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Sarah Sze's cosmic constellation: 'It could be dashed away in a moment'
The American sculptor's work is so celebrated that France opened its borders to her mid-pandemic. Yet her largest ambition is to show the fragility of Earth itself

Andrew Dickson



Constructive period ... Sarah Sze in Paris with her installation, Twice Twilight, from her show Night Into Day. Photograph: Ed Alcock/The Guardian

One click and the image on my laptop judders. When it reasserts itself, I'm looking at what appears to be an explosion frozen in time. Glittering embers hang impossibly in mid-air while images slither across: a glimpse of blue sky, rainbow refractions, a knife scraping yellow chalk.

I'm in London. Sarah Sze – who is trying to give me a flavour of her latest creation via her iPad – is inside the Fondation Cartier in Paris, where she and her assistants are erecting the installation, her first there for over 20 years. She walks through to the next room and passes the camera over a bright-white circle of crushed salt on the floor, surrounded by tiny piles of scrunched-up tin foil and bottles of water.

These are astonishing and somewhat perplexing visions, perhaps more so over a wonky Zoom connection. But then with Sze (pronounced Zee) it's often so. The US sculptor creates spectacles that defy interpretation, and often gravity as well. She's made planetariums out of overhead projectors and desk fans; created installations from sleeping bags, gravel and disco balls; filled

the stairwell of a Japanese museum with a tornado-like sculpture that has swept up chunks of plastic, plants and tape measures.



Salt circle ... Sze's new sculpture Tracing Fallen Sky in Paris. Photograph: Ed Alcock/The Guardian

Sze, who talks 19 to the dozen, is herself a kind of tornado, albeit an intensely thoughtful one. It's hard to predict what objects she will scoop up, and what shape they'll be in when she sets them down. "I'm interested in the idea of sculpture as a tool to understand where we are in time – in the world, you know?" she says.

Sze's new work at the Cartier is in some ways a meditation on what life has been like for millions of us in 2020: a world broken into fragments that we're still trying to piece together. Entitled *Night into Day*, it is technically two pieces: an illuminated, planet-like structure hanging in one room (Sze has a thing for planets); in the other, a floor sculpture over which a pendulum lazily swings (she has a thing for pendulums, too).



An intricate detail of Twice Twilight. Photograph: Ed Alcock/The Guardian

Walk around and you'll see colourful projections of videos culled from the internet, multiplying biological cells, card tricks, a garden slowly growing: images that seem to speak to life in quarantine. The piece has been planned for years – Sze accumulates ingredients slowly – but came together when she was locked down with her two kids and husband in New York.

She explains that the images she's assembled reflect how, through the pandemic, we've accessed more and more of life via our jewel-coloured screens. Also how, for some of us at least, time and space melted into a meaningless blur: Zoom encounters with friends or colleagues in distant time zones, remote pub quizzes and school lessons, none of it actually real. "In our household," she says, "there's, like, Zoom meetings with China going on, someone's trying to

make dinner. It's all happening at once. Time and space flip, become blurred."

Back in March, Sze was about to head to the airport to install another exhibition in Paris when the borders were abruptly sealed. For this new one, she had been planning until a few weeks ago to supervise the installation remotely, just in case. "I really didn't know whether I was going to be able to come at all. So that's kind of exciting." Aren't US citizens still banned from entering the EU? She laughs. "They had to say that I was absolutely necessary, to put up this crazy thing."



Images in Refraction (West) 2019. Photograph: Genevieve Hanson/Sarah Sze

Lockdown, it turns out, was a constructive period. Sze set up an improvised studio in her basement, and explored printmaking. She also worked on charity projects for homeless people in New York and struggling artists, and was able to install another piece at LaGuardia airport. Hundreds of photographs of the sky above New York are pinned to an aluminium-and-steel lattice that looks weightless, yet comes in at five tonnes. "I've been very lucky," she says. "Making the work didn't really stop – just the logistics changed."

Nonetheless, Covid-19 has been inescapable – not least because her husband is Siddhartha Mukherjee, the cancer specialist and author whose 2010 book *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* won the Pulitzer prize for general non-fiction. "You become intimately involved with whoever's in your home and their work, don't you? It's been incredible to watch – the urgency of trying to come up with solutions, solve extremely difficult scientific questions."

Often people think of Sze's assemblages in architectural terms – even as a kind of anti-architecture, in which humdrum objects float improbably in space or form rigorous and esoteric

configurations. People have compared them to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, both spontaneous and powerfully exact, or Russian constructivist sculptures. Although they often resemble natural forms such as clouds or waterfalls, in the words of the critic Laura Hoptman, "they do not describe something that is, but rather illustrate the way that something behaves".

Sze thinks of what she does as a kind of science model, or experiment – a means of interrogating space by using objects, many of them found. An installation might be planned for years, and carefully sketched out, but until she gets wherever she's working she doesn't fully know how she wants to respond. Often, she's arranging pieces of wire or tiny stones just hours before the show opens. "To me, it's about monumentality, it's about physicality, it's about materiality, but then also ephemerality. It could be dashed away in a moment."



'Sze thinks of what she does as a kind of science model' ... Timekeeper 2016 (Rose). Photograph: Sarah Sze Studio

There's something about the way the pandemic has brought home the complexity and fragility of life, its vulnerable interconnectedness, that makes Sze's work feel newly relevant. She frowns at this. "You make the work that you do and you don't always know where it comes from. You're connected to the times, but there's a ton of deep connection that you don't even know how to explain."

Born in 1969 in Boston, Sze started out studying architecture (her father is an architect), but switched to fine art, and has often shuttled between the two worlds, reluctant to be pinned to either. Her breakthrough show came in 1996, when she filled a tiny Soho space with hundreds of minuscule sculptures made from toilet paper and shaped with her own saliva. Arranged on metal shelves, they looked like bleached animal bones in some otherworldly natural history museum.

In 2003, after years of hectic work – sometimes four or five installations a year, each painstakingly site-specific – she was awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant. The wider world encountered her a decade later, when she represented the US at the 2013 Venice Biennale, creating sculptures that exploded out of the soberly neoclassical American pavilion as if unable to be contained. "Anyone reading a list of items in her complex installation might think it was ... what to pack for an unusual Outward Bound trip," remarked the New York Times, of the paint cans, napkins, gaffer tape, espresso cups and much else.

Can she remember them clearly once they're done? "I love doing shows in other countries where I leave and then I never see it again," she replies. "But when I do see a work from a long time ago, it's fascinating because I remember the decisions made, exactly the moment that I made it."

What does her home look like? Is it all drawers of paperclips arranged by size and jeans folded away in precise shades of blue? She laughs, and reminds me that she and Siddhartha have kids. "I think I used to be much more aesthetic. Now I'm just completely practical. Like, 'Where do I put my keys?'"

Though what will happen to the art world over the next six months is unknown, Sze has plenty on her plate. An installation at the Guggenheim in New York was meant to be happening this month, but has been pushed back to 2023; this autumn, she'll create a 10-metre-wide permanent outdoor work for the Storm King art centre in upstate New York. Entitled *Fallen Sky*, it will have echoes of the piece in Paris – a reflective steel circle, like an image of the Earth ruptured into fragments or drowning in rising water. She's increasingly preoccupied with how her work relates to the environment – another complex structure, vulnerable and beautiful. "If you could model the world in a way that people saw how fragile it is..." she says, leaving the thought hanging.

She and her technicians have worked from 8am until midnight over the last four days, desperate to get everything finished before Paris goes into curfew. "Everything's changing!" she says. Then the screen judders again and she's gone.