

Laura Addison, *The Stars in Our Midst*, El Palacio, Winter 2006

THE STARS IN OUR MIDST

CONSTELLATION:

Erika Blumenfeld

Constance DeJong

Jennifer Joseph

By Laura Addison, Curator of Contemporary Art, Museum of Fine Arts

The idea for an exhibition often starts with a simple and sometimes even obvious observation that gets transformed and refined over time. This is the case with Constellation, featuring the work of Erika Blumenfeld, Constance DeJong, and Jennifer Joseph. The observation in this instance was that New Mexico has long attracted artists fascinated with its “quality of light,” and many artists work with light as their subject and medium—both in and outside of New Mexico.

Most famously, artists of the 1960s Los Angeles-based Light and Space movement, such as Robert Irwin or James Turrell, focused the viewer’s attention away from the object and to light itself—captured, reflected, refracted, or otherwise manipulated for the viewer’s experience. Dan Flavin’s minimalist fluorescent light sculptures or Bruce Nauman’s use of neon introduced artificial light as a medium and means of “sculpting” space as well. And photography, literally “light writing,” has always been preoccupied with the recording of light phenomena at its very essence.

Within this broad concept of light-based art-work, the notion for the exhibition narrowed to artists who order or created patterns of light in their work, much like an astronomer finds patterns in the night sky in the form of constellations. A constellation as a metaphor implies the locating of patterns in the natural world, and order where there seems to be none. Human civilizations have always looked to the stars for geographical and existential navigation, and considered celestial bodies a basis for cultural and agricultural practices and scientific inquiry. From the ancients to the moderns, the night skies have been a source of inspiration for many and New Mexico has its place in this history.

Evidence of the sophisticated astronomical studies of ancestral Puebloan cultures can be seen in the solar-based alignments of structures at Chaco Canyon; a modern counterpart, the radio antenna of the Very Large Array, makes its home in San Agustin, New Mexico, and allows researchers to map the skies for posterity. Unobstructed views and less light pollution give us the sense of greater proximity to the constellations and many an artist has come here on temporary or permanent pilgrimages for the New Mexico landscape—and by extension, the skyscape.

Erika Blumenfeld, Constance DeJong, and Jennifer Joseph don’t create literal interpretations of constellations; rather they choreograph interactions of light with other materials in order to organize light into patterns that have an affinity with constellations. Blumenfeld is a student of the skies; she creates “light recordings” in which she allows sunlight or moonlight to inscribe itself onto light-sensitive material. The resulting minimalist compositions distill photography to its absolute essence, “light writing,” by mapping light over a period of time. Her most recent body of work, Prismatic Refractions, a video installation that will be on display in the exhibition, moves even further “into the light” by using prisms as a vehicle for recordings that span from dawn to dusk.

Constance DeJong’s recent arc series uses copper to produce fiery compositions of light that feel like galaxies in miniature. Taking advantage of the reflective properties of copper, DeJong forms small “golden rectangles” of metal—small enough to fit into the palm of your hand—into arcs that direct light upward onto a white lacquered backdrop.

The compositions vary with the changing source and angle of light and with perforations that she makes into some of the arcs. The perforations assume different patterns that might resemble a grid, the flight formations of migrating birds, or stars in the night sky. And the light that emanates from those constellated perforations is like nature drawing itself into existence.

Standing amid Jennifer Joseph's site-specific installation of suspended Swarovski crystals is like being transported to the celestial realm and walking among the stars. Many of Joseph's sculptural forms invite associations with the natural world: a web, a nest, an egg, a network of organisms. While beautiful forms in and themselves, the sculptures come alive when light engages in dialogue with the materials she choose—from acupuncture needles to crystals. The crystal constellation makes you aware that patterns and systems and ordered chaos are all around us, even if invisible to us.

By their very nature, the works in Constellation are ethereal, diaphanous, and fleeting pieces that rely on light for their existence. Without light, Blumenfeld's prismatic projections disappear, DeJong's microcosms fade away, and Joseph's webs of wire and crystal lose their sparkle. It is as if the three artists partnered with light to allow it to draw, sculpt, and write itself into the viewer's consciousness.

EXHIBIT NOTE: Constellation: Erika Blumenfeld, Constance DeJong, and Jennifer Joseph opens at the Museum of Fine Arts on December 15, 2006, and runs through February 11, 2007.