

ART IN PRINT

MARCH – APRIL 2017

MUNGO THOMSON: POCKET UNIVERSE

by Benjamin Levy



Mungo Thomson, *Pocket Universe #7 (Silver)* (2016) and *Pocket Universe #10 (Copper)* (2016). Photo: David Kern.

Mungo Thomson is a conceptual artist working across media who approaches his projects with a wink and nod. His *Pocket Universe* works appear simple enough at first glance—coins protruding from large metallic sheets—but the content unfurls at an alarming rate. Metallic foil was run through a press scattered with coins, transferring the ridges and reliefs to the thin substrate; reinforced to resemble a solid sheet of metal, the foil was mounted in a frame to emphasize its dimensionality—the delicate masquerading as the durable.

The operations and materials for each work in the series are the same, but the coins change with each impression. The metals would seem to match: the copper series was made with pennies, while the silver one used nickels, dimes and quarters. In reality, however, pennies have not been predominately copper since 1982. Nickels contained silver only for a short period during World War II, and dimes and quarters have not been principally silver since 1964. In keeping with this slippage, though Thomson's copper foil is real copper, his "silver" is aluminum, a metal used in no U.S. coinage.

Thomson likes to tweak our assumptions about value. His *Wind Chimes* series begun in 1999 pokes fun at the slippery slope between fine art and decor; and his last project with Highpoint (see 'Art in Print March–April 2016') paid homage to the *Time-Life* books that were once commonplace markers of the upper-middle-brow home. In *Pocket Universe*, he differentiated each impression by the total value of the coins used to print it, which calls attention to another disparity—metals prices have

risen, making some vintages of coins now worth more as raw metal than their face value; though it is illegal

to melt down coinage, some people hoard coins awaiting a reversal of the law. (Thomson encountered this numismatic subculture through an earlier project about misstrikes.) The carving, molding and casting of coin production has, of course, many parallels with the reversals and impressions of printmaking.

Like many of Thomson's titles, "Pocket Universe" has a double meaning: the fungible loose change we carry everywhere, and the cosmological theory of nested multiverses. Physicist Alan Guth hypothesizes that as the universe expands, other universes are created in the vacuum pockets that arise, and our observable universe is likely the product of another universe's expansion. Thomson points us toward a commonality between the mundane coins in your pocket and the mysteries of spacetime.