

Leanne Herмосilla, *Limited Visibility*,  
Beam Contemporary, 8 June – 6 July 2013

Julian Aubrey Smith



Leanne Herмосilla, *Space and Time I*, 2013, oil on linen,  
35.5 × 40.6 cm, photograph: The Photography Department

Leanne Herмосilla's recent exhibition *Limited Visibility* comprised a multifarious array of objects hailing from the disputed territories between science and mysticism. Paintings of star-scapes, bottles of crystal-vibration infused water, hand-blown glass bulbs housing semi-precious stones, the artist's Reiki credentials and photographs of auras were all displayed with an aesthetic of neutrality that is typically attendant to

scientific enquiry and co-opted here for the 'display' of the metaphysical.

The paintings, entitled *Space and Time I–V*, are small and astonishingly intricate. These compositions of stars, galaxies, nebulae, etc., are, by the very fact that they are paintings, fabrications. The choices of size, number, placement and hue of the 'stars', were, I would suggest, made in service of producing pictures both beautiful

and convincing. Convincing, however, because they are reminiscent of the images familiar to us from astrophotography, particularly the Hubble Space Telescope. Astrophotography provides us with our sense of 'what space looks like', and yet almost all of what's shown in its images could never be visible to a human eye. These photos are fabrications too; the Hubble Space Telescope receives information to produce only black and white images, they are coloured for us afterwards. The Hubble website explains thus:

- Creating color images out of the original black-and-white exposures is equal parts art and science. We use color:
- To depict how an object might look to us if our eyes were as powerful as Hubble;
  - To visualise features of an object that would ordinarily be invisible to the human eye;
  - To bring out an object's subtle details.<sup>1</sup>

From here we get something like a *Noumenon* — the Kantian concept of the thing in itself rather than the thing experienced as phenomena via the senses (*Noumena* is also the title for one of the sculptural pieces in this show). We accept that a colourful nebula, shown to us by Hubble, exists, despite the only visible evidence being a photograph altered so that the nebula is visible. With this in mind, if a seemingly similar process led a person to accept the existence of an aura surrounding her own head, it would not seem such a giant leap. After all, seeing is believing.

At the opening of the exhibition, visitors were invited to consider just this, by having their aura photographed by a professional aura photographer, for the work: *Will You Show Me What You Mean?* As a person who generally views things of this nature with scepticism, it was with much incredulity that I put my hands on the sensor plates and faced the camera. In fact, I remember thinking what horseshit it was. In spite of this, once I was shown the developed image, I immediately felt a pang of disappointment — my aura was so dull and monochromatic. My partner's was almost as dark and unvaried as mine and, scepticism forgotten, we began speculating about the reasons: it had been a stressful week, she had

been organising a birthday, I had lost half of an imminently due essay. A friend, who had had 'pfff!' written all over his face, finally succumbed to the communal embrace of this novelty and put palms to plates himself. Upon seeing the ostentation of his aura, his derision was wiped away by delight. In a wonderful outcome for this work, his feeling that he had produced a 'good one' evaporated the scepticism that almost prevented his participation.

Post-exhibition, I partook of the option to receive a written reading of my aura photograph from a professional aura interpreter. My aura, being predominantly dark, red and contained (or 'drawing in to itself') was said to represent a temporary state of stress or anxiety that was unsustainable. The aura's 'drawing in' was to help me through this state, like an auric version of vasodilation — the flow of blood to an area of the body that needs it. The predictability of the symbolism — that a red cloud engulfing one's head represents stress — brought all the scepticism rushing back. However, that doesn't discount my initial need to have it explained, and that is what the work succeeded in illuminating. This laughable apparatus, plucked from its natural habitat of *MindBodySpirit* and assembled in the scrutinous environment of the gallery, became a machine that, very effectively, highlighted the human instinct to ascribe meaning.

And it is this instinct with which the exhibition conversed. Hermosilla released the New Age stalwarts — crystals, elixirs, auras, energy and the cosmic — from the cloying *Magic Happens* aesthetic. Lavished instead with thought, care, space and the respectful accoutrements of science, the works showed beautiful things orbited by entrancing ideas. Our beliefs are shaped by meaning derived from many sources and whether you consult Hubble or Mystic Meg, if you decide you're buying it, you're doing so sight unseen.

Julian Aubrey Smith is a visual artist and an MFA candidate at the VCA, The University of Melbourne.

#### Note

- 1 [http://hubblesite.org/gallery/behind\\_the\\_pictures/meaning\\_of\\_color/tool.php](http://hubblesite.org/gallery/behind_the_pictures/meaning_of_color/tool.php)

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COVER IMAGE  
Alex Vivian  
*Vibrant Scene Suggestion #1* (detail), 2013  
photograph: Christo Crocker

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