



Lisa Sammut

How the earth will
approach you



Imagine the length of human life
as a straight line drawn through space;
beginning and ending
at random points in time.

I wonder if this feeling
is to do with an impression;
or an image held in mind,
of a body set in motion.

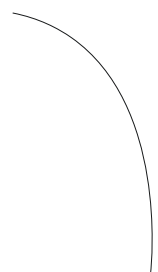
The sense that life moves
out into the far unknown;
from here in the present moment
towards a remote location.

The elliptical depiction of a comet's path
brings a strange comfort;
to see the length of a life
curl back in towards itself.

Now, imagine life as an orbit in time,
a contained and measurable space;
held within the loop of a cosmic gesture,
a closed system within an unending expanse.

Once at the very beginning
and then again towards the very end;
the earth will approach you.

Departure and return within
a system of attraction;
thrown and lured back again
by the sway of the sun.



Lisa Sammut met with curator Catherine Woolley in March 2024 to discuss the exhibition 'How the earth will approach you,' presented at UNSW Galleries.

Sammut's practice materialises intangible phenomena through sculpture, video, and installation. It draws parallels between cosmic forms and forces and the dynamics of our personal and social worlds. 'How the earth will approach you' brings together three interconnected bodies of work that consider human life in connection to transitions and cycles in the cosmos: the circular, orbital, elliptical, and eclipse. Looping between the earthly and otherworldly, the exhibition takes shape in the knowledge that our fate is intertwined with the events and laws of the universe.

CW

The first work we encounter upon entering the exhibition is *A circular logic* 2023. Can you introduce this project and tell us how it was developed?

LS

I developed *A circular logic* while undertaking a residency at Canberra Glassworks in 2023. It was a timely invitation, where the qualities of glass and the ideas I was already exploring in my practice came together in unforeseen ways.

The work's title describes a logical fallacy in reasoning where the reasoner begins with what they are trying to end with. It's a nod to my initial difficulties and realisation that I needed to be led by the natural behaviour of hot glass. Hot glass wants to be round, have curved edges, and pool around itself. You can guide it to some degree, but it will settle in a way that feels most comfortable.

It also reflects how we understand the ways of the universe in direct relation to ourselves. The circle is possibly the ultimate cosmic form, and I wanted to focus on this symbolic visual language.

CW

Circularity is an important visual and conceptual consideration throughout the exhibition. Positioned in close dialogue, the video animation *Full Circle (ii)* 2023, and its sculptural counterpart *How the earth will approach you* 2023,

articulate circular forms and trajectories from different perspectives. Can you elaborate on the process of developing these works and their relationship?

LS

Full Circle (ii) began with the realisation that Halley's Comet will appear twice in my lifetime — once at the beginning and again somewhere towards the end. Halley's Comet reappears around Earth approximately every 76 years, which coincidentally is the average global human lifespan. I was looking at elliptical diagrams of the comet's trajectory, and I suddenly understood them as maps or timelines for my own life. Something instantly resonated in this idea of life unfolding as a departure and a return. To see my life contained within this circular space in time brought a strange comfort.

The first component I created for the video animation was the text. I was reading about the trajectory of comets and wanted to explore the idea of a 'cosmic self', to ask viewers to imagine themselves in these various states. It's an invitation to undertake an exercise in cosmic thinking, to put logic aside and imagine things from a different perspective.

At the time, I was also looking at astronomical GIF animations of objects in space. Generated by complex data and computer systems, great planetary dynamics are reduced to primary-coloured lines and shapes. They focus on the relationship between things, the gravitational exchange or momentum between celestial forms, like the elliptical orbit of a comet flung around the sun. Each GIF contains a simple gesture; one motion or action repeated. They loop, and loop, and loop. I found this repetitive motion completely mesmerising.

How the earth will approach you brings these ideas into the physical realm. They were conceived to be viewed as celestial apparitions and drawings in space. I wanted to bring these theoretical ideas to life, as something you encounter in real time and space.

CW

In addition to GIF animations, you draw from various source imagery, including astronomical diagrams and illustrated

manuscripts. Something is fascinating about the innately human attempt to grasp the unfathomable. It's also interesting that these sources are rooted in different historical, cultural, or scientific understandings. Can you speak more about the kinds of research material you are drawn to and how this informs your practice?

LS

Although I'm working with subject matter often relegated to science, I'm more interested in cultural, philosophical, or poetic engagements with cosmic entities. I use the term relegated because, through the lens of Western science, the cosmos is no longer given a social role. I draw from visual imagery and documentation that attempts to find alternative understandings of what celestial forces might mean. Culturally, this has occurred for thousands of years, seeing the movements of the stars, sun, and moon as guiding forces.

I'm interested in historical documents, most recently medieval imagery, where celestial objects or events were often related to earthly materials. There are great examples of this in the *Augsburg Book of Miracles*. In this 16th-century illuminated manuscript, mysterious phenomena too large or fleeting to replicate were interpreted through the likeness of more familiar, modest, graspable objects.¹ The artists took a lot of liberty in their watercolour drawings; for example, there's a comet depicted as a burning tree branch. What I find most interesting is their descriptions as prophecies and omens, bringing cosmic meaning to personal lives.

