Giles Ryder has set a trap. Gazing at his work, I can be convinced that the Universe seems full of light. The glorious colours of the night sky echo throughout the room. Ryder’s work emulates the glittering blues of young stars. Glowing nebulae shine in pink and purple. Yellow and red neon reveal the ancient hearts of vast galaxies.

Every night on cold mountaintops, giant mirrors collect these ghostly, ancient, photons, for astronomers to later analyse, count and classify. The colours are fingerprints. The delicate blend of shades and patterns from each star and galaxy reveal the atoms and molecules from which they are composed. We may never visit these other worlds, but our great triumph is that we know exactly what they are made of.

And yet the last laugh is with the Cosmos. Because overshadowing all our careful measurements and detailed catalogues is the knowledge that most of the material in the Universe does not emit any light at all. Not a mere cold cloud of gas, yet to ignite the nuclear fires that make stars shine. Not a region shrouded in shadow, hidden from the celestial grandeur that we see each night on Earth. But matter that generates no light. Matter that can never emit light. Matter that could be all around us and we would never see it. Dark matter.

The latest measurements from NASA’s WMAP satellite allow us to pinpoint the depth of our ignorance. For every tonne of normal material – molecules, stars, trees, people – the Universe contains 5.04 tonnes of dark matter. We, and the atoms we are made from, are in the minority. What is dark matter? Why is there so much of it? How was it formed? We don’t have even guesses that might try to answer these questions. We know that dark matter must exist, because, like all other material in the Universe, it generates gravity. The same fundamental force that holds us to the Earth, and that keeps the Earth in orbit around the Sun, is the only sign that dark matter is prepared to give us that it even exists. In fact, without the gravity of dark matter, galaxies could not have formed or held together. Particles of gas would never cluster closely together enough to make stars. We owe our very existence to this silent, invisible fluid that fills the Universe.

Although we cannot yet explain dark matter, we can use powerful computer simulations to visualise it. These incredible animations show us that the Universe is spanned by interlocking gossamer filaments of dark matter, millions of light years long. Normal material gathers whether the threads of dark matter join and interlock. It is at these intersections where galaxies form, and where stars are born, live and die.

And so the stars, we realise, are not scattered like random dust across the Universe. Rather, like trophies of some cosmological spider, galaxies have been carefully pinned onto the cosmic web at the positions where the dark matter filaments mesh together.

Our efforts to study the swirls and smudges continue unabated. But we now know that this glittering celestial display is only a tiny part of the story. And just as in the night sky, colour and light are what draws our initial attention to Giles Ryder’s work, but the true form and structure is in the reflections and invisible threads. Ryder’s pieces are not just held in place on their podiums and platforms by their own weight, but are bound together by hidden filaments into a complicated, much grander whole.

Bryan Gaensler, Sydney 2008

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Bryan Gaensler, Sydney 2008

Professor Bryan Gaensler is an astronomer and Federation Fellow at The University of Sydney.
Silver Strutter - (daze of disco), 2006
Neon, Transformer, Epoxi enamel on panel, timber
Image courtesy of John Buckley Gallery
Neon details image courtesy of Michael Swingle / Giles Ryder
Another autumn on mars, 2005
Metallic and pearlescent lacquer on hand rolled aluminium
Image courtesy of John Buckley Gallery

Blue spectral - (Casanova visits hell), 2006
Metallic and pearlescent lacquer on hand rolled aluminium
Image courtesy of John Buckley Gallery
Dazed and Blazed, 2005
Metallic and pearlescent lacquer on hand rolled aluminium
Image courtesy of John Buckley Gallery

Spectral Void, 2006
Metallic and pearlescent lacquer on hand rolled aluminium
Image courtesy of John Buckley Gallery
Installation image of the Speed of Night at Blockprojects, Melbourne, 2007.

Plasticising Glamour, Fluorochrome (Vapour Painting), Grand Cosmo Returns (Stargazers and Shoegazers)
Neon / Gold Frosted Light Bulb / Fixtures / Air Rated Foam
Paint / Plywood / Gold Mirrored Plinth / Transformers
Perspex / Mirror / Liquid / Aluminium / Panel with 2Pak Epoxy
Powerboard / Brackets
Image courtesy of Blockprojects

