

REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,  
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA TO OPEN AN EXHIBITION OF WORK  
BY NICOLAS SARTER, " 0 GRAVITY" AT THE GROTE REBER  
MUSEUM AT THE MOUNT PLEASANT RADIO OBSERVATORY,  
FRIDAY 29<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2013

I have to say that I am very flattered to have been asked to open this exhibition here at the Grote Reber Museum. Indeed, I have often been flattered by Professor Britz and Professor John Dickey and others at the University of Tasmania's School of Mathematics and Physics. In addition to this exhibition of work by Nicolas Sarter, they asked me to open the new optical observatory at Bisdiee Tier, and before that, this radio telescope here at Mt Pleasant. They also asked me to address the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Astronomical Society of Australia in 2010 and the Inaugural Super Science Fellows Symposium last year. Such has been their attention that I was beginning to believe that I actually know something about astronomy, maths and science.

However, any wild mistaken belief of that nature came crashing down when I pondered what to say about this project. I have looked at Nicolas Sarter's work that he has posted on his web site and this morning I had a look at his work on exhibition here and was able to discuss it with Nicholas. I studied Nicolas' interesting background that included a period of 8 years working as a glassmaker and a year at the University of Strasbourg before he turned to painting. Last year saw him come to Hobart and start work on this exhibition. He says in his exhibition text, "Since I have a great interest in science and new technologies, I started to work on fiction and

anticipation themes. I transport the viewer into the future by mixing imaginary and reality by combining Art and Science.”

Well, I have to confess that I just could not fathom what was meant by an anticipation theme. However, I am sure that Professor Dickey knows all about anticipation themes because he wrote to me with this advice:

“The exhibition features works inspired by the concept of exploration and travel beyond our world in order to be free of gravity and thereby glimpse new horizons that are disconnected from our daily reality. It is ultimately an invitation to push imposed conceptual and geographical boundaries. The exhibition will cross cultural boundaries as well, bridging the gap between artistic and scientific endeavour.”

Well, receipt of this letter was a low moment for me because it made me realise very clearly that I not only knew nothing about astronomy, maths or science, but I also knew very little about art, and had no idea what could I say to open this exhibition.

So, I sent a ‘please help me’ message to the School of Mathematics and Physics and, as a consequence of that, learnt that this whole idea was conceived by the Executive Officer at the School, Karen Bradford. Karen does a bit of outreach work and community engagement on behalf of the School and she saw Nicolas Sarter’s compelling, vibrant and evocative images as a means of stimulating an interest in science. She explained

that this was the first time the museum had been used in this way and that her outreach program seeks to encourage deeper thinking about science, often by using ideas from science fiction and examples beyond the everyday experience, and thereby foster a further interest and participation in genuine science. Karen said that leaders of the Tasmanian artistic and scientific communities have been invited to the exhibition in order to generate discussion and to educate both groups for there is, in the minds of many, a binary relationship between art and science. In addition to the art, there are a number of pieces in the museum collection that people who go there find fascinating. Karen said having any activity in the museum allows us to interact with, and thereby educate, those who attend, regardless of their initial motivation for doing so.

Karen said that “some of Nico's illustrations could inspire a science fiction writer”. Indeed, Nicolas himself says that his work is largely inspired by science fiction writers, Gregory Benford, Arthur Clarke and Stephen Baxter.<sup>1</sup> But Karen really deeply stirred my interest in this exhibition in this place when she said:

“Looking at the pictures in this display, anybody could start to make up stories about space travel and other worlds. When children make up stories like this, they take their first step toward science. The research that our astronomers are doing with the telescopes in Tasmania begins with dreams, a kind of dream called a hypothesis. Then they use the telescopes to work

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Sarter Exhibition Brief

out whether their hypothesis is true or not. They call this doing fundamental research. Although it may sound dreamy, the history of the last few centuries shows that fundamental research drives new technologies. As an example of the unexpected benefits of fundamental research, Captain James Cook's first voyage to the Pacific, when he mapped New Zealand and the east coast of Australia, was primarily driven by the very abstract goal of measuring the distance from the Earth to the sun by accurate timing of the transit of Venus in 1769."

Karen said, "We hope that young Tasmanians will be among the great discoverers of this new century."

Suddenly, not only could I understand this project of exhibiting Sarter's work here in this museum, but I became, and remain, excited about it and its potential for the promotion of science in the minds of young people. I too think that there is a binary relationship between art and science, whether the art is music or these wonderful paintings created by Nicolas, or the stories of adventures in space created in the stimulated minds of the young. The work of the great artist Leonardo da Vinci was informed by science and as Robert Eskridge, the Executive Director of Museum Education, at the Art Institute of Chicago has said:

"Science and art naturally overlap. Both are a means of investigation. Both involve ideas, theories, and hypotheses that are tested in places where mind and

hand come together — the laboratory and studio. Artists, like scientists, study materials, people, culture, history, religion, mythology and learn to transform information into something else. In ancient Greece, the word for art was *techne*, from which *technique* and *technology* are derived—terms that are aptly applied to both scientific and artistic practices.”<sup>2</sup>

We are fortunate to have people like Karen and Nicolas, people with vision and creativity who together, will inspire our greatest asset: the youth of our country.

I am privileged to be associated with their work and to have been asked to open this splendid exhibition of work by Nicolas Sarter, “0 Gravity”.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.artic.edu/aic/education/sciarttech/2a1.html> accessed 23rd November 2013.