

KAREN SEWELL

Numinous Spheres

4 - 26 May 2021

Karen Sewell, *Numinous Spheres 4*, 2021, photogram
on Ilford matt FB, wooden frame 370 x 375mm

Room One

1

Numinous Spheres I - 5, 2021

photograms, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame

370 x 375 mm

\$950 each

2

Numinous Spheres (inter-stellar), 2021

giclee print from photogram negative

1443 x 1443 mm

\$1950

3

Pale Blue Dots 1 - 10, 2021

unique cyanotypes, wooden frame

370 x 375 mm

\$750 each

4

Pale Blue Dots 11 - 15, 2021

unique cyanotypes, wooden frame

370 x 375 mm

\$750 each

5

Pale Blue Dots (sun), 2021

unique cyanotype, wooden frame

345 x 345 mm

\$750

Room Two

Awakenings (Voice of the Earth), 2021

Installation: custom PVC sphere, helium,

nylon line, soundscape, lights

Sound credit source recordings: NASA

POA

*Framing services are available upon request

Room Three

Awakenings (Stellar), 2021

Installation, custom PVC spheres, helium, nylon line, soundscape, lights

Sound credit source recordings: NASA.

POA

Windows

Eye of God I (Helix Nebula), 2021

Sculpture, acrylic disc, photographic image, dichroic film, 450 mm diameter

Image credit: NASA images

\$750

Eye of God II (Helix Nebula), 2021

Sculpture, acrylic disc, photographic image, dichroic film, 550 mm diameter

Image credit: NASA images

\$850

Eye of God III (Helix Nebula), 2021

Sculpture, acrylic disc, photographic image, dichroic film, 450 mm diameter

Image credit: NASA images

\$750

Numinous Spheres 6 - 12, 2021

Photograms Ilford Matt FB

420 x 420 mm

\$1,250 each

About the Artist

Karen Sewell is a multi-media artist specialising in installation art. Sewell is interested in the intersection of art and spiritual experience, and aspires to create artworks that activate spaces for participants to be able to experience liminal moments of encounter with the unseen and unknown.

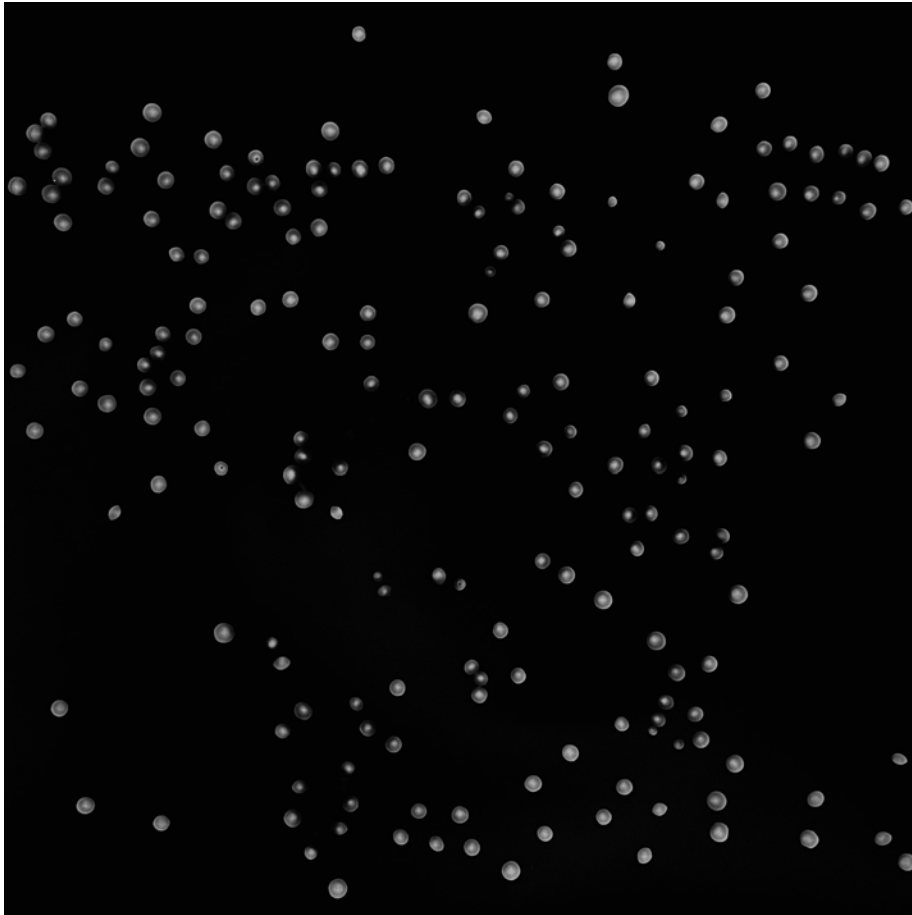
Sewell lives and works in Tamaki Makaurau, Auckland. In 2016 she graduated with a Masters in Fine Art with Honours from Whitecliffe College of Art and Design. Her work has been selected for multiple awards, including the New Zealand Portrait Awards and the Glaister Ennor Graduate Art Awards. She won the Premier Award of the Waitakere Trusts Art Awards in 2011, and is represented in private collections. She is the current artist in residence at the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Parnell.

