

MOONS

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MOONS: an exhibition of contemporary art and scientific artifacts pondering the poetic and transcendent dimensions of real space at the Williamson Gallery, ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena California; July 19 through December 16, 2018.

From the nocturnal side of planet Earth, Galileo Galilei peered skyward to darkness and christened a quartet of bright dots he'd been observing for months. It was March 2, 1610, and he would call them the Medicea Sydera (Medician Stars), four specks honoring Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici of Tuscany, along with Cosimo's three bothers. It wasn't all selfless homage, Galileo was seeking the Duke's patronage -- but it was a big deal in history and the quest for a better understanding of ourselves. While mere points of starlight among so many others, Galileo's weeks of observation had shown these particular dots to be satellites orbiting the massive Jupiter.

In the seventeenth century, four of anything caught circling a planet other than our own would have challenged the Ptolemaic and Roman Catholic certainties that only a god-created Earth was the center around which all else revolved. Galileo's discoveries to the contrary were published in his book *Sidereus Nuncius* (Starry Messenger) the same year as his discovery, but his House of Medici naming has largely been eclipsed. It was from the astronomer Simon Marius, who is said to have observed the Jupiter dots just before, after, and/or simultaneously to Galileo, that time was provided the names we ended up using today -- *Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto*. Galileo, at the time, refused to use the Maruis designations, and accused him of plagiarism. Nowadays, given how a raucous past flattens eventually into its arbitrated history, we collectively refer to the orbs Marius named, by calling them the Galilean Satellites.

Celestial bodies tethered by orbital physics to our solar system's planets, commonly known as moons, comprise a consortium of enticing worlds we now know are rocky, wet, icy, cratered, hot, cold, and puzzling, some of whose veneers are also textured with mountains, lakes, concealed oceans, valleys, volcanoes, geysers, canyons, and plains, and that contain water and heat to fuel tantalizing speculations. Such objects present a pathway to the poetics, knowledge, and disruptions ignited by an age-old urge to probe reality beyond the single planet on which we are cradled.

We haven't been familiar with the enormous diversity and broad set of complexions belonging to our neighboring planets' satellites, for very long. Only since the advent of powerful space telescopes, fly-by probes, and targeted landers, have we realized how many there are, and that our own seemingly desolate but nonetheless gorgeous gray Luna is not, as it turns out, the de facto template for what all moons are like -- including Galileo's first four. There's now so many of them, in fact, it's hard to keep track of who belongs to who. Mercury's easy, it doesn't have any moons and neither does Venus. Earth has only one; Mars, two; sixty-nine for giant Jupiter; sixty-two Saturn; Uranus has twenty-seven; and Neptune fourteen. The dwarf formerly known as planet Pluto, has five.

Some are big like planets; two are bigger than the planet Mercury. Altogether, one-hundred eighty-something – and more, yet to be discovered, likely on the way.

To their parent planets, moons can be like offspring, little brothers or sisters, step-siblings, or wholly unrelated adoptions, but in every case the family is lured together and bonded by the loving bear-hug of gravity. Precise family trees in space are an ongoing challenge, but anything out there that is terra firma or terra not-so-firma will have long lost relatives in cosmic dust and gas. After which, vast amounts of time are the slow-stir of the pot, until four and a half billion years or so later the neighborhood ends up concocted somewhat like ours is today: burning mother star, eight major planets with a host of minor leaguers, a couple hundred moons, and lesser shards, fragments, and flying snowballs. We call our own moon, Moon – but its earliest incarnation may have been Theia, an object about the size of Mars that landed a glancing blow into primordial Earth and either reformed its smithereens as an orbiting satellite, or emerged right along with the planet itself from the same dusty donut of shattered collision debris. Nobody knows for sure -- but for sure it happened, and happened somehow.

A human compulsion to unravel the mysteries of the *somehow* that anything requires, has fueled eons of tangential lore on just about everything not otherwise obvious. Throughout their timeless choreography together, Earthlings have explained away the Moon in ornate narratives and imaginative mythologies, a cascade of primal expressions artfully constructed and able to append meaning to that beguiling light in the sky -- the night's punctual, floating, ghostly or glorious illumination. It needed a *somehow*. Deities and genders, a sibling of Sol, scapegoat for bio-rhythms, stimulant for werewolves and friend of vampires, dire predictor, overseer of harvest, candlelight to all that is spooky, and romantic backdrop. The moon has been everything throughout the full flowering of human history but only relatively recently, and rather humbly by comparison, has it simply been what it really is.

