

## Public Programmes

### Join us

**Saturday 11 June, 2pm - 3pm**

Conversation with the Artists

Free

**Saturday 18 June, 1.30pm - 3.30pm**

Artist Workshop with Karen Sewell

\$20 pp

**Saturday 2 July, 1.30pm - 3.30pm**

Artist Workshop with Rozana Lee

\$20 pp

RSVP via [staff@northart.co.nz](mailto:staff@northart.co.nz)

### The artist wishes to thank:

Northart Directors, Jonathan Organ and Jessica Pearless

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Michael Rua

Mark Pierson

Rod & Alison Sewell

The Black and White Box

Homestead Framers

Graham Sewell

Lynda Coombe



LUMINARY  
LŪWĪNĀBE

KAREN SEWELL

24 May - 2 July 2022

List of Works

Entry wall

1. *Numinous Spheres (Dark green, soft pink)*, 2021  
giclée print from lumen negative, Ed of 10 (2 AP's)  
760 x 780mm  
\$2,300

Left side wall

2. *Numinous Spheres 1-5*, 2021  
photograms, Ilford matt FB, wooden frames  
370 x 375  
Set of 5 \$3,500  
\$750 each

Back wall

3. *Solar Portal*, 2022  
giclée print from lumen negative, wooden frame, Ed of 10  
640 x 790mm  
\$2,500

4. *Dawn to daybreak -36° 51' 51.20" S 174° 52' 11.79"*  
*E Taylors Hill 10/11, 2021*  
giclée print of lumen, wooden frame, Ed of 10  
640 x 790mm  
\$2,500

5. *Sunbow 3*, 2022  
giclée print from lumen negative, wooden frame, Ed of 10  
640 x 790 mm  
\$2,500

Video

6. *In-between*, 2022  
Video, 6mins, 44secs

Video documentation including a time-lapse of the installation process of the *Luminary I Luminae* presentation at Palazzo Bembo in Venice, will also play on Northart's digital screens near the entrance to Gallery A and is viewable 24/7.



We have long been interested in the experience of wonder, but attention has recently shifted to the materiality of wonder. Indeed, materiality is strong in Sewell's works although the invitation to touch the object is withheld. Just as we cannot touch an altarpiece when we visit a church today, we cannot touch Sewell's spheres - a combination of the convention of galleries and contemporary art and indeed the height of the levitating object itself. But the tangible physical element of worship in early modern engagement with altarpieces precipitated touching, kissing, crying. For medieval Christians, the marvellous and miraculous entered life in miracles, divine communication and prodigies in their communities.<sup>2</sup> Art and architecture played a significant role in mediating the miraculous. However, not all devotional experiences or objects are or were ones of awe and scale. For example, an early sixteenth-century prayer bead - just six centimetres in circumference when closed - suggests the significance and space of a sphere. Its inside offers rounded carved scenes of the adoration of the magi, the crucifixion, the adoration, and Adam and Eve in Paradise (Figure 4). Such rosary beads, which were designed to be held in the hand, emphasised the tactility of devotion, the repetition of touch as well as viewing.

*Luminary* | *Luminare* offers a creation story for the twenty-first century, drawing upon a deep lineage of art historical exploration into wonder, life and death and the discoveries of astronomy and geometry. Even without knowing their art historical context, these works speak in a visual language that is universal - able to span temporalities and cultures. The circle, sphere or orb and its internal light are familiar and wonderful.

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1. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 1150-1750 (1998), 13.

2. *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 61.

**Figure 4:** *Prayer Bead with Adoration of the Magi and the Crucifixion*, early 16th century, Boxwood, 5.8 x 5.5 x 5.6cm (closed), 11.2 x 8.1 x 2.7cm (open), Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917.