Artist Statement

Numinous Spheres explores contemporary connections between art and spiritual experience through relationships between geometry, abstraction, colour, light and space.

The installations activate the gallery space with an invitation for viewers to experience the numinous through a geometric encounter with forms intended to suggest the cosmos, the transcendent and the unknown. The concept of the numinous speaks to the spheres of our experience which cannot be quantified, explained or contained, our intuition, our feeling states, connection to the cosmos - and for some, a sense of the divine.

The sphere or circle is the primary geometric symbol in this exhibition and relates to sacred geometries, which have long and layered histories. Galileo described sacred geometries as 'the language of the universe'. They exist in nature, architectural structures and art across cultures. Harmonics are related to the planets and their distance from both one another and the sun: 'the music of the spheres'. The sphere is a universal symbol and can represent wholeness, totality, the self, life and its cycles, eternity and the infinite.



Karen Sewell, *Numinous Spheres (inter-stellar)*, 2021
giclee print from photogram negative, unframed, 1443 x 1443mm

Levitation: The Recent Work of Karen Sewell

by Emil McAvoy



Final shot, teaser trailer for *Kenobi*, Star Wars television series, 2019.

The final shot of a recently released teaser trailer for *Kenobi*, a new *Star Wars* television series centred on the life of Obi-Wan Kenobi, features the Jedi levitating in the skies above a barren desert landscape. It reads as a thinly veiled reference to Christ's journey through the Judaeen Desert, where, while fasting, he is reported to have been repeatedly visited by the devil, whose temptations he refuses for forty days and forty nights. Following this spiritual test, the story goes, Christ returned to Galilee - enlightened - to begin his ministry.

In *Kenobi*, the bearded, longhaired Obi-Wan (Ewan McGregor) journeys through arid environments we might associate with the life of Christ, minus the spaceships (unless 'Jesus was an astronaut' theories are your thing). Obi-Wan hears voices and experiences visions which echo portrayals of Christ's path to divine revelation. The voices Kenobi hears are telepathic communications from other Jedi masters acting as spiritual guides. As is well known in popular culture, the Jedi both believe in, and seek to channel *the force*, an unseen energy permeating everything in the universe. It would appear the Jedi share a philosophy and practice grounded in occultism and the possibilities of mediumship and cosmic connection.

There are no biblical claims Christ levitated that I am aware of, however, there are representations of him floating supernaturally in the sky, and a number of Christian saints are reported to have done so, Saint Francis of Assisi among them. Historical allegations of its use in witchcraft also exist. In *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Paramahansa Yogananda claims the Hindu saint Nagendranath Bhaduri was able to perform this act through mastery of Astanga Yoga. Kenobi's cinematic levitation - made possible by his channeling of *the force* - can be seen to represent a triumph over adversity and a supernatural transcendence of gravity and apparent human limitations. Here, the lens captures Obi-Wan from behind, looking out upon the land which grounds and sustains him, just as he hovers high above it - body and mind, land and spirit, earth and cosmos in divine equilibrium.

