

SIGHTLINES

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NEGATIVE SPACE: MUNGO THOMSON APPROACHES THE VOID WITH NEW WALKER MURAL

by Paul Schmelzer



Mungo Thomson, *Negative Space* (STSci-PRC2012-10a), 2012.

“My work has been about negative space, in some respects: The overlooked, the void, emptiness,” said artist Mungo Thomson during a September visit to Minneapolis. “I had this idea to take that literally and make negative images of outer space.”

The result is the Walker’s new acquisition, the 93-foot-long mural *Negative Space*, recently installed outside the Vineland Place entrance. The piece reflects Thomson’s interest in what he calls “the dumb idea”—something simple blown up to grand proportions. In this case, he found a public domain photo taken by NASA’s Hubble telescope and using a basic Photoshop command inverted it. “Just click Apple-I,” he said of the work that’ll be on view for the next six months. “It takes two fingers.”

But like all conceptual art, the simplicity of the gesture can be deceiving.

Begun in 2006, the series of *Negative Space* works started with a book and was quickly followed by billboard and gallery versions. In the context of the white cube, the work was about “aligning the two voids: the void in outer space is black, and the void in the art context is white.” By inverting the colors, he inverts our relationship to the space.

In this case, the artist is not particularly interested in the specifics of the content depicted—the galaxy cluster Abell 520, caused by the collision of two spiral galaxies—but instead he’s playing with perceptual frames. “All my work is about these frames—the way culture frames reality in particular ways, and sometimes the way it frames reality obscures both reality and the frame. It’s the concept that we don’t see the

lenses through which we see,” he says. “The photograph is a frame, the Hubble is a frame, the architecture is a frame, so by grafting this onto architecture I’m bringing this thing that’s in the background forward. But what it ultimately does is call attention to the frames and maybe make you pay attention, create a space in your mind.”

Another spatial work recently at the Walker was Thomson’s installation *New York, New York, New York, New York* (2004) in the recent exhibition *Lifelike*. An immersive environment that also addressed frames of perception, the four-channel projection was shot in Los Angeles at four separate studio lots, each with its own gritty New York street scene, created in exacting detail to show graffiti, litter, and exhaust-dusted brick. While the scenes at first seem familiar, subtle visual cues—a palm tree, a golf cart, a lone security guard, the absence of street noise—eventually tip the viewer off that it’s not Manhattan, but a movie set.

The colorful expanse of wall also “hybridizes my biography,” Thomson says. Raised in Northern California, but a Los Angeles resident for the past 15 years, he says the imagery mixes the “Berkeley psychedelic” with the “Southern California evacuated void.” That terrain is also shared with artists Michael Asher, a fellow Northern California native Thomson says he admires, and LA-born John Baldessari, both of whom are doing work that at first glance may seem simple. “The video installation of the Hollywood sets is both about the construction of vision through culture and the way we come to see and to recognize, but it’s also about the empty room,” Thomson says. “If you put four things that are all lies on the walls, you sort of have an empty room. These sets were built to lie to the camera. You put a camera in front of them you have an effective illusion. You fill a room with it, but in a way it’s a vacuum.” Like deep space.

“He talks a lot about how he goes after simple ideas, but what he really does is make them magical,” says Walker curator Siri Engberg, who curated Thomson’s mural installation (which is part of the current Walker exhibition *The Living Years: Art after 1989*) and the touring show *Lifelike*. She says what draws her to Thomson’s work is his interest in “making the everyday remarkable.” She recalls his installation in the coat room of the Whitney Biennial in 2008: “Every coat hanger was a different thickness of metal so when the coat check people were rotating coats to find your number, you’d get this wonderful windchime-like effect,” she recalled. “Visitors didn’t really realize they were already in the show when they were standing there checking their coats. It was fully functional, but it was also a work of art.”

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As for the simplicity of the two-finger inversion at the heart of *Negative Space*, Thomson sees it two ways. One is related to open source software and the ease of changing up imagery he easily found on the Internet and altered. “One thing I really like is sort of the open-source deployment. With this piece, I have an image that I can then deploy in all these different kinds of contexts. So, for example, the Walker owns this. When they get tired of it on this wall, we can consult and move it indoors, into the stairwell or into a gallery,” says the artist. “It’s like software sitting in a folder waiting to be used.”

The other is about distilling ideas down to their essences. “I’m definitely interested in doing very little, or at least in reducing the number of steps between me and the

result and the idea and the result,” says Thomson. “So that the viewer has a pretty straight-through line to the idea. The goal is to avoid being didactic while keeping a certain amount of opacity and mystery, even.”