

Clarissa Tossin: Falling From Earth

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Clarissa Tossin, 'Falling From Earth', Museum of Contemporary Art Denver,
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Clarissa Tossin, left: *8th Planet*, 2021 (partial view), right: *A Queda do Céu (The Falling Sky)*, 2019, installation view of 'Clarissa Tossin: Falling From Earth', courtesy of MCA Denver, photo by Wes Magyar

Clarissa Tossin's 'Falling From Earth' exhibition is a natural segue from her earlier work. Tossin, born and raised in Brazil, but currently working in the US, has long dealt with colonial resource extraction and the impact of large US businesses on the earth. Past work has referenced Fordlandia and Belterra, both rubber plantations built by American industrialist Henry Ford in Brazil, as well the timber town he created in Alberta, Michigan during the early twentieth century. So it is not surprising that her attention has now turned towards current industrialists and their growing interest in outer space.

If this sounds a bit didactic, it's not... quite. While Tossin has done her research – and reading the texts accompanying each piece in the exhibition is strongly advised – the works

operate in art's best liminal space: blurred boundaries of facts, objects and the feelings they elicit while viewing. Tossin is as engrossed in the seductive possibility of materials and their potential for metaphor as much as she is in information. This is evident throughout the exhibition, which covers three differently sized rooms, a winding corridor and a small, six-foot entryway with work ranging from 2019 to 2022.

Having seen the exhibition twice, both times from different entry points, it is tempting to begin with what appears to be a collection of brightly painted bamboo sieves hung from the ceiling in a long hallway. Titled *A Queda do Céu (The Falling Sky)*, this is Tossin's earliest piece here. The baskets are actually woven from interlaced strips taken from satellite views of the Amazon forest fires in 2019 along with NASA images of a plain on the planet Mars, named Amazonis Planitia. The title is a sly reminder that every historical expedition is replete with the projected desires of what explorers already knew – or wanted to know. Think of the seventeenth-century engravings and maps embellished with monsters produced by Theodore De Bry, or John White's images of Algonquins posed like Michelangelo's *David*.¹ While *A Queda do Céu* is a modestly sized work and far from being the most visually arresting here, it sets the stage for the artist's examination of the relationship between a world in crisis and the technological needs that exacerbate it.

8th Planet, in the same space, is surely what viewers might notice first. A stunning jacquard tapestry, over thirty feet long and thickly woven, it combines celestial imagery and astronomical grids that identify which areas of the moon the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) sees as potential sites for mining ice. While nearly monochrome in colour, the black, grey, white and metallic golden threads vibrate in contrast, its beauty recalling historical tapestries that celebrated conquest. But the signage next to it is cautionary. Viewers are told that the Moon Agreement adopted by the United Nations in 1979 declared natural resources to be 'the common heritage of mankind', while also letting us know that this agreement was nullified when the USA passed a law legalising space mining by private companies in 2015. For anyone who has not noticed, Tossin wants us to realise the dominant role companies currently play in the privatisation of outer space, and how they appear to be banking on major profits no matter what the corollary environmental costs. Tossin cites this as beginning in 2015, but other news outlets lodge the privatisation of outer space much earlier in the USA – as early as the Clinton and Bush administrations.²

¹ See David Gelber, 'American scheme – Theodore de Bry's sensational approach to the New World', in *Apollo*, 13 November 2019, a review of *America: The Complete Plates, 1590–1602* by Theodore de Bry, published by Taschen, www.apollo-magazine.com/theodore-de-bry-america-complete-plates/; and Dr Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, 'Inventing "America," The Engravings of Theodore De Bry', [Smarthistory.org](http://smarthistory.org/engravings-theodore-de-bry/), www.smarthistory.org/engravings-theodore-de-bry/; as well as National Humanities Centre's 'America in Class': Early Visual Representations of the New World, www.americainclass.org/early-visual-representations-of-the-new-world/