## Sculpture

- |   |         |
|---|---------|
| 7. <i>Luminary (Pole Star)</i><br>steel sphere<br>1200 diameter | \$7,900 |
|---|---------|

## Purple front wall

- |   |         |
|---|---------|
| 8. <i>Celestial Event Series (Sunbow 3)</i> , 2022<br>lumen, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame<br>340 x 460mm        | \$700   |
| 9. <i>Celestial Event Series (Solar Portal 2)</i> , 2022<br>lumen, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame<br>340 x 460mm  | \$700   |
| 10. <i>Celestial Event Series (Sunbow 2)</i> , 2022<br>lumen, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame<br>340 x 460mm       | \$700   |
| 11. <i>Celestial Event Series (Solar Portal)</i> , 2022<br>lumen, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame<br>340 x 460mm   | \$700   |
| 12. <i>Celestial Event Series (Sunbow 4)</i> , 2022<br>lumen, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame<br>340 x 460mm       | \$700   |
| 13. <i>Celestial Event Series (Sunbow 1)</i> , 2022<br>lumen, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame<br>340 x 460mm       | \$700   |
| 14. <i>Celestial Event Series (Solar Portal 3)</i> , 2022<br>lumen, Ilford matt FB, wooden frame<br>340 x 460mm | \$700   |
| Set of seven  | \$4,700 |



**Exhibition Statement:**

Taking *Luminary* on tour while the presentation is showing in Venice opens the potential for dialogue, connections and opportunities across the two separate but connected projects, linked by histories of contemporary art and faith, and sites of worship.

The presentation of *Luminary* in Aotearoa tours the project to three unique and significant sites of worship – St Pauls DunedIn, New Zealand’s only entirely stone Cathedral, a widely acclaimed architectural award-winning contemporary space of worship in Christchurch Oxford Terrace Baptist, rebuilt to replace the ruins of the original building from the earthquakes of 2011. The third site in Wellington, St Johns Presbyterian, is a gothic period heritage building constructed entirely of wood, and one of only three of this type in New Zealand.

Sewell’s foregrounding of the everyday materials of her works construction also suggests moments of access between the material and the intangible. Photographic works are lumen prints made at the dawn of day. These recast found and everyday materials (polystyrene balls from a do-it-yourself set of our solar system and glass paperweights) as celestial bodies hovering in deep space. The resulting compositions evoke the cosmos, and for some, perhaps the earliest representations of our solar system.

The sound component in this installation is created from NASA Voyager recordings made in deep space around the planets and moons of our solar system. This information, when sent back to Earth and decoded, can be heard as enigmatic and intriguing sounds from space – the music of the spheres. Sewell’s interest in levitation, a quality suggested by her suspension of forms appearing to hover in space, is influenced by ideas of ascension and transcendence, and conduits between the material and ethereal realms. She aspires to draw viewers’ attention to look and think beyond the material – and into the realm of feeling – in order to experience the possibilities of wonder.



Figure 3: Stefano della Bella, *Galileo Galileo en drie Muzen*, 1656, etching, 21 x 15cm. Rijksmuseum.

Scale is significant when considering the connection between wonder and the sphere. *Luminary* | *Luminare* astonishes through scale and the appearance of levitation. Sewell's spheres are often installed in religious houses like churches or cathedrals, or indeed secular spaces like an art gallery, spaces that she activates to inspire similar experiential awe and behavioural reverence. Her activations explore the relationship between contemporary and abstract art and spiritual experience, each work offers new stories depending on its context. When Sewell's works are exhibited in holy environments, they echo the memories and activities of worship, embodying a feeling that is often known only internally. Yet an interest in her art transcending from the material into the ethereal realm has several historical and art historical references. These floating spheres are inspired by cosmic forces and astrological knowledge as well as biblical reference. The delicate veil covering Sewell's orb draws on the iconography of Jesus Christ's shroud which covers his body after the Crucifixion, suggesting that her orbs may have corporeal and ethereal properties. Transcendence in a religious context refers either to the Ascension of Jesus Christ on the fortieth day after his Resurrection or the Assumption of the Virgin Mary's body and soul into heaven after her life ended on earth.

Combining spiritual and numinous wonder with an exploration of the known natural world was also the preoccupation of the early modern period, and Sewell's influences stretch from Galileo Galilei's understanding of the universe to the NASA voyager recordings of recent space exploration. When a publication of the life of Galileo was printed in 1656 the frontispiece depicted the famous astronomer alongside personifications of his three muses: Astronomy, Perspective and Mathematics (Figure 3). This engraving combines the cosmic with the aesthetic, and artistic perspective with the scientific and mathematic. As the father of Western sacred geometry and a capturer of the wonder of the universe, Galileo can be cited as a strong influence on Sewell's practice and knowledge. Sewell's lumen prints are touched by light as one might be touched by a spiritual encounter or by a sense of wonder. Their form is produced without literal or sensual touch, by an intangible and natural actor.

