

## Footnotes

1. Chee Chee Leung, "Rocky ways to secret of skies," *The Age*, August 2, 2008.
2. Catherine Evans, email interview, March 3, 2014.
3. Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds," *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Claire H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1957): 11.
4. Ibid, 13.
5. Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
6. Ibid, 42.
7. Ibid.
8. Christopher Tilley. *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2004), 25.

## Image (cover):

*Constellation II*, 2014  
Catherine Evans, ballpoint pen on paper, 21 x 30cm

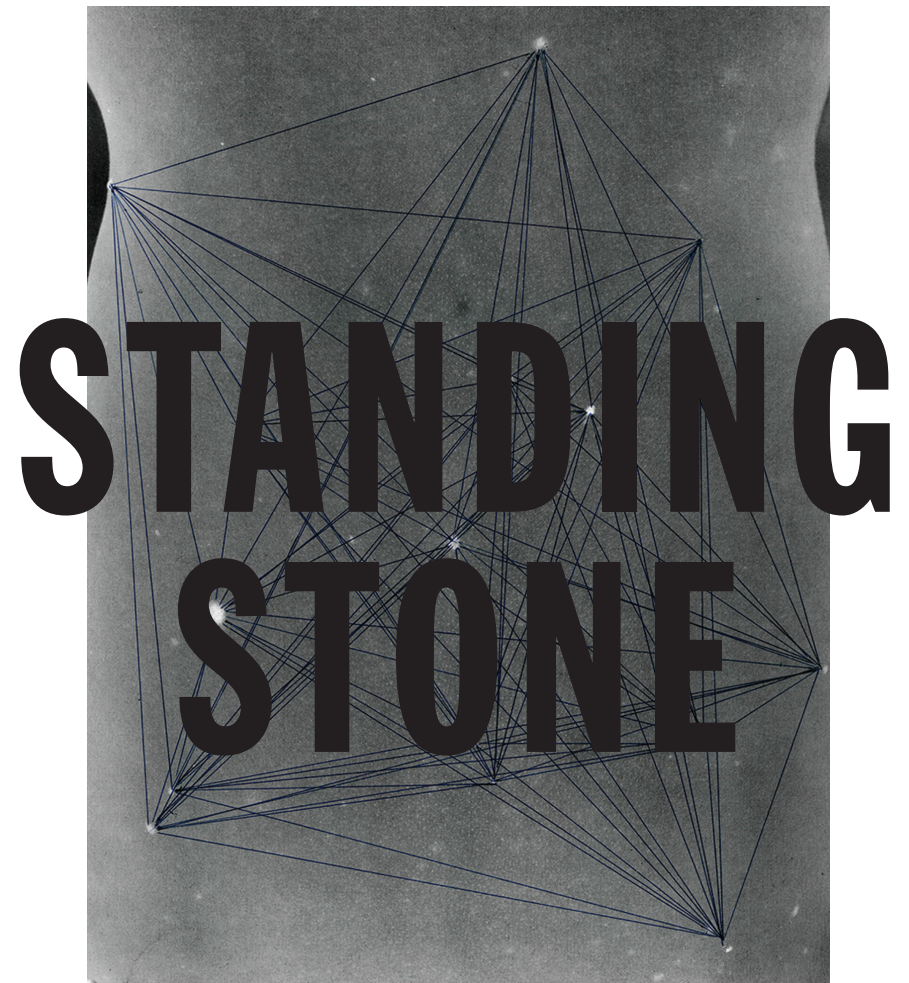
This exhibition and research took place on the lands of both the Wurundjeri and Wathaurong people who have been the traditional custodians of these lands for thousands of years, and whose sovereignty was never ceded.

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30 Apr–17 May  
2014

## CATHERINE EVANS



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# BLINDSIDIS

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# BLINDSIDIS

# WITH THE UNIVERSE AT OUR BACKS

Artist talk:

Saturday 10 May 2.30pm

We have long looked skyward, consumed by a desire to arrange celestial bodies into pictures. Sometimes these formations are difficult to see amid the city's night-haze of light and pollution. Yet, on a drive out of town, these cosmic arrangements come into view. Constellations describe a visual relationship between groups of stars, which, over time, become culturally recognisable. To make a constellation, a dreamer must draw a line from one bright body to the next: the stars implicated in this formation need not be close to one another in reality, but merely form a visual engagement when viewed from an Earthly vantage point. For millennia, ancient cultures have made these connections, constructing apparitions in the ether that recall existential stories. However, these cosmic sketches have also served as insightful gauges of time.

In the volcanic plains of Western Victoria—the third largest of its kind in the world—lies a geological constellation. It is an Indigenous 'map' made of ancient stones, named by the Wathaurong people as Wurdi Youang. This egg-shaped arrangement is relatively humble in size, and up until recently was thought to be an initiation site. However, Wurdi Youang is now being considered a geological record of equinoxes and solstices, with each stone set at a considered angle, marking the movements of the sun over time<sup>1</sup>. For artist Catherine Evans, this cosmic calendar held within it a latent agency that was both intimate and expansive. Through its very construction, the Indigenous peoples of the area had used a prehistoric material to articulate a schema that connected themselves, and their activities, with the unreachable workings of the universe: "I find the contrast in time scales at this site fascinating—that on the one hand we have an ancient time scale of the land (geologic), and on the other the human time scale, which in comparison is only a blip"<sup>2</sup>.

