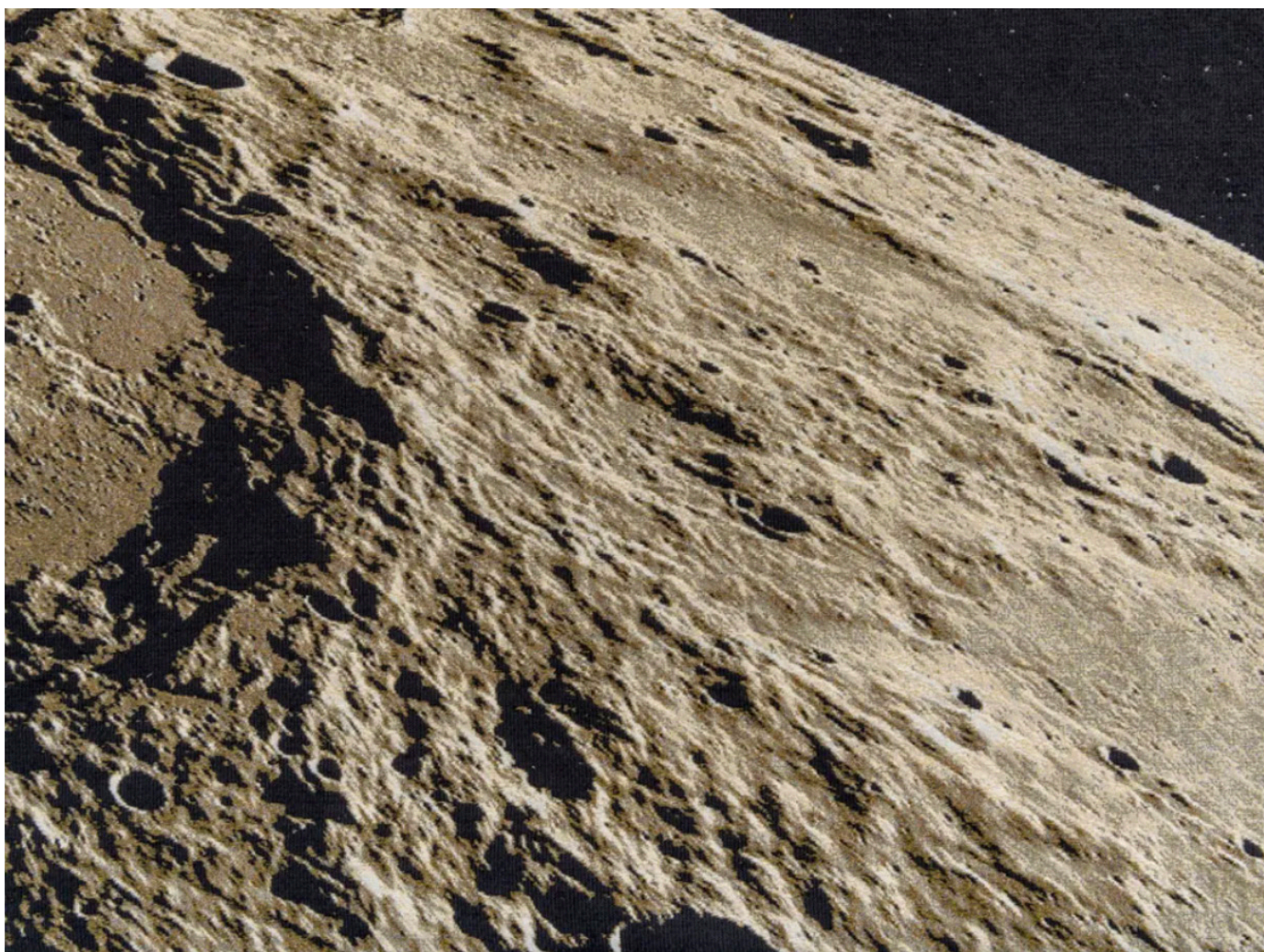


In Houston, Artist Clarissa Tossin Ponders the Colonial Implications of the 21st-Century Space Race

BY BETSY HUETE  March 18, 2022 11:35am



Clarissa Tossin, *The 8th Continent* (detail), 2021. Installed, as part of "Off the Wall," 2021–22, at the Raymond and Susan Brochstein Pavilion. Commissioned by Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University.