## About the Artist

Karen Sewell is a visual artist working across photography, sculpture, installation, video, sound and light. Sewell is interested in the intersection of art with spiritual experience, in particular, human experiences of the \*numinous.

Sewell lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. In 2016 she graduated with a Masters in Fine Arts 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 Awards. She won the premier award of the Trusts Art Awards in 2012, and is represented in private collections internationally and in New Zealand. She is the current artist in residence at the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Parnell, Auckland.

## Artist Statement

*Luminary* | *Luminare*, explores contemporary connections between art and spiritual experience through relationships between geometry, abstraction, colour, light and space. Sewell creates artworks in unexpected and alternative exhibition spaces such as sites of worship - as well as gallery spaces - that offer the viewer the potential for an experience of the unseen and unknown. The exhibition includes the use of spherical and circular forms in sculptural and photographic works, which reflect Sewell's interest in celestial bodies and sacred geometries.

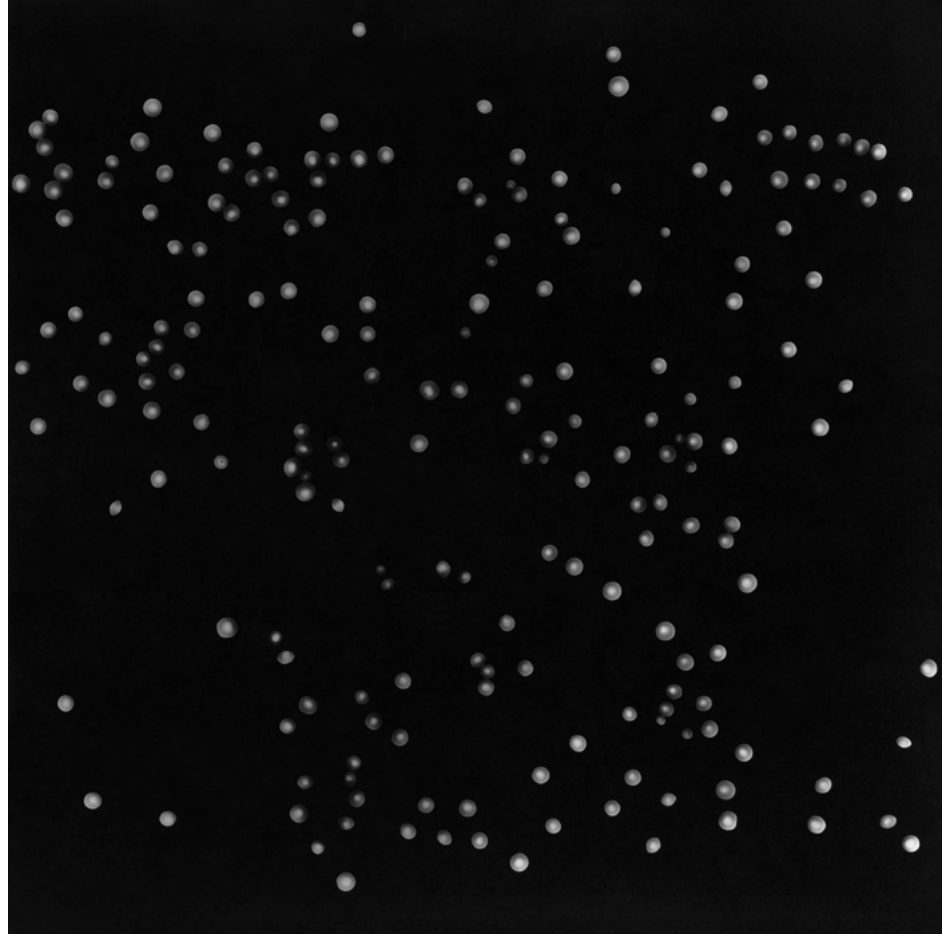
Here, the original use of the term 'luminary' references natural light-giving bodies, cosmic or celestial. A luminary can also be a person who inspires or influences others, especially one prominent in a particular sphere.

*Luminary* | *Luminare*, is concurrently showing in Venice, Italy, in the 6th Edition of the ECC Biennale at Palazzo Bembo, Venice, until 27 November 2022, and is also touring Aotearoa New Zealand's four main cities, beginning at Northart Gallery.

This presentation is a multi-media immersive installation, including two suites of photographic works, a sculptural component, sound and video. It is a new site-specific iteration of *Luminary*.