The extraordinary popularity of the *Star Wars* universe is also testament to the medium of cinema, (alongside others such as art and literature), as an important avenue to express humankind's deep desire to explore new and alternative possibilities of being in the world. In our current age, the pervasiveness of rationalist-materialist philosophies act to frame, bind and dominate what humans are collectively permitted to conceive and perceive as 'reality' and often relegate what might be broadly described as the spiritual to the imaginative realms of fiction. Hence, alternative realities, or those which might contradict or conflict with our current consensus reality are often first imagined and tested within the arts, where they may operate with a greater degree of cultural safety as speculative and imaginative propositions.

History, however, also confirms the glacial creep of such speculative propositions and alternative practices into the realm of consensus reality. In recent years, the scientific establishment has begun to espouse the benefits of meditation from an empirical basis grounded in contemporary neuroscience. Orthodox science appears to have finally caught up with what it once widely dismissed in mainstream western culture as a 'hippy' and later 'new age' phenomenon, now recognising practices which the ancients - across all parts of the globe - knew centuries ago as lived experience. Thank God we have the arts.

Recently I have been reflecting on these broad, complex and contested ideas in relation to the work of local artist Karen Sewell. Based in Tamaki Makaurau Auckland, Sewell's work is motivated and informed by spiritual concepts and histories, coupled with a direct engagement with specific sites. Sewell works across a range of media including sculpture, photography, painting and participatory projects. My attention here is predominantly focused on her recent installations that appear to float in space, alongside a series of recent photographic works intended to evoke the idea of levitation.

Sewell is an artist of faith and identifies as Christian, though keen to stress her openness to, and interest in, other spiritual belief systems, traditions and practices. In terms of New Zealand art history, while one might consider Colin McCahon's painterly evocations of a divine presence inhabiting the New Zealand landscape as a key precedent, for example, McCahon was no uncomplicated believer. His oeuvre can also be seen as an endless struggle with personal faith and doubt, particularly through the prism of biblical scripture. In the final years of his life, McCahon appears to have succumbed to doubt (echoed, for some, in his late works), and to Korsakoff's syndrome, a form of dementia likely accelerated by a long term struggle with depression and decades of alcoholism. However, McCahon can also be seen to hold open a space for the possibility of numinous experience in the face of doubt - whether his own, or his vocal critics. For this writer, McCahon's triumph can be felt in selected paintings that evoke a visceral sense of the divine, beyond the paint on canvas and what is represented. They walk the talk.

In contrast, Sewell suffers from none of the restless tensions that both drove and haunted McCahon's enterprise. Instead she creates from a place of self-assurance. She also attempts to listen to subtle inner guidance from unseen forces. While this may sound strange to some, it can be considered as simple as meditation or prayer, and being open to what may appear in the spaces these practices can open. "Use the force", as they say.

Her series *Awakenings* (2020-) is comprised of round, custom-made inflatable plastic balloons filled with helium which float freely in space, often installed in low-light environments and lit with an array of coloured lights. While the installations are constructed of readymade materials we might associate with the industrial or domestic, the colourful spectrum of reflections cast by their surfaces also suggest a range of possibilities. The series points towards the heavenly bodies of stars, moons and planets, and the sacred geometries of the celestial realm. The title alludes to an awakening of mind or spirit, echoed in the sculptures' glow that illuminates their surrounding darkness.



Karen Sewell, *Awakenings IV*, 2020, installation, Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell, Auckland Art Week, custom pvc sphere, helium, nylon line, organza mesh. 2000 x 2000 x 6000mm. Photo courtesy of Sarah Wilson @sarahwilsonwrites

In Sewell's recent installation, *Awakenings IV* (2020), a shrouded spherical form was suspended in the nave of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Parnell, Auckland, a site of worship and sacred space with cultural and historical significance. In the West, churches were, of course, the primary venue for encountering art for centuries, though they have long given way to more secular gallery and museum spaces.

