



Were the Eye Not Sunlike

Curated by Third Object

In the Theater of the Sun

THIRD OBJECT

As the ultimate number one, the Sun is the obvious role model for the aspiring tyrant. A solar economy configured in a totalitarian model works by fostering a heliotropic relationship between the energy-deprived masses and their energy-endowing leader. His mythic singularity transforms him into the source of all metaphor. Stalin followed this path, nourishing his subjects with “the glow of paternal generosity” while also “reducing them to ashes in the pitiless rays of his ‘just’ wrath.”(1) This is the reason that overthrowing the “fascist institution of the sun” is the basic “dream of all great revolutionary moments in history.”(2) While the configuration of the solar economy is mostly no longer totalitarian in the Sun-god fashion of twentieth century dictators, it remains coursing as an active circulation of hazardous energy nonetheless.(3)

In the midst of this circulation, the two-part exhibition *Were the Eye Not Sunlike* takes hold of and expands on the heliocentric metaphor. One part of this exhibition takes place on ACRE TV, an online video streaming network, for which a program of moving image work by sixty-two artists has been organized into three chapters, *Sunrise*, *High Noon* and *Sunset*.(4) The program tracks the optical, energetic and emotional fluctuations experienced throughout the day. The second part, an exhibition at Fernwey Gallery, shows the work of three artists, Assaf Evron, Danny Giles and Lauren Edwards, whose works take up the solar tropes of time, transcendence, power and subservience. They are joined by Danny Floyd, whose essay “Looking at Nothing” unfolds from an understanding of how our senses meet the world halfway, and Mia Nolting, whose artwork and design grace this publication.

Revered as a divine force in and of itself, the Sun has long been associated with political or spiritual potency. Ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica built pyramids in an attempt to concretize the tiered hierarchy of the cosmos. The Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, for example, is believed to have been a space for spiritual devotion to the elements of fire and water.(5) The structure is celestially charged as well, its site and orientation determined by the path of the Sun and functional as a calendrical marker.(6) The pyramid form is the ideal merger of horizontality and verticality, a stepwise coupling of the earthly plain and the sunsoaked sky. Assaf Evron’s pyramidical *Untitled (Richard the III, Leopold Jessner, Emil Pirchan, 1919)*, 2015, is a model for a different monument, the 1919 Berlin State Theater stage setting for Leopold Jessner’s *Richard the III*. In the play, the tiers of the stage served as temporal markers on which different scenes played out in the story of Richard’s ascent to power through murder and manipulation. The piece nods toward the heliotropic upwardness of the politically ambitious while slyly revealing the theater as the foundation for all political and spiritual leadership.

