

DATEBOOK

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' 'Cosmic Wonder' exhibition reaches across a generational gap

By Kenneth Baker
CHRONICLE ART CRITIC

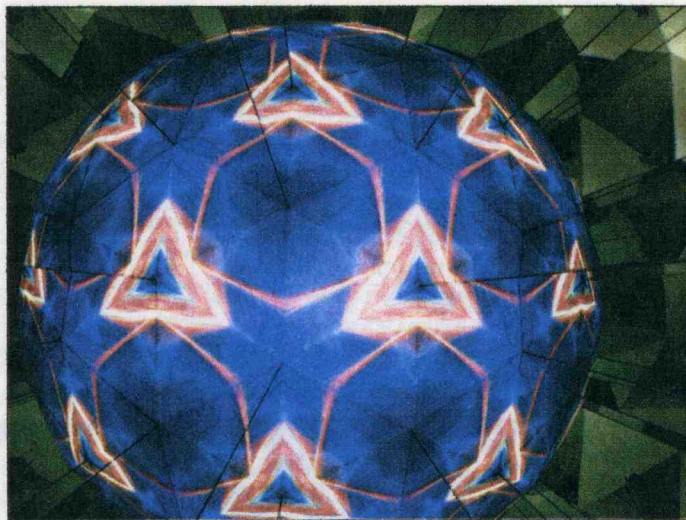
I may have used the pejorative "nostalgic" too often in recent columns, but I need it one more time: to characterize "Cosmic Wonder" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Organized by guest curator Betty Nguyen, the exhibition looks at younger artists' replays of '60s pop aesthetics to express — what? — blissful awareness of life, hankering for a lost cultural innocence, honest amazement at what they experience?

The difficulty of deciding hints at the fraught position in which young and mid-career artists find themselves today. They look back at a period, indeed a century, in which their predecessors seemed to do and lay claim to everything that could be done in the name of art and its promise of surprise, pleasure, confrontation with and deliverance from managed consciousness.

Two artists included here personify the generations in eclipse: James Turrell and Richard Misrach.

Turrell's "cross corner projection" "Alta (Pink)" (1968) throws a sharp, tipped rectangle of tinted light into the bottom corner of a darkened room where it presents the illusion of a glowing pyramid. Walk back and forth as you look at it and it will appear to rotate.



Ara Peterson and Jim Drain's "Large Video Kaleidoscope" (2003-06).

Dutch Projects

Cosmic Wonder: works in media ranging from video and projected to installation and wall painting. Through Nov. 5. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., San Francisco. (415) 978-2787, www.ybca.org.

When Turrell first made the piece, people read it as dematerializing the strict solid geometry of minimal sculpture, an argument that form depends on perception rather than determining it.

To the '60s art crowd Turrell's early work looked worlds removed in seriousness from the psychedelic light shows that helped to define the decade's popular image of itself. From a younger generation's vantage point, they apparently converge.

Ara Peterson and Jim Drain's "Large Video Kaleidoscope" (2003-06) looks like the most direct remembrance of Turrell here. It opens a hole in the wall through which angled mirrors multiply the changing light, colors and figures of an abstract video projection.

We have to wonder, though, how seriously Peterson and Drain mean what they've made. Is it more than an eye-dazzling machine? Should it be?

When Turrell began working with projected light illusions, he joined a conversation then in progress about the dispensation of art as object. Such a background conversation today would have a different subject. It might concern the different modes of experience possible in physically constructed virtual spaces like the "Large Video Kaleidoscope" and digitally constructed phenomena available only through a screen or flat projection.

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Takeshi Murata's video stands out

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But neither singly nor collectively do the works in "Cosmic Wonder" hint that any current of controversy might connect them. "Cosmic Wonder" makes a visitor ask whether curatorial decisions or the artists' own or both explain the wildly diverse levels of ambition and fulfillment represented here.

The title "Cosmic Wonder" has ironic and serious overtones. It faintly mocks the sort of hippie-dippy awe and worldview that psychedelics can induce and it also faintly promises an old-fashioned taste of art as illuminating release from the mundane constraints of vision.

Two mid-'90s photographs by Misrach serve as a kind of middle term between Turrell's light piece and the recent works on view. In each, Misrach framed a passage of empty sky, registering nothing but light and space and, in his titles, the times and locations where he made each exposure.

The pictures peg the immediate

Leah Garchik
is on vacation.

morial fluctuations of day and night to moments in history, both the photographer's own and humanity's. In this way they really do induce wonderment that the universe should have evolved creatures that could witness it and even record what they see.

Nothing by the younger artists in the show even appears to consider aiming so high, except Los Angeles resident Takeshi Murata's video "Untitled (Silver)" (2006).

Murata apparently subjected some old black-and-white Hollywood footage to digital treatment that makes the images cascade into cubistic fragments with every movement of camera or performers. He commissioned a clangorous score from Robert Beatty and Ellen Mollé that somehow makes everything on screen look metallic. Even though we can almost never tell what Murata shows us, "Untitled (Silver)" is visually captivating.

By its hypnotic effect Murata's video upstages nearly everything else on view. It also calls attention to an issue that might have informed the curator's choices, to the show's benefit: the shifting position — implicit or explicit — of the viewer.

Murata's piece solicits absorp-

tion pure and simple. So does Peterson and Drain's "Large Video Kaleidoscope." In more static and philosophical terms, Misrach's do also. Other pieces, such as Hanna Fushihara Aron and David Aron's "Purifying Structure in a Garden of Light and Sound" (2006), call for detached observation that turns ironic almost instantly. Yet others, such as Jose Alvarez's painting-like panels encrusted with minerals, seem torn between the private obsession of a hobbyist and the career drive of a canny artist.

In any case, no meaning of the phrase "Cosmic Wonder" comes close to unifying these disparate types of effort.

The list of artists involved has the makings of a powerful project. Had the curator been able to present installation works rather than static objects by Doug Aitken, Yayoi Kusama and Mariko Mori, "Cosmic Wonder" might have been something memorable. But under its constraints of budget, time and availability, "Cosmic Wonder" ended up less than cosmic and less than wondrous, no matter how you look at it.

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