Sewell's installation drew attention to these histories of sacred spaces as sites which offer an encounter with art and the spiritual in communion. Her engagement with contemporary materials and installation strategies also attempts to reconnect audiences with the possibility of a spiritual experience in the present - completing the circle, if you will. Alongside histories of the spiritual in art, the *Awakenings* series can also be connected with art historical lineages as eclectic as Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (1965), a suite of helium-filled silver balloons released into the streets of Manhattan, and Martin Creed's *Work No. 329, Half the air in a given space* (2004), an installation at Michael Lett's former gallery space in Auckland featuring a room overflowing with hundreds of coloured party balloons. Sewell's work, however, is more interested in levitation influenced by ideas of ascension and transcendence, and conduits between the material and ethereal realms. Sewell is always inviting the viewer to look and think beyond the material - and into the realm of feeling - in order to experience the possibilities of wonder.

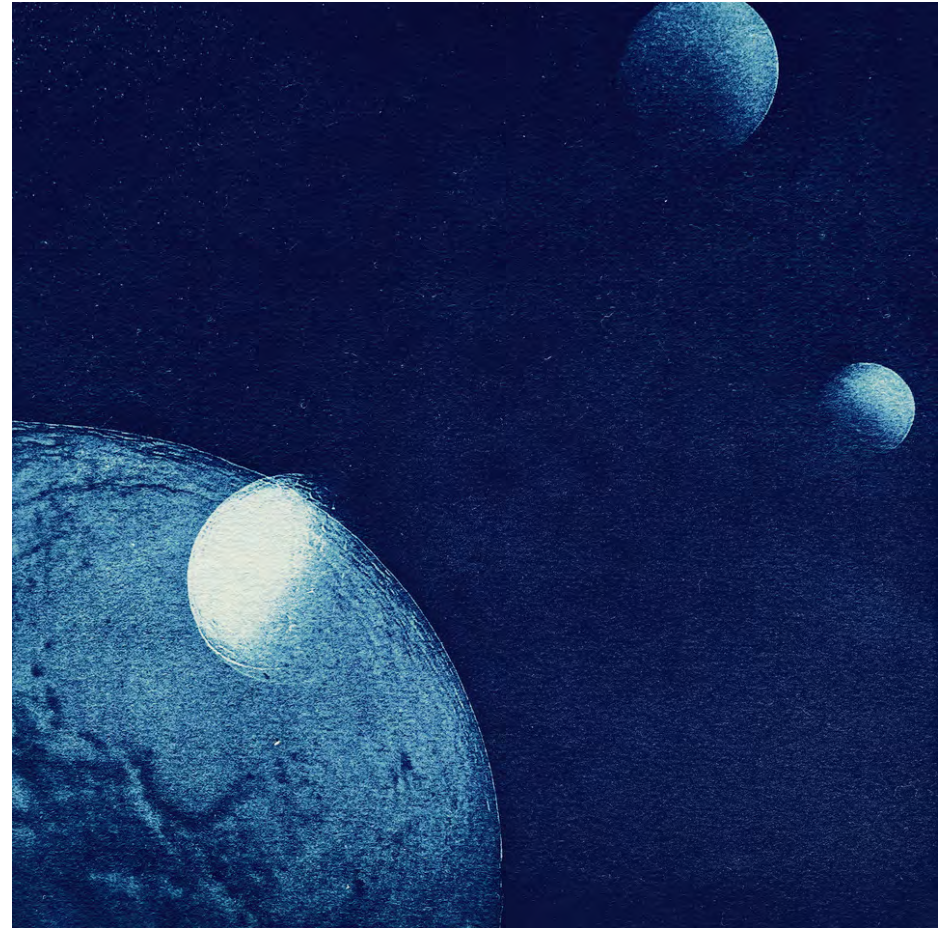
In counterpoint to the artist's invitation for viewers to transcend the material - as one might be invited to suspend disbelief in a film, perhaps - Sewell also foregrounds the materials themselves. This is perhaps most salient in two new series of photographs which accompany her installations in the exhibition *Numinous Spheres* at Northart in Auckland. An eponymous series of photograms re-cast readymade polystyrene balls as celestial bodies hovering in deep space, which also appear to orbit one another according to their own laws. These polystyrene balls were sourced from a family style do-it-yourself model of our solar system, a pedagogical aid repurposed into the raw material of an art project. Joined by marbles and a paperweight, the resulting compositions evoke the heavens, and for some, perhaps the earliest photographic representations of our solar system. They are accompanied by *Numinous Spheres (inter-stellar)* (2021), an enlarged print derived from a photogram comprised of polystyrene balls found in a beanbag.