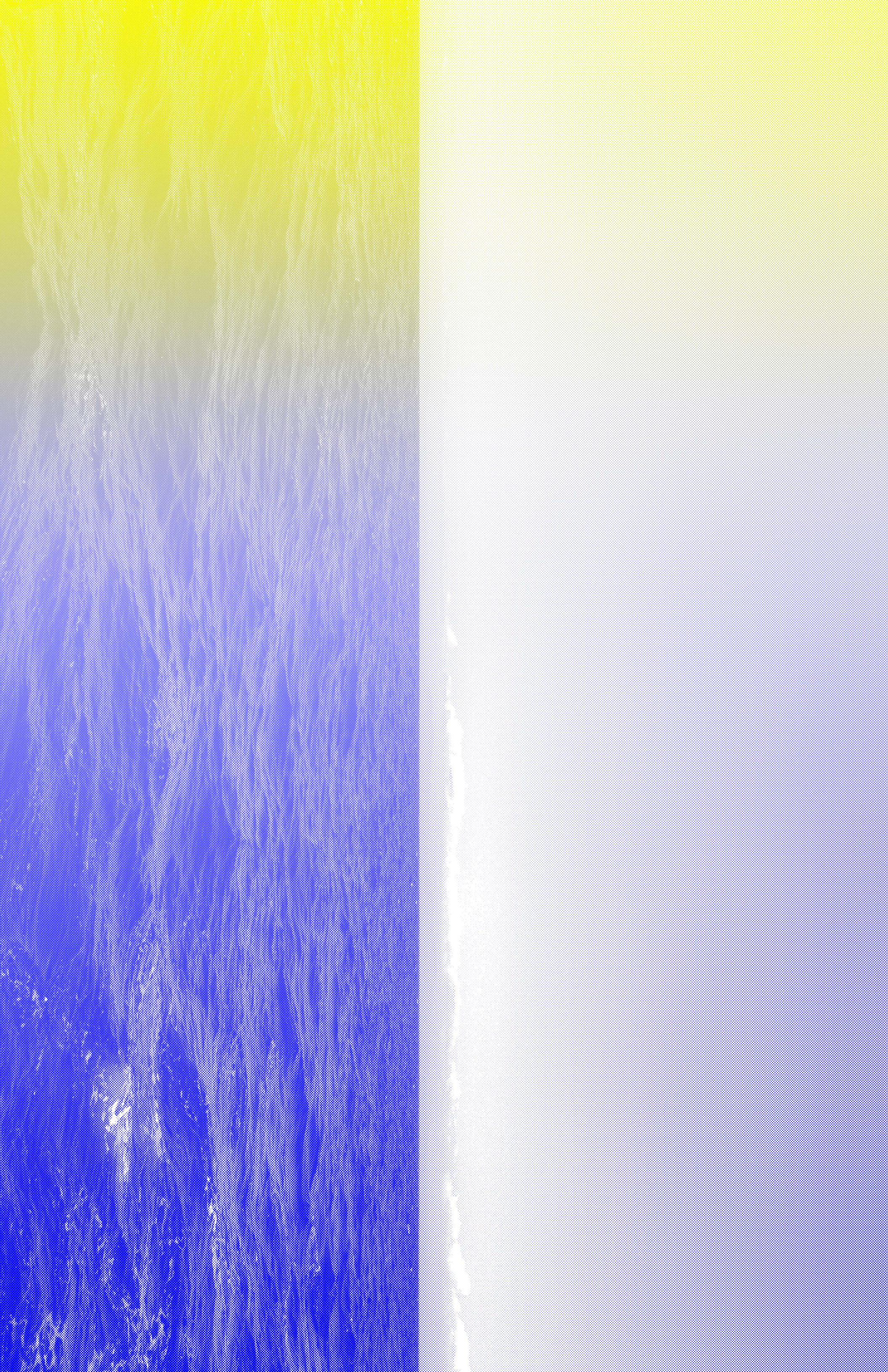
It so happens that the Sun has quite the stage presence, transfixing the audience’s eyes while maintaining a vigilant gaze itself. Danny Giles evokes this circulation of seeing in his two-piece work, *Late Romance I and II*, 2014-15. The two sculptures reclaim the convenience store surveillance mirror as a surface for an image. Spray painted on its face, almost as an act of vandalism, an orange and purple sunset redirects our gaze upward. The surveillance mirror asserts its presence as a solar overseer, but also becomes a space for contemplative looking, a space that is directed upward. Nearby, Giles’s *As Above, So Below*, a bright white hand-twisted rope of synthetic hair, furthers this perpendicular relationship. A comment on the escape to be found in self-stylizing, the rope promises a reverse-Rapunzel getaway, recalling the poet Velimir Khlebnikov’s promise of transcendence: “When I get tired of myself / I’ll fling myself into the golden sun.”(7)

Escapes from or into the Sun recur throughout *Were the Eye Not Sunlike*. The hypnotic rays of the banal yet captivating star provide such an escape in Lauren Edwards’s contribution, *Three Suns*, 2011. Central to the work are the ubiquity and sentimentality of a sunset and its reproduced image. Collapsing both time and space by superimposing two found images of the Sun on the horizon, Edwards’s work evokes a nostalgic, impossible place. In their intentional misalignment, the grassy horizon of one image eases into the orange clouds of the other. Are these suns rising or setting? A subtle debasing of the singular helios, she creates a scene in which the printed sun, the projected sun, and the projector flow together in a circuit of collapsing images. Bodies passing between the projected sun and the projector create a staccato rhythm and an illusion of passing time, but it’s just an illusion. Here the Sun only ever hovers in the offing.

Recently, efforts have been made on the part of political leaders to reinstate or reclaim the relationship between the body, time and the Sun. In 2007, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez set the country’s clocks back half-an-hour through a presidential decree, citing, as he put it, “the metabolic effect where the human brain is conditioned by sunlight.”(8) In 2014, Bolivia began running its congress building’s clocks in reverse, a symbolic, indigenist embrace of Bolivia’s hemispheric relationship to the sun.(9) In these gestures, the solar circuits are channelled, the gaze drawn upward, and the cosmic cycle translated onto the terrestrial plane. Statecraft has not left the theater of the sun, and neither, as the artists of *Were the Eye Not Sunlike* attest, has the work of artistic production.

Third Object would like to give sincere thanks to all of the artists in this exhibition and video broadcast for the many ways they contributed ideas and materials to this project, as well as to ACRE TV and Fernwey Gallery for their generosity in collaboratively hosting this exhibition.