To paraphrase the physicist/artist Richard Feynman: who are poets that can speak so eloquently of the Moon if it is divine, but if it is rocks and minerals, must be silent?

Sturdy among the pillars supporting recent art's 150-year string of paradigmatic makeovers, is the inclination to objectify what is aesthetic and transcendent. Despite its winding pictorial course through history, its enduring tributaries of style and pools of fantasy and allegory, modern and contemporary art's prevailing undercurrent has been to convert the enthrallments and intrigues of imagined worlds into equal sensations of the real world. In the visual arts, this is accomplished by making objects rather than pictures, and pictures that behave as objects, shifting the experiential paradigm from the imaginary to the real. Our Moon's veneration of ancient narratives, bedtime stories, and superstitions are revered still, reinforced again and again, but it now shines naked and exposed, objectified by science. We know its dusty candor, and its unadorned exhortation for poets to recalibrate -- to discover nuances of the natural and a romance of the real.

Among the art and moons of *MOONS*, some are simple portraits of faraway places we don't yet know very well – the faces of wonder worlds and orbiting mysteries. All

acclaim the atonal orchestrations of human curiosity. Nine alien moons and the one circling Earth are the photographic outcomes of Kevin M. Gill, a Jet Propulsion Laboratory software engineer who wrangles data from spacecraft and synthesizes them into stunning accounts of what's really out there, what silently beckons. In an equally candid view, London artist Melanie King follows misty perceptions that gesture from the spectacle of a full moon in transit, a meditation on the sublime silent eye keeping watch on a human ethos unfolding below -- so emotionally linked yet physically aloof. Karley Sullivan has rendered representations of 143 barely known moons that are confirmed orbiters of Earth's solar neighbors, perhaps challenging the historical hubris of our one-moon planet as a divine center of the universe. Her graphic inquiry both documents the checklist of discovered moons and probes for their secrets.

Human conventions, born of repetition and rhythm, cycles and expectations, have yielded the notion that moons are of the night. But the Moon and everything else outside our circumference belongs to all skies, the ones sunlit as well as shaded. Reality beyond Earth disregards our circadian expectations. Artist Steve Roden thwarts expectations with a series of moon musical scores, in which craters are replaced by audio speakers and their Moon locations superimposed by staff lines of sheet music, diagrams for triggering a lunar syncopation of sound. New Yorker Penelope Umbrico addresses the ubiquity of moon imagery on the internet, using its cultural saturation as commentary on how media exhausts our perceptions, and how the extraordinary can be reduced and marginalized by repetition until it becomes conventional and stripped of signification.

Earth and moon cycles are inextricably tied to our body identity, to which all that is different may seem alien. But only to our own Earth-bound perspectives, are we the rule and everything else the exception -- in truth, we are also aliens in the us-versus-Universe duality. The curiosity of Galileo, the reality of two-hundred moons instead of one-per-planet, and the cultural incisions of art together with science, are all of the sort that challenge our ingrained domestic worldviews. Outside such convention, Southern California artist James Griffith infuses his works with a past that records life-and-death cycles, by using natural unearthed tar as his medium. His Moon renderings reference the primordial interactions that brought life to a planet, along with the role played by its satellite in nurturing those evolutionary processes. In similar fashion, Jacqueline Woods uses light-sensitive paper and photo chemicals to brew moon portraits into existence, modeling a kind of photosynthesis where moons and the imagination engage science with the poetic. Artist Sarah Perry looks askance at the alienation of the Other, combining moon worlds with Earth creatures and props, ignoring the strained etiquette of difference, and forging new alloys of embrace out of stark celestial contrasts. Tim Hawkinson creates a moonscape made of lips and mouths accompanied by a floating thumb-astronaut, their ultimate insertion one into the other belying a childlike yearning for the comfort of our reliable orbiting security blanket. And in the tradition of cloud-watching, the art duo Alternative Moons (Nadine Schlieper and Robert Pufleb), find enchanting imposters in the hot-griddled reactions of flour batter to extreme heat, showing a series of pancake photos that tease our clichéd impression of a prototypical moon -- a witty caution against life's illusions, and at the same time testament to the seduction of other-world mysteries in space.

Only *one* moon – quaint by comparison. In the future, myths and endearments surrounding Earth’s satellite may be part of how our epoch’s story is told, the time when human perceptions were circumscribed by a provincial corner of space. And then how, the story will go, the skies slowly opened up to their stunning and tangled truths.