² *Eclipse Aviation* lodges it in 2011 (Erikson, 'When was Nasa Defunded?', *Eclipse Aviation.com*, 20 March 2022, www.eclipseaviation.com/when-was-nasa-defunded/#1), but a BBC Sounds radio documentary, 'A Home in Space' lodges it much earlier. The latter is fascinating, if only to hear Jeffrey Manber, President of International and Space Stations at Voyager Space, unabashedly state, 'The exciting thing is you won't have a government facility... For me what is exciting is it will be the beginning of a robust market place. I believe you cannot consider going to Mars or the moon; you cannot consider practically doing more than the initial steps of exploration without having a marketplace in space' ('The Documentary: A Home in Space', BBC Sounds, 12 December 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p03b6t7p). NASA's own documents confirm the move to privatisation: www.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/atoms/files/nid_8600_121_tagged.pdf

While NASA still exists, as does the European Space Agency, and the Russian, Chinese and other national agencies, it is now taken for granted that billionaire businessmen are major players in what used to be considered a state and/or multi-state exploration of our solar system.³

The narrow hall that connects the exhibition to two other rooms has five prints interspersed with two identical vitrines holding identical tiny vials of extracted materials. The first vial is filled with ‘moon dust’, courtesy of the Johnson Space Center. The second is filled with particles the artist ‘mined’ from *Valuable Elements*, the series of inkjet prints of NASA photos of the moon. Tossin scraped these prints by erasing and extracting their ink, carefully saving these materials as though they are as precious as moon dust – the artist’s labours next to NASA’s.

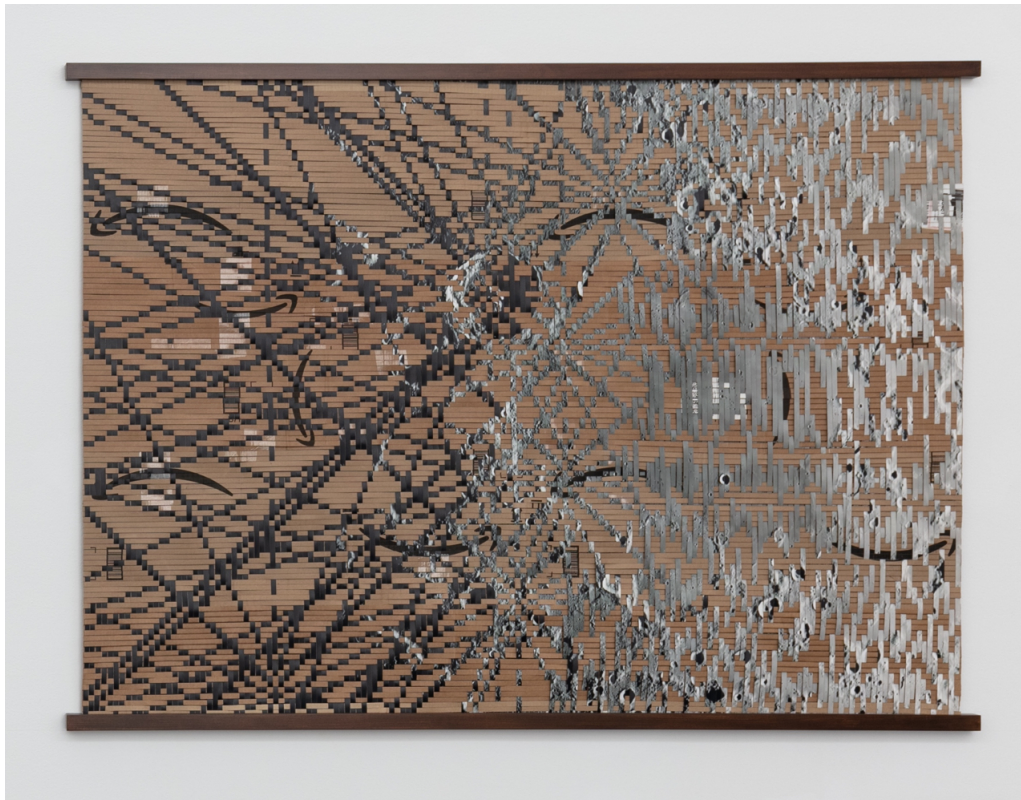


Clarissa Tossin, *Valuable Element*, 2022, archival inkjet print on paper, inkjet dust and glass vial in vitrine, dimensions variable, courtesy of MCA Denver, photo by Wes Magyar