The model solar system components also appear in *Pale Blue Dots* (2021), a series of cyanotypes which evoke the surface of our moon, or barren, rocky planets. Within the set of fifteen prints, the artist also slips in an image of our sun sourced from NASA which has been reprocessed as a cyanotype. Viewers are implicitly prompted to guess which one, while perhaps also reflecting on how hard it is to spot the difference.

Collectively, Sewell's recent installations and photographs suggest images of outer space are inseparable from our concepts and representations of the heavens, bound up in our attempts to comprehend them - and that art, science and spirituality are inextricably linked. Further, the artist's foregrounding of her materials offers a potential spiritual experience in the everyday. For Sewell, the cosmic is right here, right now.



Karen Sewell, *Awakenings IV*, 2020, installation, custom pvc sphere, helium, nylon line, organza mesh, Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell for Auckland Art Week 2020, 2000 x 2000 x 6000mm. Photo courtesy of Artsdiary



Karen Sewell, *Pale Blue Dots 12*, 2021, cyanotype, wooden frame, 370 x 375mm

Awakening Numinous Experience Immersion in the Spheres of Karen Sewell

by Tamar Torrance

Every now and then, we enter the presence of the numinous and deduce for an instant how we're formed, in what detail the force that infuses every petal might specifically run through us, wishing only to lure us into our full potential.

- Mary Karr

The term 'numinous' derives from the Latin *numen*, translating literally to "a nod of the head" after the figurative nodding or assent of the 'divine head'.¹ In this gesture toward the presence or will of divinity, 'numinous' speaks fundamentally to qualities of spirituality, mystery and otherworldliness. This term was given its contemporary sense by theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto, who used the 'numinous' to express non-rational, religious or spiritual experience. While described as "non-dual, non-sensory experience or feeling, whose primary and immediate object is outside of the self," the 'numinous', as conceptualised by Otto, is perceived from *within* and presents itself as '*granz Andere*' - wholly other; "that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures."²

Many contemporary thinkers have since extended Otto's ideas on the numinous beyond this religious framework. Though indisputably transcendental to Otto's mind, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung drew numinosity into the realm of immanence, positioning this phenomenon instead as a manifestation of the psychological more so than the wholly. Beyond religion, the numinous became an expression for spiritual experience as it arises in a multiplicity of forms, from dreams and wandering states of introspection, to sensations of embodiment, interpersonal relations, and even feelings of connectedness to the wilderness.³ This phenomenal understanding of numinosity speaks to way in which the ethereal is expressed, and indeed manifests, in the everyday, and the connective threads tying together the seen and the unseen, the physical and the metaphysical. Despite arising from 'within', the numinous is therefore ingrained in a *sense* - whether this be tacit or explicit - of something beyond and inexpressibly greater than the 'self', though to which the 'self' is inexplicably tethered.⁴

It is this *sense* that Auckland-based artist Karen Sewell channels through her body of work, aspiring to awaken potential for numinous experience through reference to the cosmos. In her most recent installations at Northart, a series of PVC spheres are floated with helium and suspended on threads. Levitating and radiant, these structures take on a celestial appearance, recalling extraterrestrial bodies and interstellar territories.