PHOTO: NASH BAKER

Los Angeles–based artist Clarissa Tossin has created work in various modes from post-apocalyptic sculpture to installations comprising of woven textiles. For her current exhibition at the Moody Center for the Arts at Rice University in Houston, she presents *The 8th Continent* (2021), situated in Brochstein Pavilion on Rice's campus as part of the Moody Center's "Off the Wall" series. The work is a wide-spanning triptych depicting three images taken by NASA of the moon's ice deposits, which could potentially be mined and later produced as rocket fuel. With the warmth of woven, glittering metallic thread, *The 8th Continent* feels at once enveloping and eerily clinical with its scientific images rendered on a digital loom.



Clarissa Tossin, *The 8th Continent*, 2021, installation view, as part of “Off the Wall,” 2021–22, at the Raymond and Susan Brochstein Pavilion. Commissioned by Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University.

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Born in Porto Alegre, Brazil, before moving to L.A. in 2006 to complete an MFA at the California Institute of the Arts, Tossin has previously spent an extended time in Houston, when she was a fellow at the Core Residency Program, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, between 2010 and 2012. Her work has also appeared in major exhibitions like the 2018 Gwangju Biennale and “Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art” at the Whitney Museum in New York, also in 2018.

In addition to her Moody Center show, which was guest curated by Ylinka Barotto and runs through August 27, Tossin was recently the subject of a solo show at her L.A. gallery Commonwealth & Council earlier this year, where she showed “Disorientation Towards Collapse,” and will have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver that opens in June. A 2019 sound piece by her, *You Got to Make Your Own Worlds* (for when Siri is long gone), was also included in a group exhibition “Kissing Through a Curtain,” which opened in 2020 and closed earlier this year at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

For her current show in Texas, Tossin is thinking about the relationship between space entrepreneurship and exploration: “I’m curious to see how land use and territory play out in the 21st-century space race, and whether the abuses of land and people that have marked our time on Earth get perpetuated as we move out into the solar system.” To learn more about her Moody Center exhibition and her other recent projects, ARTnews interviewed Tossin by email.

How did your interest in moon exploration/exploitation begin?

Clarissa Tossin: I’ve been using NASA images of Mars and the Moon in my weavings and collages for the past few years, as a counterpoint to devastating scenes of environmental collapse. I’m interested in how the narrative around 21st-century space exploration is being put forth as a solution to the challenges facing humanity due to climate change. It seems quite absurd to me, and I really hope to be proven wrong.

I recently began researching Moon-based mining because I wanted to know what resources there were considered worth extracting. Initially, I thought that rare Earth elements must be the Moon's "gold" since they're so important in making high-tech electronic equipment. But in conversations with Dr. David Alexander, director of the Rice Space Institute, and Dr. David A. Kring, principal scientist at the Universities Space Research Association's Lunar and Planetary Institute, who both generously offered me guidance during my research, I learned it's really the Moon's water ice that holds the greatest mining potential, as it's crucial for producing hydrogen rocket fuel for NASA's Artemis program.

It's poetic and disturbing that our presence on the Moon will begin with water (ice deposits) and sunlight (harvested by solar arrays to power the machinery necessary for extraction)—the same two elements that fostered biological life on Earth, billions of years ago. What's about to happen on the Moon will most likely begin to push humanity toward a different kind of life beyond Earth.

For those of us less familiar with this part of space history, could you give us a brief background of the Moon Agreement and how the U.S. created a loophole around it?

The Moon Agreement was adopted by the U.N. in 1979, expanding on the 1967 U.N. Outer Space Treaty that created a basic framework of space law, banning nuclear weapons in space, reserving the Moon and other celestial bodies to peaceful uses, and making space a kind of international demilitarized zone for free exploration and use by all nations. The Moon Treaty further declares the Moon the "common heritage of mankind" (which is a source of ongoing disagreement) and stipulates that "an international regime" should govern any resource extraction or mining. The U.N. held a series of conferences to try and settle on an appropriate regime of law, but failed to get anywhere, and the Treaty was never ratified by any of the major players in space flight, like the U.S., Russia, and China.

Fast forward to 2015, the U.S. Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act, signed into law by President Obama, effectively legalized space mining by American private enterprise, allowing companies to own mining rights and profit from sale of resources produced on asteroids and other off-world bodies like the Moon, Mars, and beyond. Many other nations have followed suit. In 2020, President Trump went a step further by signing an executive order, "Encouraging International Support for the Recovery and Use of Space Resources," formally recognizing the rights of American private interests to claim resources in space, thus ending the decades-long debate that began with the signing of the Outer Space Treaty. It establishes Americans' "right to engage in commercial exploration, recovery, and use of resources in outer space, consistent with applicable law"—and directly refutes the Moon Treaty in declaring that the United States does not view space as a "global commons."

Do you believe the human impulse to explore is also inextricably linked to the desire to have and own—or control?