The centre room is filled with five large weavings and is titled ‘Future Geographies’. These pieces are hung flat on the wall, spaced apart to give each one some prominence, although from a distance they look remarkably similar – brown with small bits of colour, because they are made from original Amazon packing boxes. Four of them also weave in inkjet prints of various planets that are currently considered resource rich. Together they appear unimposing, yet the accompanying text gives us background into how they are valued, alongside a glimpse into ironies that one might not think NASA personnel possessed. In *Future Geography: Jezero Crater, Mars*, one learns that that crater has been nicknamed the Octavia E Butler Landing – an unlikely homage to the African American science fiction writer whose work took on themes of racism, gender, class and climate change. That the moon has a crater named after the Anglo-Irish explorer, Ernest Shackleton in *Future Geography Shackleton Crater, Moon*, is perhaps less

³ In terms of private investment in space travel, this isn’t to say that Space X (Elon Musk) and Blue Origin (Jeff Bezos) are the only players. There is also Richard Branson’s Virgin Galactic, as well as numerous other businesses, including Lockheed, Boeing, and more.

startling, as Shackleton's failed explorations of the Antarctic have regrettably become a standard reference in US leadership seminars. *Future Geography*, used in the titles of three of the images, highlights that these are places already being mapped as sites for possible resource extraction. Museum text indicates that the Shackleton Crater will be used for polar ice mining for rocket fuel, among other things. It also notes that in 2020, an executive order by then-President Trump recognised the rights of American companies to claim resources in space. Because each image is woven with Amazon packing materials, it appears the artist is speculating that the owner of the world's largest shop, Jeff Bezos, will be a prime beneficiary. She is probably right.



Clarissa Tossin, *Future Geography: Shackleton Crater, Moon*, 2021, Amazon delivery boxes, archival inkjet prints with matte lamination and wood, 152 x 213 x 4 cm, courtesy of MCA Denver, photo by Wes Magyar

A smaller, adjacent room is filled with effigies of sorts. Its centre is dominated by the cast of a dead peach tree suspended from the ceiling, like an effigy for our climate crisis. It is taken from Tossin's own garden in Los Angeles, where temperatures have increased by 3°F since the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴ At the edges of the room are fragments of a 1960s space suit, also cast from silicone. The pieces look melancholy: a suit, two gloves and a helmet, each deprived of their purpose and without the astronauts who wore them. They are soiled, empty, and scattered in a corner. It is easy to project a kind of misplaced nostalgia here. Perhaps that period was modernism's last, optimistic gasp, an era marked by belief in an upward trajectory of science, engineering and the possibility of different countries working together.

⁴ See the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Centers for Environmental Information, State Climate Summaries 2022, California, <https://statesummaries.ncics.org/chapter/ca/>

I save the most beautiful piece for last. *Death by Heat Wave (Acer pseudoplatanus)* is laid out on the floor of the largest room. A sixty-two-foot silicone casting of a sycamore tree, one of many that are dying in France from lack of moisture and too much heat, it is spread out limply on the floor. The tree's enormous size forces some of its branches into the hallways, becoming a deflated, translucent death mask for what we are facing here on earth. As if to emphasise that idea, the walls are sparsely dotted with clay and porcelain masks of the artist's own human face. The work acts as a denouement that is laced with uncertainties. If, as some attest, using resources from other planets is the only way to maintain the human race, Tossin's link between her native country's colonial history of extraction, along with its current president's policies toward the world's largest rainforest, acts as a warning. We have seen the failures of state governments' response to both climate change as well as the needs of their populations, but we have also seen the excesses of private businesses – and the lack of transparency in the latter should be sobering. Tossin already singles out Henry Ford, but what about Leopold II's private rubber colonies in the Congo? What about Shell? BP? Exxon? The track record here on earth has not been good and 'Falling From Earth' asks us to pay attention.



Clarissa Tossin, *Death By Heat Wave (Acer pseudoplatanus)*, detail, 2021, silicone, approx 1900 x 1100 cm, courtesy of MCA Denver, photo by Wes Magyar

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as here in *Third Text Online*. She currently lives in Berkeley, California.