Karen Sewell, *Awakenings (Stellar)*, 2021, installation at Northart, May 2021
custom PVC spheres, helium, lights, sounds

In *Awakenings (Voice of the Earth)*, the space is dominated by a single cyan globe and flooded by similarly coloured light. Upon entering viewers are engulfed by a sea of blue, concentrated to such a degree that it takes on a near corporeal density. In the adjacent installation *Awakenings (Stellar)*, a constellation of iridescent spheres is lit by polychromatic LEDs, transitioning between colours to transform the space into a galactic prism. Animated by their gaseous contents, Sewell's spheres exist in a state of flux, stirring in the presence of visitors and ever shifting through the gallery space. Celestial connotations are furthered carried by sound recordings from deep space that permeate these environments. Sourced from NASA Voyager spacecrafts - decoded from electromagnetic vibrations - the cosmic refrains reverberate amongst and assimilate with the installations to conjure sensory evocations of our cosmos.

Sewell stages these evocations as a means of grounding numinous experience in cosmic wonder. However, while cosmic imagery may evoke the numinous as a concept, it is through sensorially and physically absorbing viewers that a numinous *experience* may be aroused. Light, colour and sound draw the surrounding space into Sewell's work, engendering an immersive environment within which the shifting fields of light and harmonics of deep space envelop viewers in a multi-sensory experience. At once surrounded and surrounding, the installations confuse the boundary between viewing subject and viewed object, in a bid to suspend viewers' self-awareness. In this moment, awareness of 'self' as distinct from 'other' dissolves, collapsing the subject-object boundary and momentarily rendering outward-directed perception indistinguishable from inward-directed introspection.⁵

When immersed in art, consciousness is therefore liable to unmoor from the anchor of self-awareness, to become suspended and free-floating in a seamless flow between the mind, body and environment. Such thinking resonates with Eastern philosophical traditions of thought advocating the transcendence of self-other dichotomies, dissolution of the ego, and experience of 'centreless' consciousness.⁶ Likewise, one may find Western phenomenological insights that surfaced at the *fin de siècle* subscribed to a similarly non-dualistic approach to conscious experience. Sewell describes this state as *liminal* - derived from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold' - in a gesture towards the transient, unfixed and undefined boundary between the 'what was' and the 'next'; a state in transition and with untold potential for transformation.⁷ Through immersion in Sewell's installations, viewers may enter into such liminal states and *experience* the numinous; what Otto defined as 'numinous feeling' or 'numinous consciousness'.⁸ Jung conceptualized this experience as an alteration of consciousness that traverses the personal unconscious to evoke spiritual power.⁹

In this liminal state, or 'alteration of consciousness', the numinous - that which is inexpressibly greater than the 'self' - may assimilate, however transiently, with one's sense of being. The experience ensuing this exchange has potential to manifest in sensations of awe, fascination, a sense or feeling of divine wonderment, and perhaps at times, a terror akin to the sublime. Otto identifies the terror or *tremendum* aroused by numinous experience as "the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures."⁹ Sewell's celestial installations may therefore inspire *tremendum*; this dread aroused in the face of that which is inconceivably vast (the cosmos is infinite after all) such that the 'self' is obliterated and lost to insignificance. 'Zunichte-werden'¹¹ 'becoming nothing'. A haunting notion indeed.

However, Sewell endeavors to instead ground numinous experience in feelings of monistic *oneness*, channelling Otto's *mysterium* (mystery) and *fascinans* (fascination) to evoke wonder and awe despite the fear. There is nothing of the chasm or abyss in Sewell's installations. They are full - full of light, colour and warmth - blanketing spectators in this encounter so that they are free to entertain cosmic sublimity without threat of erasure. This is cemented by Sewell's interest in sacred geometry, with special attention paid to the sphere or circle. In sacred geometry, spheres or circles can represent the cyclic nature of life, divinity, wholeness, totality and infinity. These shapes and forms are emblematic of concepts of interconnectedness and inseparability central to monistic and non-dualistic philosophies, and as such speak to an essential unity between the tangible and intangible, corporeal and ethereal, physical and spiritual. Sewell's spheres embody the threads connecting the seen to the unseen, and those that by this law tether the 'self' to the 'whole'. In this way, immersion in her installations arises as comforting and nurturing; signaling a return to the maternal embrace of materiality and inviting one to contemplate - and indeed, experience - their own interconnectedness to the cosmos and thresholds beyond.