(1) Victor Tupitsyn, “Civitas Solis: Ghetto as Paradise.” *The Museological Unconscious*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 18.
(2) Sam Kriss, “Manifesto of the Committee to Abolish Outer Space.” *The New Inquiry*. February 2, 2015, <<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/manifesto-of-the-committee-to-abolish-outer-space/>>.
(3) Reza Negarestani, “Solar Inferno and the Earthbound Abyss,” *Our Sun*, (Milan: Istituto Svizzero di Roma, 2010), 3–8.
(4) The series begins with *Sunrise* and its thematic associations of stillness, ritual and intimacy. Reflecting the course of the earth-bound day, the following program, *High Noon*, salutes the warmth and optical energy of a bright, full sky. *Sunset*, the final chapter, evokes impending darkness, melancholy, loss and reflection. See back cover for program lists and air dates.
(5) Department of the AAOA. “Teotihuacan: Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon.” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/teot2/hd_teot2.htm>.
(6) David Summers, *Real Spaces*, (London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2003), 161.
(7) Quoted in Tupitsyn, 13.
(8) Rory Carroll, “Chávez turns back hands of time by half an hour,” *The Guardian*. 9 Dec. 2007.
(9) Sam Jones and Sara Shahriari, “Bolivia turns back the clock in bid to rediscover identity and ‘southernness,’” *The Guardian*, 25 June 2014.



Looking at Nothing

DANNY FLOYD

My artistic collaborator Jeff and I have a standing engagement to spend Saturday mornings visiting architectural landmarks around Chicago. We meet each other at a weirder and lesser-known structure in our city's repertoire. Almost everyday for a year, I biked past an unassuming, lighted pavilion made of concrete or stucco or something colored a very false shade of terracotta on the corner of Halsted and Roosevelt without knowing it was actually a sculpture by revered Light and Space artist James Turrell. The drippy water feature on its rim is a little too appropriate as bad public sculpture-seating likely for its neighbors, a college campus and a strip mall. But when seen from above on Google Maps, the trademark oculus with a beveled edge reveals its secret identity.

Unsurprisingly, it's not the best Turrell in the world, but it works. I don't mean it works in the way that art or architecture students say a piece "works" when they like it in critique and don't know why. I mean that it has a specific perceptual effect on our vision that Turrell's work is known to create, a sensation I will try if not to explain but to understand now.

Fortunately, we arrive during perfect Turrell weather. The sky is cloudless and bright blue. We look up at the blue ellipse for a bit, and the longer we stare the more we are able to ignore the unintended details: seven or eight little icicles pointing down from it and a ring of what is probably black mold around the opening. Our focus zeroes in on the blue shape, and the knowledge of what it is begins to fall away in favor of its abstract qualities. For its part, it helps that the walls of the structure come down far enough that other views of the sky are framed out by the surrounding buildings.

"There's this thing that's happening when I look at it over time, it feels like it's expanding out," says Jeff, "like it's changing its proportions to the ceiling as I get more immersed in this space."

"Well, your eye isn't supposed to look at nothing," I say. "So I guess your attention gets so focused into it to try to discern something out of it."

"I feel like it's moving down, or I'm rising up to it."

The blue oval seems to switch between a flat field of color on the ceiling and infinite space beyond it, as if my eyes are trying out either option. This is known as the *ganzfeld effect*. Coming from the German for *total field*, this perceptual paradox occurs when the eye cannot perceive enough details to distinguish between close from far, leaving the brain with no conclusion as to whether the field is perfectly flat or totally infinite. Snowblindness and dense fog provide prominent examples.

The brain relies on patterns and details to decode sensory perception, and the odd feeling of constant visual recalibration we feel recalls a story from music journalist Mike McGonigal in which he experiences something similar with sound. A rabid My Bloody Valentine fan, he remembers seeing the band play their early song *You Made Me Realise* in 1992. When playing it live, MBV notoriously stretches out a fifteen-second noise break in the recording to extreme lengths, up to forty minutes according to frontman Kevin Shields, simply bent over their guitars strumming wildly. McGonigal describes the first time hearing it: "I learn what it's like to stick my head inside of a jet engine. Surprise: it's fucking unbearable...It's can't-think-straight loud, a deliriously loud kind of loud. It seems to be tacky, showoffy, offensive and most of all, really painful".(1)

He witnessed the crowd writhing violently and unhappily then gradually turning euphoric. And as they did, he could hear the

music changing: "Now, just as suddenly as it hit in the first place, something truly beautiful is happening. A playful array of overtones can be heard bouncing on top of the dirge...It seems that this cloud of harmonics is sweetly filling the room. These delightful ping-ponging notes, are perhaps the whole point of the exercise, what the band had been trying to get to all along".(2)

Fourteen years later, he finally got to ask Shields what they were doing to make these sounds, and the answer disappointed him: "There was no melody!" Shields explains that "it was such a huge noise with so much texture to it, it allowed people to imagine anything".(3) MBV still does this at shows; I've seen it, and it's intense. For what it's worth, I only got the choir-of-angels experience for a moment, maybe because I already enjoy overwhelming noise.

