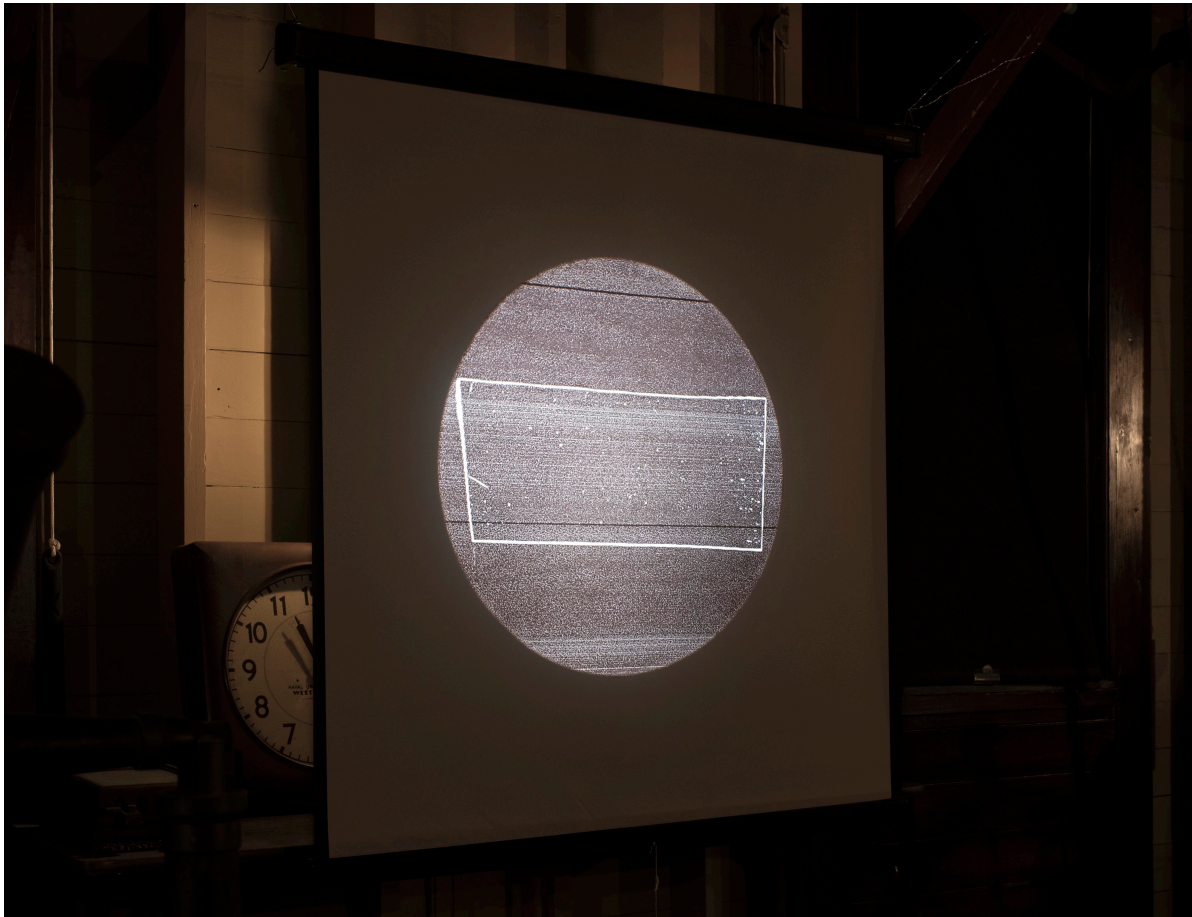


Site Intervention_Ladd Observatory

In Light of Lenses

Silica dust is observed throughout the universe. Scientific studies¹ locate the origins of this dust resides in the remnants of two distant supernovae. In the core of these exploding stars, silica was forged. This massive supernova event spread silica dust throughout the Universe, forming a good portion of our Earth's crust. Haley Gomez, Professor of Astrophysics at Cardiff University, studies the formation and evolution of cosmic dust. She keenly notes:

*"Every time we gaze through a window, walk down the pavement, or set foot on a sandy beach, we are interacting with material made by exploding stars that burned millions of years ago."*²



Daiqing Zhang, About Dust #8_Dust Charts, 2023

photo credit: Kai Wasikowski

¹ Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society, Volume 480, Issue 2, October 2018, Page 1612, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mnras/sty2085>

² <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/1371708-glass-made-from-exploding-stars>

This supernova origin narrative echoes the celestial, temporal and atmospheric wonder channeled by artists Kai Wasikowski, Alexander Wenstrup and Daiqing Zhang. In April 2023 these three RISD graduate students (from the Photography, Architecture and Glass programs) integrated their artworks within the ground floor rooms of Ladd Observatory. Their trans-disciplinary explorations compelled visitors to joyfully ponder what items belonged to the walls, cabinets, shelves, mantles and tables of Ladd, and which items were in fact new neighbors.



Wasikowski, Wenstrup & Zhang, *In Light of Lenses*, collaborative intervention, 2023

photo credit: Kai Wasikowski



Kai Wasikowski, *Between a Point and a Plane (Observatory)*, 2023

One of my favorite rooms in Ladd houses nineteenth century cabinets with glass mounted transparencies. Here a collaborative intervention of photographic transparencies by all three artists was on display. This space was notably transitional, and the thresholds between observatory artifacts and contemporary works were delicately drawn. The gentle insertion of these interjacent transparencies spoke to how all three artists think about the construction of images, and how these are born through various lenses (lens being broad enough to be a traditional or nontraditional component of an apparatus, or a physical, or abstract, intermediary that reveals differing perspectives).