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



## Numinosity In the art of Karen Sewell

by Tamar Torrance

Figure 2: Giovanni di Paolo, *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise*, 1445, tempera and gold on wood, 46.4 x 52.1cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.



Luminary | Luminare is a new entry in the lineage of wondrous art and sacred geometry in Western art history. Visual and material culture have long been used by artists and patrons to activate spiritual and devotional experience. While Karen Sewell's practice is informed by faith and spirituality, her works also speak to the experience of wonder. Wondrous objects have historically marked the limits of the natural world while a sense of wonder occupies the liminal space between the known and the unknown.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers, scientists, and artists of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries were fascinated with attempts to understand and recreate wonder. Likewise, Sewell intends to instill feeling and create liminal moments for her viewers (Figure 1). In positioning Sewell's work within the tradition of Western art history (c.1400 - 1700) and the lineage of both wonder and sacred geometry, we can better understand the contributions of contemporary and abstract art to numinous, wondrous experience - a fascination of which has not faded over time. The visual language of sacred geometry, which holds the circle or sphere at its centre, is universal across cultures and temporalities but will be considered here in the context of early modern religious art in Europe. The special attention paid to the sphere in such art represents the cyclical nature of life - divinity, wholeness, totality, and infinity.

Sewell's oeuvre speaks to the story of creation and divinity, life, light and the earth. When the Sieneese artist Giovanni di Paolo painted *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise* in 1445, he conceived of the universe as a celestial globe and circle (Figure 2). At the centre of the circle is the earth, surrounded by a series of concentric circles that represent the four elements, the known planets (including the sun according to late-medieval understanding) and the constellations of the zodiac. One of the concentric circles near the centre is red, however, the outer rings are the same vivid azure and lapis lazuli blue that Sewell has used in her practice. The inheritance of sacred geometry and the lineage of colour which Sewell draws upon aligns us all too, as viewers, whether consciously spiritual or not, in an interconnected tradition. It is an almost unbroken line, indeed perhaps a circle, between di Paolo's creation painting and Sewell's *Luminary | Luminare* which speak to the weight of the sphere as embodying the unity between the tangible and intangible, corporeal and ethereal, physical, and spiritual.

*"Humanity stands in absolute power in the space between the individual and the cosmos. In the face of this plenitude of power, we become transmuted into plenitude of being."*

- Jungu Yoon, *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Idea of the Numinous*, p.51

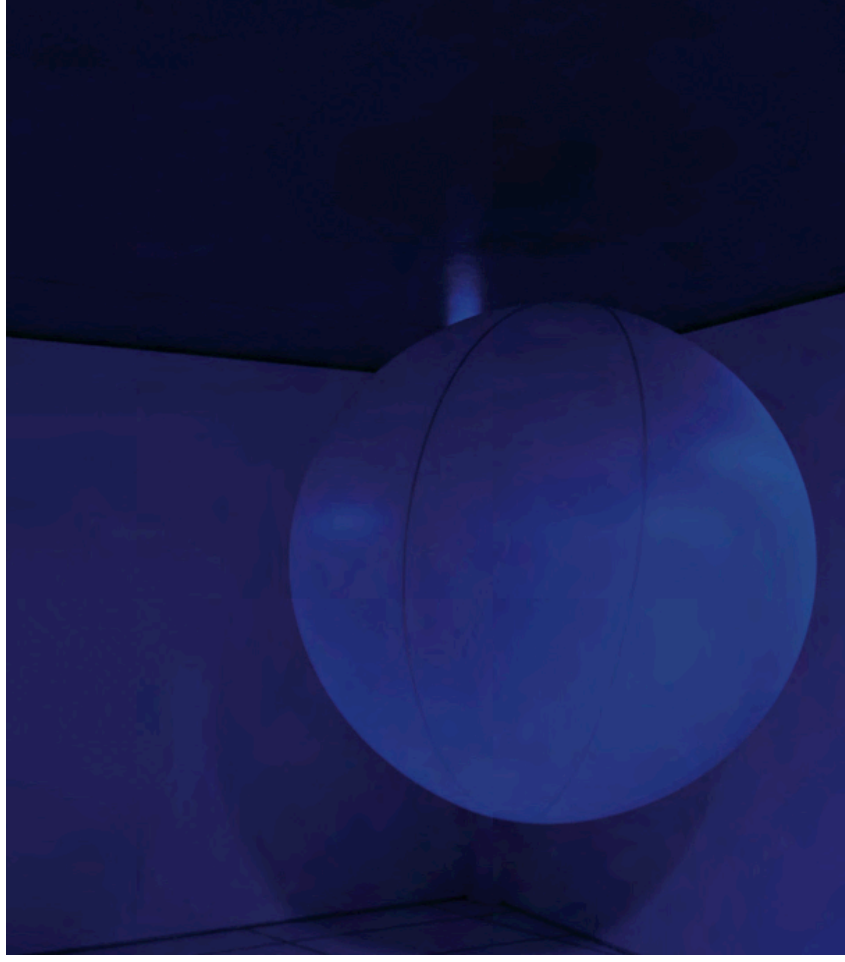
For centuries, artists have been captivated by the allure of spirituality; a fascination with the metaphysical, the mystical, and other-worldly which has transcended historical, cultural, and geographic boundaries. While historically expressed through faith or religious doctrine, the contemporary art scene has seen growing interest in spirituality beyond piety, giving rise to an out flux of artists in pursuit of far broader permutations of the spiritual. Karen Sewell can be counted among such artists. Based in Tamaki Makarau, Auckland, New Zealand, Sewell's diverse practice explores notions of spirituality through the prism of the 'numinous', a term derived from the latin 'numen' which translates etymologically to "a nod of the head" after the figurative nodding or assent of the 'divine head'. In this gesture toward the presence of divinity, numinosity too has previously been enmeshed with religion; an association advocated by theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto, who conceptualised the numinous in his *Das Heilige - The Idea of the Holy* - as analogous to ecstatic religious experience. Though arising externally to the 'self', Otto described numinous feeling as perceived from within and presenting as 'das ganz Andere' - wholly other, "that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures." However, 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 holy. 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 connection with the natural world.