CW

This is what's so fascinating about your practice. You are dealing with the vastness and intangibility of the cosmos yet translating these ideas into a physical human experience. Can you discuss how you arrived at the material language of these new works?

LS

The only way to grasp those large concepts is through the earthly materials of here and now. I try to transform these very ordinary materials by shaping them into things that suggest some kind of celestial significance. I'm working with materials

and measurements designed with the human form and scale in mind. Works often begin with panels of timber or mirrors close to the limit of what a human can manoeuvre alone.

While I use a lot of different materials, I would say my primary medium is movement. Whenever I conceive something in my mind, it's always in motion. I believe movement can speak to the subconscious in ways words can fail. I am drawn to moving images and kinetic objects because they mimic or complement my experiences. These animated sculptures appear to gesture to each other, like individuals within the collective body. It's like body language. In my work, I like to think that motion and emotion are the same thing.

CW

Glass is a relatively new material in your practice. Can you tell us more about the glass forms in your work and why you are interested in glass blowing techniques?

LS

Having never worked with handmade glass before, I tried a lot of things during my residency. Working with experienced glass artists, I eventually settled on creating two repeated forms: the glass sphere, and the cosmic egg.

I'm interested in glass for both its optical and metaphorical properties. I am drawn to how the glass sphere reflects, warps, and distorts the space around it. It's like this black hole, the way it narrows light. I was also thinking about the crystal ball, which is culturally understood as a tool for self-reflection, engaging with ideas of fate and the future. Fortune telling, tarot, palm reading, chiromancy – all these practices link cosmic events with the body and human endeavour. I thought that was interesting in relation to the ideas around life and death I was exploring, a cosmic anxiety about what the future holds. The sphere is also the most compact way for an object to form itself. I liked the idea that these small, intimate glass spheres could speak to ideas of uncertainty and expanse while condensing them down to something I could hold.

The cosmic egg is symbolic of the individual, beginnings, and life itself. In mythological creation stories, all life begins as one

small seed and expands outwards. Positioned precariously at central points within these oscillating sculptures, they are in constant motion, and yet to me, they feel grounded. Again, they represent contrasting states of being.

CW

As we've been thinking through how to restage these works at UNSW Galleries, we're continually returning to the idea of how people encounter the works spatially. Can you elaborate on how you are thinking about architecture, space, and perception when situating viewers within your work?

LS

As I often do with large-scale installations, I'm responding to the space and thinking architecturally. As you enter the space, you are greeted and held in place by suspended structures arranged in a semi-circular formation. As you move around these objects and into the next space, the dark walls recede, and the viewer is suspended between oscillating objects and a rhythmic soundscape.

This draws on my research into astroarchaeology and celestial architecture — built structures or spaces that draw on cosmic symbolism or are designed to mimic or harness interplanetary dynamics and transitions. When people navigate those spaces, they're either performing or experiencing the cosmos in some way. These are often circular spaces. They create a bodily sense of familiarity with these larger concepts.

The entire exhibition has a sense of rhythm and repetition through circular and cyclical movements. It's all about circularity; that is what really ties these works together.

Notes

1. Till-Holger Borchert and Joshua P. Waterman, *The Book of Miracles: Das Wunderzeichenbuch — Le Livre Des Miracles*, Taschen, Köln, 2017.

Lisa Sammut is an artist based in Kamberri/Canberra, working across sculpture, video, and installation. Her practice oscillates between notions of cosmic perspective, belonging, connection, and time. Overlaying celestial phenomena and human narratives to investigate themes of otherness, power, and agency, recent works have considered the ways cosmic forms and forces mirror the elusive dynamics, relations, and dimensions of our personal and social worlds. These works have focused on the metaphorical qualities of interstellar movement to reconsider the dynamics of human interaction, the role of the individual, and the sway of the collective.

Catherine Woolley is a curator and programs producer based on Bidjigal and Gadigal Country, Sydney. Catherine has a decade of experience working across curatorial projects, community engagement programs, and education initiatives in the arts and culture sector. She is currently the Curatorial & Public Engagement Officer at UNSW Galleries where she has recently curated the exhibition 'Pliable Planes: Expanded Textiles & Fibre Practices' (2022–24, with Karen Hall and touring nationally).

A circular logic 2023

Timber, paint, etched mirror, hand formed glass, acrylic, crushed quartz, light, motors, steel cable

This project was developed during a residency at Canberra Glassworks in 2023, supported by an Arts Project grant from Creative Australia.

Full Circle (ii) 2023

Two-channel HD video with sound
7:10 minutes, looped

How the earth will approach you 2023

Timber, paint, etched mirror, hand blown glass, acrylic, light, motors, steel cable

This project was originally commissioned by The University of Melbourne. It was developed during a residency at Canberra Glassworks in 2023, supported by an Arts Project grant from Creative Australia.

All works courtesy of the artist,
Kamberri/Canberra