Spectral Vortex (Cherri), 2007
Hand-rolled aluminium and metallic auto paint with fixtures.
Image courtesy of Ryan Renshaw Gallery
Starburst float amongst the stars, 2008
Neon, transformer, 2-pack enamel on board, gold brackets
Image courtesy of Ryan Renshaw Gallery
left
Starburst (details), 2008
right (clockwise from top left)
Black is the Colour of You, Mirrorchromes - (Rose – she’s like lighting – it goes right through you), (Silver – space dust) (install view), 2008
Here Comes the Sound of Colours: (A notated structural wall relief), 2008
Coloured mirror, Perspex, MDF and fixtures. Dimensions variable Image courtesy of Art Doc.
Plasticising Glamour, 2007/08
Cellulite Soul (forget LA move to Miami) (detail), 2008
Black is the Colour of You [clouds and soundwaves for T.S.O.L], 2008
Neon, transformer, glitter, lacquer, silver brackets.
Installation image of Trans-Futures, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane, 2008.
Painting in Stereo [01/07]
Automotive paint on aluminium
Image courtesy of Ryan Renshaw Gallery
A Kind of Equivalence 1 & 2, 2007
Image courtesy of Art Doc.

Image courtesy of The Narrows
left
**FLOROCHROMES / GESTURAL AIR PAINTINGS: 2007**

FCGAPB
FCGAPM
FCGAPPS (silver spinner)
Pigment, aluminium rods, plywood, epoxy enamel, aerated foam
Image courtesy of The Narrows

Installation image of Work and Non-Work (Oscar Yanez and Giles Ryder), The Narrows, Melbourne, 2007
Image courtesy of The Narrows

below
Installation image of Some Kind of Electric, Peloton, Sydney, 2007
Image courtesy of Art Doc
There are only practices: expanded foam and cosmology in the work of Giles Ryder. In 2002, Bruno Latour, the distinguished sociologist of the natural sciences, wrote a text discussing the preponderance of representations in art, religion and science. The essay, ‘What is Iconoclash?’, concludes that for humans there may be no access to anything except via acts of mediation. Latour briefly speculates that overcoming this ‘disgusting’ realm of ‘impure but fascinating human-made mediators’ could make access to God, Nature, Truth and Science much more efficient and immediate.

The answer is probably no, because without the existence of conceptual frameworks to provoke reflection there may be no possibility of human engagement with anything. In any case, Latour asks, if human-made mediators are so dangerous why are there so many of them?

The effort invested in tearing down representations of other peoples’ belief and fact nevertheless underscores the cultural, political and social power of mediators, whether visual, material or alphanumeric. One way to subvert the truth of representations is to reveal their human origin. The strategy is the same for sacred icons, counterfeit photographs or scientific facts, the objectivity of the latter depending on the sense that they are equivalent with physical nature not the product of scientific paradigms and practices, especially if these are deemed to be incorrect. For Latour, however, the evidence of human work in the creation of representations—particularly when it involves great effort—may reinforce the significance of what they stand for. For instance, the cultural value of artistic representations derives from deep investment in individual skill and creativity when works of art are judged authentic. If there is a problem with attribution, this becomes another matter, suggesting why Latour ascribes the principal problem with representations to uncertainty ‘about the exact role of the hand at work in the production of a mediator.’

‘This, he argues, is ‘iconoclash’.

In all their viscous, fluoro and neon gorgeousness, Giles Ryder’s latest works remind us that science-based images of the world—at both the macro and micro-level—are not verifiable equivalents of the real, whether this is the reality of a bacteria, a gene, an exploding star or a black hole blasting photons into space. These are all things that can never be directly seen by people and what science knows about them can only be disseminated at the popular level through representations. Yet, as Bruno Latour astutely observes, ‘without huge and costly instruments, large groups of scientists, vast amounts of money, long training, nothing would be visible in those images. It is because of so many mediations that they are able to be so objectively true.’

Certainly, the more astonishing, human-produced, scientific images that are available, the more science appears to compiling a complete catalogue of the universe. However, the practice of visualisation in science, especially in astrophysics, isn’t about raw facts. It involves the use of high-powered computers to interpret and synthesize data from a range of sources. The results are fabricated digital images that incorporate elements of artistic interpretation to complete the available data, especially in terms of colour. Yet it is only through scientific visualisations that lay audiences can gain some access to the abstract and complex concepts of science. By contrast, the communication of research findings between scientists mostly employs non-visual techniques. Scientists can read coded data directly, thus having less need for its mediation as image, though various levels of mediation are still present. For instance, the characteristics of scientific proof determine that any single representation of data is only one element in a linked cascade of representational forms—arguments, diagrams, equations, formulas, instrument readouts, photographs, tables of figures, statements—the sequence of evidence being the thing that has meaning. As Latour explains in his book Pandora’s Hope, a single scientific image means nothing and refers to nothing.