The numinous is therefore a wearer of many faces, and it is this malleability that makes the term apposite across various expressions of spirituality. However, whether a manifestation of divinity or psychology, of the transcendent, the immanent, the ethereal, the material or the spaces in between, the numinous speaks, fundamentally, to a *sense* of something beyond and inexpressibly greater than the 'self', though to which the 'self' is inexpressibly tethered.

It is this sense that has allured Sewell throughout her practice. In recent years, Sewell's interest in numinosity has manifested by way of cosmic wonder, with the artist seeking to evoke numinous experience through reference to the humbling immensity of our universe. *Luminary* | *Luminaire* signifies the apotheosis of this interest, a sculptural installation that transmutes the gallery into an immersive microcosm of our galaxy. Harmonics of deep space - sourced from NASA Voyager spacecrafts and decoded from electromagnetic vibrations - permeate the site, reverberating amidst a nebula of lights that stir and coalesce to form galactic patterns of colour and energy. Toward the centre, a lustrous sphere levitates among the shifting lights, draped with a translucent organza. Aligning the walls, images of celestial bodies and interstellar territories envelop the installation, inviting viewers to traverse the spaces imagined. In this encounter, contemplation of the cosmos is inescapable, and potential for numinous experience boundless.

*Numinous Spheres* presents a suite of ten black and white photographs, created through a unique and often mercurial process involving the confluence of chemical emulsion and light. Cast from the shadows of objects trapped in photosensitive paper, the images depict a constellation of quasi-planetary bodies. As though the boundary between form and formlessness has been rendered suddenly tenuous, their edges appear illusory, and solidity precarious. Perhaps, at any given moment, the forms will morph or dissipate entirely, only to then separate once again at an unexpected place and time.

Against an impenetrably black sky, these spheres sing with a startling radiance as though spelling the moment of an intense revelation or manifestation. By contrast, the surrounding void is saturated with nothingness, an unknown and unknowable space. Across various permutations of faiths and philosophies, the void, and the emptiness it describes, evokes a place of genesis and creation rather than one of absence and desolation. In the space between stars, the blackness beholds a realm of infinite potential, a liminal threshold between the boundaries of what was and what will be, within which all is un-fixed, undefined, and infinite, perpetually in transition with untold potential for transformation.