In Evans' current exhibition, *Standing Stone*, the artist has used rocks from the plains nearby Wurdi Youang to recreate a constellation of markings found on her own body. The layout for these marks was initially realised on an inverted black and white photograph Evans took of her back: in this image, her usually pale skin appears darker than its illuminated blemishes. Using a biro and ruler, moles and freckles were connected with diagrammatic lines, just as planets, stars and dark nebula are drawn to one another in astronomical illustrations. In the exhibition, this exact configuration of blemishes is re-presented using volcanic rocks in a sculptural installation. Across the walls and floor, each point is connected with a gleaming line of transparent cello-tape.

Here, two seemingly opposing containers of time—the body and the universe—are depicted as insulated, yet reflexive, systems. Just as skin imperfections are reminders of age, trauma, exposure and adaptation, the individual rocks at Wurdi Youang are conscious notations of the sun's movements in the sky. Each rock or blemish represents a passed event that, in conjunction, forms the schema for a cosmos. Although more commonly understood as the extraterrestrial zone outside the Earth's atmosphere (and therefore, outside of ourselves), the etymology of 'cosmos' is derived from the less-boastful 'ornament': a sphere seen as ultimately expansive is reined into a handheld trinket. This oscillation becomes an underlying consideration in Evans' new work, as temporality swings between what is known, even embodied, and what is all encompassing.

In understanding these holistic systems, we can draw on biosemiotician Jakob von Uexküll's concept of 'umwelt'. Umwelt describes the 'phenomenal world' or 'self world' of an animal, as shaped by a series of functions necessary for survival. These sets of functions are programmed to suit each specific organism, creating a harmonious motion, or pattern, for existence. In consequence, all animals, from the simplest to the most complex, are fitted into their unique worlds with equal completeness: "A simple world corresponds to a simple animal, a well-articulated world to a complex one"<sup>3</sup>. From this theory, both the humble body and the celestial sphere could be seen to exist within an umwelt, or environment, tuned to its innate processes.

In Evans' work, it is the configuration of a constellation that represents these sets of motions as markers on a temporal scale. For example, the blemishes found on our bodies, or the rocks moved by Indigenous people at Wurdi Youang thousands of years ago, exist in perfect accord with each organism, or system's, relative lifespan. That could be a sunspot the artist developed one summer, 17 years into her life, or the fusion of gases that combined to form a star 13 billion years ago in the Milky Way's galactic halo. As Uexküll explains, the animal or subject *creates time* through its own set of harmonious processes, no matter how simple or complex: "Instead of saying... that without time, there can be no living subject, we shall now have to say that without a living subject, there can be no time"<sup>4</sup>.

The visualisation of these essential movements is euphonious. Feminist and cultural theorist Elizabeth Grosz articulated Uexküll's umwelt as nature set to counterpoint<sup>5</sup>. In her interpretation, the environment works in a similar way to a musical melody, following a set of instructions that can be syncopated with another. She recalls one of Uexküll's most examined specimens, the tick, describing the way in which it "lives in a simplified world, a harmonic world of its own rhythms and melody"<sup>6</sup>. This melody, according to Grosz, is composed of the animal's umwelt, as the conjunction of its three most vital processes: moving up a twig following the warmth of the sun; smelling the butyric acid expelled from the sweat of an animal; dropping onto the animal to suck its blood. In turn, the tick becomes what she describes as "a connective, an instrument"<sup>7</sup>.

This musicality is innate within Evans' new work. Here, rocks intonate the room, propped at varied heights like notes on musical score, while reflective tape connects the specimens to one another in directional locomotion. Flesh-pink geometric shapes, made from unprocessed (and still-processing) photographic paper, provide platforms for rock-relics: two materials accumulating time at vastly different rates. Just as the vision of celestial space seen at night expands our image of the natural world, the constellation found on the artist's back is magnified out into the gallery as an assemblage that connects ancient time with personal time. It is within this singular temporal frame that the intimate (that nebula-birthmark on your wrist) is a reflection of the processes that, even now, evade us (tangible stars imagined into dream shapes).

Consequently, *Standing Stone* envisions landscape as a phenomenological site, where the body and the universe share the same harmonic processes. As British archaeologist Chris Tilley explains, to perceive landscape as phenomenological resists any precise topographical boundary: as we have seen, landscape in its holistic form—as a cosmos—can transcend terrestrial limitations. Instead, he perceives landscape as "embodied sets of relationships between places, a structure of human feeling, emotion, dwelling, movement and practical activity"<sup>8</sup>. In this way, Evans presents a landscape that is both intimate and expansive. Just as the celestial exterior looks down upon us, it shifts into us, reflecting back the documents we make. These documents are many, printed on our bodies and arranged in sophisticated groupings in the environment. The constellation, therefore, flips and folds, not just across a horizontal plane, but vertically, between what is cast in the night sky and its earthen recollection.

Laura Skerj is a Melbourne-based artist and writer.  
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