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Light and lines

Portraits by
David James

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When **Kāryn Taylor** made the move from designer to artist she found herself more interested in questions than answers.

Claire O'Loughlin talked to her about the universe, light, and finding her voice.

Kāryn Taylor wants you to question reality, to see it from different angles. Her clean lines and precise use of light and materials feel pure and elemental. Taylor's work is almost shocking in its minimalism. I feel drawn to it the way one is drawn to simple, functional design. But unlike design, she says, it isn't about function or what it achieves, but rather the questions it asks.

The distinction between design and art is a precise one for Taylor, who had a career in design before developing as an artist. In many ways, she says, the two fields are opposites – 'as a designer, you're looking for the answers. As an artist, you're opening up the questions.'

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But she credits her years as a designer with helping her to understand shape, colour, line, and weight and how to balance them precisely to create a clarity of visual solution. This precision is evident in all her work.

Taylor has been consumed with art and design ever since she can remember – painting, drawing, everything. ‘I was always hogging the kitchen table,’ she laughs. This kitchen table was in Dunedin in the 70s and 80s, in a creative home. ‘My father was very creative with woodwork and did some painting. Both my brothers were creative, but neither of them were consumed by it like I was.’

Her interest in the universe developed in tandem with her art obsession, and for her the two have always been entwined. She began reading books on metaphysics and

quantum physics when she was 13 years old – ‘I’ve always been interested in the relationship between the nature of consciousness and reality.’

This relationship is evident in her wall works especially. In *Field Notations*, which was exhibited in 2017 at the Palazzo Mora in Venice alongside the Biennale, wall-leaning structures could, at a glance, be mistaken for two-dimensional triangular shapes, but are in fact multi-dimensional, moving works made of animated light, cherry wood, pvc, and gouache. At every vertex, another material takes over and continues the line, the change of material seeming to shift the work into another reality. Shadow is also employed, and, like the animated light, is always moving. Looking at them stretches my mind's capacity to comprehend all of the

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Kāryn Taylor,
Eclipse

realities that the work reveals at once, but it's the intuitive, holistic 'right-side' brain that feels really engaged. Taylor's art asks you to feel the logic of it, rather than understand it.

In one of her works, *How to Construct your Universe*, she seems to be providing the tools the viewer needs to, yes, construct their universe: a circle, a square, a line. Light. Wood. 'I like primary objects, and primary colours,' she says. 'I do love messy, full-on work, but every time I go to make something like that myself, I always end up going, "No, it needs to come right back to the essentials".'

But she never goes into the making of a work with a

precise purpose in mind, because it is in the making that the work reveals itself. 'All those ideas that I'm thinking about – frequencies, vibrations, quantum world, realities – all that thinking is happening in the background. But if my mind gets too involved, too logical, I find that it becomes difficult to make the work come forth.'

Light is a key component of her work. 'Light is another frequency,' she says. Her lightbox works seem to glow from the inside, but the light is all ambient, not electric. It is about bringing to light elements that already exist, and making us think about them anew.

Mystery and wonder play a large part. 'One of the first works I saw that really influenced me was *Adam* by Anish

Kapoor, in the Tate Modern,' she says. *Adam* is a large piece of sandstone rock cut flat on one side, with a black rectangular void at about head height. 'The void was so black that you could not see into it, you had absolutely no idea of its depth. It blew my mind – this perceptual trick that was so simple was very exciting to me.'

It was a while before she was able to turn this excitement into her own artistic practice. After finishing high school in Dunedin, she studied 'a little bit of everything' in polytechnic art and design courses in the late 80s in Dunedin and Christchurch.

Then came marriage, moving to California, and several years working around the USA, Australia, and Europe as

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a graphic designer in the early days of digital design. 'I hated it,' she says. 'The design world was full of red tape – it can be very restrictive in terms of creativity.'

She divorced, returned to New Zealand and undertook a BFA at Massey in Wellington. Then in the MFA programme at Elam, Taylor really found her voice. 'It made me feel grounded in what I wanted to do as an artist, in what I wanted to say and explore.' For that year, she didn't really look at other artists' work. 'I needed to be grounded in my own ideas and way of making, and not be influenced by anyone else and all the artwork out there. I needed to make from the very core of myself. I needed that stability so I could go out there and make my work and know it was me, it was mine.'

After completing that degree, she made the bold decision to focus solely on making art, quitting her part-time jobs working in galleries and as a picture framer. The financial side can be a struggle, and she has been house-sitting for the past two years, currently in Nelson. But the sacrifice of financial security is worth it for artistic focus. Her work has flourished, with exhibitions in New Zealand, Australia, Italy, and Greece. She'll be exhibiting alongside Erica van Zon and Moniek Schrijer at Millers O'Brien, Wellington, in December.

Her work is moving more towards exploring frequencies and energies. It is still the same search for the pure forms, but in new ways, and I think it likely that she will never stop questioning. ■