*Karen Sewell, Awakenings (Voice of the Earth), 2021, installation, custom sphere, helium, sound, light, sound. Sound credit source recordings: NASA. Photo courtesy of Sam Hartnett.*

## The Lineage of the Luminary Wonder and the Sphere in Early Modern Art History (1400-1700)

by Megan Shaw



Where *Numinous Spheres* heralds an all-encompassing darkness, Sewell's lumens radiate with the light of the sun, the works created *en plein air* at daybreak and named after the dawn. As the sun crests over the horizon, its light makes contact with the photosensitive paper, staining the surface an incandescent wash of colour. In this series, saturation of colour becomes its own entity, a distillation of elemental power and spiritual luminosity that transcends reference to materiality. Nevertheless, Sewell's lumens vibrate with presence, as though vessels of pure kinetic energy, embodiments of passion, power and vitality that bring forth life from the void.

As energy signatures of the dawn, the lumens bear strong symbolist associations, ingrained in notions of newness and awakenings that carry across religious and philosophical contexts. The sun rises in the east, bringing with it the light and illuminating the sky, before completing its journey in the west, and casting the world back into darkness. This pattern is akin to the cyclic nature of being, wherein the light of life is forever entwined with the darkness of death, transitioning infinitely between one another. In this way, the sun itself is a model for existence, an expression of life's great cycle wherein night and day, light and darkness, life and death flow together and know no distinction.

This notion of sublime interconnectedness resonates throughout Sewell's cosmic imagery. Beyond simply describing the cosmos, these portrayals speak to the ontological oneness of materiality, at once evoking the ether and the earth. It is this sense of cosmic unity which takes physical shape at the centre of *Luminary | Luminare*. An iridescent orb occupies the altar of the exhibition space. Lit by polychromatic LEDs and floated with Helium, the installation recalls a celestial body, levitating, radiant and accompanied by a cosmic orchestra. Sewell describes this work as embodying the boundary between the heavens and earth, signified by its gossamer veiling that shifts beneath the lights, translucent and permeable. Across great many religious doctrines and faiths, the veil speaks to states of awakening, whereby the lifting of the veil signals a lifting of a boundary, whether between oneself and their God, between oneself and enlightenment, or indeed, the boundary partitioning the seen from the unseen.



Karen Sewell, *Luminary | Luminare*, 2022, installation view, Personal Structures Exhibition, Palazzo Bembo, Venice Italy.

Though symbolism may evoke cosmic interconnectedness as a concept, it is through physically and sensorially immersing viewers that a *sense* of interconnectedness may be aroused. Light, colour and sound draw the surrounding space into Sewell's work, engendering an immersive environment within which prismatic fields of light and harmonics of deep space envelop viewers in a multi-sensory experience. Confusing the boundary between viewing subject and viewed object, *Luminary* | *Luminary* suspends distinctions between 'self' and 'other' in a bid to render outward-directed perception indistinguishable from inward-directed introspection. In this moment, consciousness unmoors from the anchor of self-awareness to become free-floating in a seamless flow between the mind, body, and environment. Sewell describes this state as *liminal* - derived from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold' - in a gesture towards the transient, unfixated, and undefined boundary between being and non-being.

Immersed in *Luminary* | *Luminary*, viewers may enter into the liminal spaces imagined, traversing the personal unconscious to *experience* the numinous. As the mind wanders, the present is transcended and viewers may access the void held within *Numinous Spheres*, caress the threshold between form and formlessness, follow the dawning sun as it cycles across the surfaces of Sewell's lumens, or assimilate with the artist's luminary sphere. Amidst this alteration of consciousness, the numinous - that which is inexpressibly greater than the 'self' - merges, however transiently, with one's sense of being. In theory, such an experience has potential to inspire terror akin to the sublime - what Otto described as *tremendum*, "the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures". However, Sewell instead grounds the numinous in feelings of monistic *one-ness*, channeling Otto's *mysterium* (mystery) and *fascinans* (fascination) to evoke wonder and awe despite the fear.

There is nothing of the chasm or abyss in *Luminary* | *Luminary*, it is *full* - of light, colour and warmth - blanketing spectators in this encounter so that they are free to entertain cosmic sublimity without threat of erasure. Embodying the threads connecting the seen to the unseen, and those that by this law tether the 'self' to the 'whole', immersion in Sewell's cosmos 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.



Karen Sewell, *Luminary* | *Luminary*, 2022, installation view, Personal Structures Exhibition, Palazzo Bembo, Venice Italy. Photo credit: Lorenzo Pasadonna Scarpa