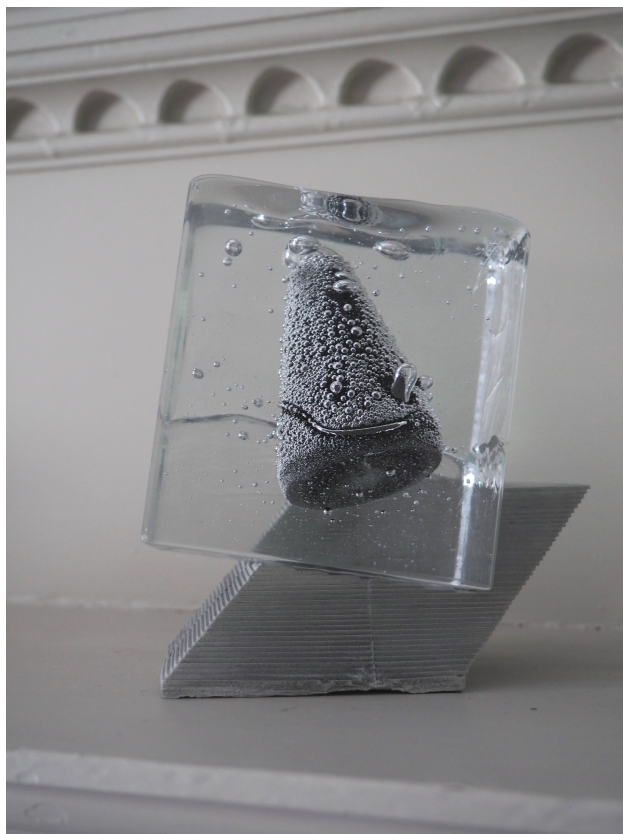
Kai Wasikowski's photographic works invited viewers to explore both the analogue and the digital. His digital renderings gave a definitive nod to the photographic interventions and the

analogue, 4x5, black and white, on-site photos of Ladd exuded a historic aura that made it difficult for even the savviest of viewers to resolve present-day details like folding tables and plastic milk crates. The body of Wasikowski's work highlights settler colonialist histories that mythologize land as empty space to be invaded, extracted, occupied. In the context of the observatory, this far-reaching perspective should give us pause as our gaze looks out to the vastness of the cosmos.



Daiqing Zhang, *Moon Vessel*, 2023

photo credit: Kai Wasikowski



Alexander Wenstrup, *Cones of Inclusion Series*, 2023

Above these cabinets, Daiqing Zhang's rotating moon vessel projection becomes an uncanny and seamless addition to Ladd's celestial globe collection. Her *Moon Vessel* sits between a photographic record of an eclipse and an Etienne Trouvelot illustration of an eclipse. Zhang's light projection moved at such a slow pace that most visitors did double takes until they resolved for themselves that the image was in fact rotating. This in-depth looking and immersion is reiterated by two other works of hers; *About Dust #8_Dust Charts* and *About Dust #11_The Night Sky*. Both these works explore the addition of dust to hot glass as a new method of creating a star map.

Alex Wenstrup's glass works and photographic deconstructions echo our experience of gazing through a telescope or some type of optical instrument that realigns our vision. Inspired by the Cubist art movement Wenstrup is mining the potential of visual/optical systems (like one point and multiple point perspectives, anamorphic images, lenticular images, etc.). He embraces modes of viewing which simultaneously enhance and deceive our understanding of the world.

Alexander Wenstrup, *Valley, Mountains*, 2023

photo credit: Kai Wasikowski

Wenstrup's *Cones of Inclusion* series is perched on Ladd's fireplace mantle. Suspended within a matrix of clear glass the metal clad cone shapes encourage our bodies and eyes to align, look through, and perceive anew. The optics of the glass distorts our view. This sense of displacement is once again reflected when we look across the room to the bookshelves and find a dimensionally incised photograph. Here, vanishing points collapse, and Wenstrup's spatial reverie takes hold, and we find ourselves reassessing our notions of space, time, and memory.

This text is a departure from the regular *Clear Skies* format. In an effort to align with the magazine's precedents I am noting three astronomical/historical events linked to the April timeframe of the *In Light of Lenses* exhibition; April 1961, Yuri Gagarin is the first man to orbit Earth, April 1981, the First Space Shuttle Columbia is successfully launched, and April 1990, the Hubble Telescope is deployed into the Earth's orbit. These historical milestones mark the accomplishments and manifestations of our collective dreams and embody our immense curiosity about the universe. Through this lens of science and art we image, hypothesize, and calculate the vast unknown or as Carlo Rovelli puts it; "We have a hundred billion neurons in our brains, as many as there are stars in a galaxy, with an even more astronomical number of links and potential combinations through which they can interact. We are not conscious of all this. 'We' are the process formed by this entire intricacy, not just by the little of it of which we are conscious."³

Jocelyne Prince
Professor
Head, Glass Department
Rhode Island School of Design

A note of thanks: since 2020 there have been a series of collaborations between Ladd Observatory and RISD Glass. Proudly we have mounted exhibitions at Ladd which marry our love of optics and the celestial: *Perspective in Arbitrary Dimensions* 2022 (Mandy Lee, Lauren Glenn, Zahra Tyebjee) and, *Intercalary Event 2020* (Katie Bullock, Sean Salstrom and myself). Our sincere thanks go to all who work at Ladd, and who have graciously helped make these exhibitions possible. Special thanks goes to Bob Horton who, back in 2020 took a risk and launched this wonderful collaboration.

³ Rovelli, Carlo, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, Penguin Books, 2015, Page 72