Art’s role in recording and disseminating scientific data is a long and established one. Many artists have been inspired by particular scientific ideas, modernism often adopting science as a general model for human social and cultural progress. Recently, however, the paradigm of critical art has been directed against contemporary science, echoing its philosophical critique.
Jean-François Lyotard, for example, has argued that institutionalised science is characterised by illegitimacy, its earlier sense of the inherent value of knowledge (Idealism) and the potential of knowledge to secure human freedom and happiness (emancipation) overtaken by the need to deliver economic returns and support broad governmental agendas. 1 Bruno Latour has argued that science fails to see the world as a meshing of human and nonhuman elements and interests, leading to the unregulated development of human/nonhuman hybrid ‘monsters’ like atomic weapons and genetic engineering. 2

Giles Ryder’s current work harnesses forms and techniques central to art practice to address systemic conditions in science, broaching issues of the construction of knowledge, its methods and practices. However, his work not only advances a critical perspective on science. It also examines issues of contextuality in art. Two streams of work are represented in this exhibition. The first, earlier stream explores the links between abstraction and modernisation, where industrialisation generated a new, serialised mass culture that both inspired and challenged abstract art. The smooth surfaces and perfect forms that both inspired and challenged abstract modernism’s superseded restrictions on the human mind and the phenomenal world, developing, as Mark Freed explains, ‘a modern world view according to which humans are seen as independent of and autonomous with respect to a nonhuman (super)natural world.’ 3 Suggesting the adjacency of cultural and scientific worldviews, principles of autonomy and self-sufficiency were equally integral to modernist abstraction.

But modern art is now historical. Seen through the lens of history it doesn’t mean the same things anymore. Ryder’s work, for example, clearly represents as futile modernist efforts to establish discrete sets of aesthetic concerns, knowledge and techniques to separate the artistic disciplines from each other and thereby raise them above mass culture. In querying and contesting the practices of science, his latest line of investigation stretches modernism’s superseded restrictions on what art is and what it might be about. While his work accepts aesthetics and materiality as still foundational to art, these elements are used for crafting a commentary on the world, making it ‘concrete’ in physical and experiential terms for us as viewers. We can see the constructed, artificial world of scientific visualisations in the improvised fabrication methods, brash colours and gaudy surface of these objects. We can feel it in the uncertain way the objects sit on their spindly stands, the use of expanded foam seemingly ‘filling in’ the knowledge gaps.

Bruno Latour argues that for most people scientific images ‘are not even images, but the world itself. There is nothing to say about them except learning their message’. 4 In his latest works Giles Ryder highlights the differing knowledge systems, cultural models and auto-semantic strategies which scientists and the rest of us use to engage the phenomenal world. Conversely, these works add something to the representational repertoire of contemporary science visualisations. No matter how accurate and detailed the digital image, the phenomenon it captures, its physicality and being remain remote.

The consequence is that something of its value as evidence is lost. For most people, proof is deeply embedded in the affective experience of the ‘real’. In restoring physicality to what is usually delivered as digital information, Ryder creates an embodied relationship to other and inner worlds, the fascinating, oozing, hyper-coloured intensity of his works opening up the nature of scientific images to speculation and debate. In this he suggests that practices, whether in science or art, are just an approach to proposing questions and alternatives, not the equivalence of truth.

Carolyn Barnes, Melbourne 2008

Dr Carolyn Barnes is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, where she is involved in a range of research projects investigating the role of art and design in public communication.

2005 Master of Visual Arts, Sydney College of Art, University of Sydney
2003 Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours), Sydney College of Art, University of Sydney
2002 Bachelor of Visual Arts, Griffith University, Brisbane

Awards
2008 Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship
2007 ANZ Bank RIPE Emerging Artist Award
2007 Australian Postgraduate Award
2005 Zelda Stedman Young Student Scholarship
2004 Zelda Stedman Young Student Scholarship
2001 Griffith University International Experiences Incentive Scheme

Individual Exhibitions
2008 Dark Matter, John Buckley Gallery, Melbourne
2007 Trans-Futures, Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane
2007 Some Kind of Electric, Peloton, Sydney
2007 Light Works, Georgie Petelin Gallery, Gold Coast
2006 Neo Modernism, MSSR Projects, Brisbane
2006 GROK, John Buckley Gallery, Melbourne
2005 Metallic, Peloton, Sydney
2004 Fade in, Fade out, Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney
2003 3 Colours, Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane
2002 A Night at the Drags, Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane

Selected Groups Exhibitions
2007 Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship 2007, Artspace, Sydney
2006 Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship 2006, Artspace, Sydney
2005 Artists Against Sedition Laws, Casula Powerhouse, Sydney
2005 Straticulation, Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane
2003 Gene Pool, Modus Gallery, Brisbane
2000 Levtron, Campbell Mahony Exhibiting Space, Brisbane

Collections
Monash University Museum of Art
Artbank, Sydney

Giles Ryder
Dark Matter
28 May - 14 June 2008
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Studio image: afterspray with fluorochrome, 2006. Image Giles Ryder