History as a patriarchal narrative written by the winner has taught us that this might be the case, but I'm interested in alternative narratives that question those assumptions about "human nature," for instance, the book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* by anthropologist David Graeber and archeologist David Wengrow. The authors show how history becomes a far more interesting place once we learn to throw off our conceptual shackles and perceive what's really there. They challenge our most fundamental assumptions about social evolution and reveal new possibilities for human emancipation with startling implications for how we make sense of human history today, including the origins of farming, property, cities, democracy, slavery, and civilization itself.

I have a related question in regards to a quote from the exhibition's wall text: "By focusing on the eminent extraction of resources on the Moon, The 8th Continent recalls the tension between environmental preservation and industrial exploitation of Earth's diminishing resources, and considers how frontier mythologies rationalize discovery and the subsequent stages of development and extraction." Do you believe the U.S.'s notion of unfettered optimism toward progress is inextricably linked to colonial conquest? Especially as someone who isn't originally from the U.S.: do you see an America that is forever entangled in its own mythology?



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Every empire uses mythologies and values systems to sustain and justify the control it exerts over others, over its own people, and so on. The colonial project goes beyond issues of border and territory; just think about how our minds are colonized, trained to think along certain lines and not others. But going back to the issue of resources, if you believe that expansion is a given and progress will always bring benefits to people, then we might one day have to extract beyond the solar system!

In my sound piece, *You Got to Make Your Own Worlds* (for when Siri is long gone), which was recently on view at Mass MOCA, I selected excerpts of [historical] interviews with sci-fi author Octavia E. Butler and put them in conversation with Apple Inc's iOS virtual assistant, Siri. Here's an excerpt from that constructed conversation, a quote by Butler: "I think that the one thing we can be sure of is that we won't have, you know, straight line prophecy coming true that whatever technological things we're doing now will just do more of that and better. I think we'll get surprises. It's dangerous to assume that we can actually see the future by only looking at the advancements we've made so far." It's very interesting to see how some of Butler's statements about the future and the faith in progress reflect our present.

*You've expressed interest in Butler's writing in past work. Does your interest in Butler also relate in any way to *The 8th Continent*? If so, how?*

Octavia Butler sparked my interest in science fiction, as well as space exploration and some of the current science associated with it. *The 8th Continent* doesn't draw directly from any of her novels, but it certainly comes from a familiar place of interrogating scientific propositions from a humanistic perspective. I'm curious to see how land use and territory play out in the 21st-century space race, and whether the abuses of land and people that have marked our time on Earth get perpetuated as we move out into the solar system.

The work in the Moody Center show feels texturally gratifying in terms of its excruciating level of detail, the iridescent thread, and the material warmth emanating from the woven tapestry. Yet, these high-resolution, scientific images also register as clinical, icy, and even evasive. Could you talk more about this seductive push/pull technique going on in the work and how it relates to the subject matter at hand?

I wanted to stay true to the digital realm, treating outer space images for what they are: more a matter of selective mapping and coding than anything like photography in the traditional sense, the straightforward record of a landscape. Images of planets and moons taken from satellites and rovers are far less straightforward than meets the eye. Every image must be processed, manipulated, and interpreted—and this is after a team of scientists has haggled over what they should even be imaging, to begin with. Janet Vertesi's book *Seeing Like a Rover* has been illuminating, and a great source of inspiration in this regard. She unpacks the role of digital processing in uncovering scientific truths, where images craft consensus and team members develop an uncanny intimacy with the sensory apparatus of a robot, millions of miles away.

Could you elaborate more on the use of a digital loom?

Using a digital loom to output the images into the weave of the tapestries seemed to go with these processes, which inherently complicate the relationship between reality and photography—its documentary capabilities and relationship with the human eye. I think it's interesting to think about the visualization of space landscapes as something created by scientists through technological imaging processes that go beyond human sight. Think about how Google Earth allows us to surveil the surface of the Moon and Mars from a detached robotic perspective, and how more and more, these landscapes are getting incorporated into the visuality of “our” world.

Could you talk a little bit more about your recent show at Commonwealth and Council? In what ways does that show parallel or intersect with this work?

In “Disorientation Towards Collapse,” I further engage with the global environmental catastrophe, and the key role humans and corporations have played in accelerating the disaster. I’m also looking at the paradigm shift from environmental conservation to industrial exploitation against a backdrop of Earth’s dwindling resources, and how frontier mythologies really pave the way, charting the relentless course that leads from discovery and development to extraction, over and over again, starting just beyond whatever frontier we just used up. Of course, the privatization of space exploration in the 21st century is gearing up for the next cycle. I want to show how this flourishing new industry is predicated on the same bad logic of over-extraction that has brought our planet to the brink of ecological collapse.



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