In the face of current ecological threats such as global warming, however, these installations remind also that this relationship is tenuous, and to be sustained at all costs. Sewell calls for efforts to nurture our connection to the natural world, drawing on the theological concept of *tikkun olam* - a Hebrew term associated with Kabbalah that translates loosely to 'for the sake of repairing the world'. Her installations therefore manifest spaces within which to reinvigorate non-dual conscious experience as a reminder of our inseparability from the world around us. Encouraging viewers to grasp their own immanent place within this world (and certainly, those beyond) may be seen to signal the first meaningful step towards such restorative efforts.

¹ Charlton and Short, "A Latin dictionary: founded on Andrew's ed. of Freund's Latin dictionary." Alternatively, Robert Schilling asserted that the "numinous" was rather derived from the Greek 'neuma', which "signifies the manifestation, will or power of a divinity". (Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 21.)

² Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 12-30.

³ Punita, "Numinous and religious experience in the psychology of Carl Jung," 125.

⁴ In this suggestion, Otto ascribes numinous experience the potential to evoke "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*" - fearful and fascinating mystery. (Sarbacker, "Rudolf Otto and the Concept of the Numinous.")

⁵ Nechvatal, "Towards an immersive intelligence," 418.

⁶ Nondualism stems from various Eastern religions including Hinduism and Buddhism - and is therefore conceptualised slightly differently depending on which religious school of thought one subscribes to. However, at the root of nondualism - 'advaita' in Hinduism or 'advaya' in Buddhism - is the dismissal of dualistic conceptions of consciousness. Max Müller likened nondualism to monism, a philosophy contrary to Cartesian traditions of thought which rejected the mind-body dichotomy. See David Loy's *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* for further reading.

⁷ Richard Rohr, "Liminal Space: Introduction."

⁸ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 137 (referenced in Nörenberg, "The numinous, the ethical, and the body. Rudolf Otto's "The idea of the holy" revisited," 549.)

⁹ Yoon, *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Idea of the Numinous*, 27. (See this source for a contemporary reading on concepts of the numinous and art.)

¹⁰ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

¹¹ Otto, *Das Heilige*, 66.0

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Karen Sewell, *Awakenings (Voice of the Earth)*, 2021, installation at Northart, May 2021
custom pvc sphere, lights, sounds, Northart, May 2021, 6300 x 7600mm

Numinous Spheres: Soundscapes

Music of the Spheres

(Sound mixed from NASA *Voyager* recordings)

This unique series of soundscapes is created from original *Voyager* recordings of the electromagnetic 'voices' of the planets and moons in our solar system. Although space is a virtual vacuum, this does not mean there is no sound. Sound exists in space in electromagnetic vibrations. The sounds you hear are from decoded information on interactions of the solar ionic wind, the planet's magnetosphere, plasma wave phenomena and interactions between the planet's ionosphere and magnetosphere.

The specially designed instruments aboard the space probes were designed to pick up and record electromagnetic vibrations. This information, when sent back to Earth and decoded, can be heard as intriguing and beautiful sounds from space - the real music of the spheres. Original recordings have then been woven together into the unique sound scape that can be heard in the installation.

Numinous Spheres Online

You are invited to respond to this installation on the online platform Instagram.

To participate simply visit the page *Numinous Experience* https://www.instagram.com/numinous_experience/

Click on an image from the *Numinous Spheres* installation that you are drawn to, then record an impression or feeling or liminal moment - your experience of the numinous. You are welcome to record a comment or a reflection - write as many or few words as you wish to. Thank you for your participation.

@numinous_experience

PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

Join us

Saturday 16 May, 1-2pm

Conversations with the Artists

Jessica Douglas and Karen Sewell

Saturday 22 May 11am-1pm

Artist Workshop

Make your own Lumen Print
with Jessica Douglas and Karen Sewell

The artist wishes to thank:

Northart Directors, Jessica Pearless and Jonathan Organ
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Graham Sewell
Peter and Jessica Crothall
Lynda Coombes
Megan Shaw
The Black and White Box
Homestead Framers
Mark Pierson
PCL