The neuroscientist Jonah Lehrer writes about how the brain interprets organized sensory experiences like music. Recognizing the patterns that constitute these phenomena is the job of the *corticofugal network* in the brain. To paraphrase, the more it searches for patterns, the sharper it becomes at detecting them. It also produces dopamine to induce the satisfaction that we all experience in patterns. Dopamine produces pleasure, but also erratic behavior. He attributes an infamous riot induced at the 1913 premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* to this effect.(4) It is no doubt this is the cause of the emotional rollercoaster in the MBV audience and the eventual beauty discovered in the search for order where there was none.

I am not a neuroscientist, but I believe the same process is happening for Jeff and I as our eyes and brains try to make sense of the hallucinatorily plain cut-out of the sky. The quality of it is as beautiful as it is unusual, and in part fabricated by our sensory faculties. While our perception can't change the world around us, moments like these remind us that our senses are nonetheless productive, not simply passively receptive. This is more or less what Goethe meant when he wrote, "Were the eye not sunlike, how would we perceive light?" We aren't separate from the nature around us and what we perceive.

We leave the Turrell for our next destination, Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall at Illinois Institute of Technology, now an architecture studio and classroom. The middle of the one large room is partitioned by modular walls to create an empty critique and exhibition space. One wall has a piece of paper taped up with following crudely scrawled: "CRITIQUE CRITERIA 1) WHAT WORKS WELL 2) WHAT DOESN'T WORK 3) HOW IT CAN BE IMPROVED 4) NEW IDEAS:"

The mystery of the blue sky in our last destination is replaced by a drop ceiling unworthy of the space's prominence and the simple grandeur of its wide-openness. But like in the Turrell, visual details are all emptied out. The emptiness creates the potential for our own production, not that differently than how the empty section of sky leads our senses to produce unexpected effects. I'm reminded, however, as the sun rakes sharply into the full panel windows and illuminates Jeff dramatically—and I'm not shy to say beautifully—that we become aware of our observational-productive potential not only through the distanced contemplation of neuroscience or the experience of sensory aberrations, but also through simply being and acting amid the everyday conditions of life.

(1) Mike McGonigal, *Loveless from the 33 1/3 series* (London, New York: Continuum Press, 2007), 3-5.
(2) Ibid.,7-8.
(3) Ibid.,10-11.
(4) Jonah Leher, *Proust was a Neuroscientist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 140-142.

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APRIL 3 - 26 , 2015

Lauren Edwards
Assaf Evron
Danny Giles

Essay by Danny Floyd
Design by Mia Nolting

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ACRE TV

APRIL 1 - MAY 31, 2015

acretv.org

Sunrise

APRIL 1 – APRIL 19

Christopher Bailey & Charles Woodman, Blair Bogin, Patrick Andrew Boivin & Stéphane Charpentier & Alyssa Moxley, Laura Bouza, Kate Casanova, Karen Y. Chan, Silvana D’Mikos, Stephanie Hough, Cassandra C. Jones, Pablo Marín, Andrew Payne, Chris Rice, Andrew Rosinski, Ben Russell, Patrick Tarrant, Robert Todd, Penelope Umbrico, Eileen Rae Walsh, Eric Watts.

High Noon

APRIL 19 – MAY 10

Tony Balko, Tommy Becker, Sarah & Joseph Belknap, Karen Y. Chan, Thomas Dexter, Max Grey, Ilan Gutin, Amy Hicks, Jason Judd, Meredith Lackey, Elina Malkin & Jónó Mí Ló, Pablo Marín, Eden Mitsenmacher, Rebecca Najdowski, Aaron Oldenburg, Jean-Michel Rolland, Ben Russell, Fern Silva, Rachael Starbuck, John Szczepaniak, Patrick Tarrant, Robert Todd.

Sunset

MAY 10 – MAY 31

Laura Bouza, Collin Bradford, Sarawut Chutiwongpeti, Sara Condo, Alexei Dmitriev, Mike Gibisser, Max Grey, Sam Hoolihan, Cassandra C. Jones, Jeremiah Jones, Robert Ladislav Derr, Christine Lucy Latimer, Karl Lind, Chris Little, Ying Liu, Laura Mackin, Matthew-Robin Nye & Marc Wieser, Jae Pas, Chris Rice, Andrew Rosinski, Eeva Siivonen, Fern Silva, Eric Stewart, Takahiro Suzuki, Robert Todd, Penelope Umbrico, Eileen Rae Walsh.

