

Katie Paterson (born 1981)

Scotland

Fossil Necklace 2013

170 carved rounded fossils, strung on silk
Courtesy of the artist

Katie Paterson is fascinated by time. All kinds of time – evolutionary, geological, astrological, glacial, light speed. Time, in a variety of modes, is the material she organises in various ways to help an audience stuck in the ‘now’ consider the ineffable ‘then’ of the past and future.

One of Paterson’s most remarked-upon projects involves the planting of a forest on the outskirts of Oslo, Norway to create *Future Library*, 2014–2114. Right now, 1000 sapling spruce trees are growing, which in 2114 will be harvested to provide the pulp that will make the paper to print the books that are currently being commissioned and written. Speculation fiction writer, Margaret Atwood has written a book, so too fantasist, David Mitchell, as well as Elif Shafak, Sjón, Han Kang and Karl Ove Knausgård. Each year another author will provide a story and submit it to the library, which will remain unread until the project has been completed. *Future Library* is an act of faith – neither artist nor many of the writers will see their work come to fruition. Even Paterson’s recently born child may not live to see the project’s outcome.

Paterson must believe that the Future Library Trust, established to care for the project, continues to be supported by the Norwegian government, community and writers – even have faith that the concept of paper printing will still be viable in the year 2114. That the forest will survive climate change. That developers will not see a land-grab opportunity. That people are still interested in books and can read. There are many unknowns, huge possibilities, many fallibilities that one can imagine.

Paterson knows only too well that matter and time change. That what seems stable now may become the rubble of the future, that all that is solid melts into air and all that is certain might turn to dust. But she is also inspired by the resilience of material and its capacity to hold time.

As an embodiment of this thought, and acknowledgement of deep time, Paterson has made an object of epic, epochal and millennial dimensions. Paterson’s *Fossil Necklace*, 2013 has been 3.2 billion years in the making. It comprises 170 spherical beads carved from fossilised material strung on a single strand. Like small planets, each ball holds its own micro-system and geological history in its material. It spans time, evolution and extinction on Earth, from the first-single cell life form, to multi-celled organisms. It presents our fragile, mutable planet as diverse, floating, drifting and part of an evolving DNA from Europe, Java, Africa, Alaska and more.

Contemplating such an object – ancient, intricate and so full of geo-DNA, strung together like a massive opera-strand of pearls – we are able to ruminate on the incredible diversity of life on Earth and the extraordinary drama of geological incidents that have produced such beauty, colour and variations. Integral to the various orbs are evidence of volcanic disruptions, meteorite collisions, botanical emergence, continental drifts and zoological developments.

During the Covid-19 isolations there has been a boom in stargazing and the contemplation of the cosmos as people have sought a bigger picture and some comfort in seeing farther and future worlds. By contrast, Paterson’s necklace allows us to see time compressed into orbs which are awesome in their relative dimensions. At both ends of the time-space spectrum is the realisation that we exist in vast time and space and represent but a minute spec of life. Paterson’s necklace permits us the opportunity to understand, too, that life goes on, changes and evolves – cataclysmic events produce new life forms, shifts in landmass migrate nature, and sometimes things become extinct and reach their end of life.