flowers, sending them 100,000 ft above the Nevada desert (Credit: AMAKI)

In 2017 Azuma made space feel closer by recreating the art history standard of the still life with a bouquet of flowers hovering in the outer edges of the atmosphere. His works were necessarily impermanent, as if to suggest the fragile and temporary nature of everything alive and organic in the great cosmos, even the planet that we call home. So again, the artist's exploration in space comes back to our life on Earth.

> *The Voyager project epitomises the striving spirit of humanity reaching outward with a message of beauty and human creativity*

Azuma's approach to reaching space was decidedly more DIY. Rather than launch his bouquets into space aboard a rocket, the arrangements were secured to gigantic balloons, reaching heights 100,000 feet above the Nevada desert. At 40C, the flowers began to break apart in the outer atmosphere before falling to Earth like colourful confetti. The photographic documentation is the only evidence of the adventure, capturing the grey area where Earth ends and space begins. The project called EXOBIOTANICA offers a poetic exploration of space, as if to say, we must dive into the unknown only if we bring beauty with us.

© Alamy

Sounds of The Earth is, according to Carl Sagan: "Earth's greatest hits, a gift across the cosmic ocean from one island of civilisation to another" (Credit: Alamy)

The history of art in space stretches back further than the last few years however. Two of the most famous aerospace missions, Voyager 1 and 2, launched spacecraft designed to reach the outer edges of our galaxy, carry with them two golden records full of art. After their launch in 1977, they continue to careen ever further into the unknown. With every second they become the farthest human-made objects from Earth ever. In December 2018, **Voyager 2 left our Solar System**, nearly 18 billion km (11 billion miles) from Earth, following Voyager 1, which **left our Solar System in 2012**. Truly one-of-a-kind, the Voyager project epitomises the striving spirit of humanity reaching outward with a message of beauty and human creativity. Each golden disk contains a message to a potential extraterrestrial civilisation that might discover the spacecraft: images, music, and greetings in many languages from around the world.

Carl Sagan, charged with the impossible task of curating the content of the golden record to represent all human civilisation, called the disk "Earth's greatest hits; a gift across the cosmic ocean from one island of civilisation to another". In the four decades following, there has been no greater undertaking of art in space. Our exploration of the cosmos, whether artistic or brutal, is ultimately an exploration of our soul and the interconnectedness of the universe.

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