The Herald

Katie Paterson: Afterlife is at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh

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Visual artist Katie Paterson at the Scottish debut of her exhibition Afterlife at Collective Gallery in Edinburgh *(Image: Eoin Carey)*

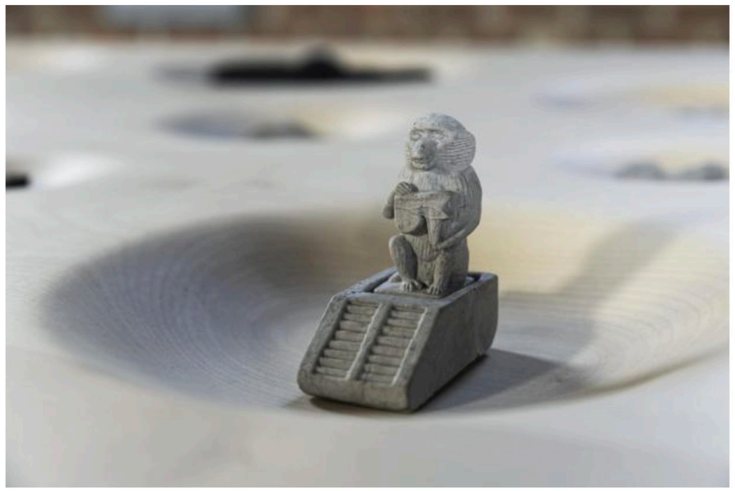
You could never accuse Katie Paterson of a lack of ambition, nor could you ever say she didn't think big.

In 2014, for example, the Glasgow-born artist initiated The Future Library. Intended as a century long programme, it involved the planting of 1000 trees north of the Norwegian capital Oslo, and the commissioning of 100 manuscripts from 100 writers, some of them not yet born. These written works are to be held in a specially constructed 'Silent Library' and will be unavailable to the reading public until 2114, when the forest will be harvested to make the paper to print the books.

Among the authors who have already contributed are Margaret Atwood, Amitav Ghosh, Karl Ove Knausgård and Elif Shafak. Shafak is appearing at this month's **Edinburgh** International Book Festival, by the way, should you want to try to find out something about her contribution, titled The Last Taboo.

"It's a project built on trust, hope and long-term thinking," Paterson explains. "The authors are writing for readers they will never meet, and we're caring for a forest whose purpose won't be fulfilled within our lifetimes ... It's a work that unfolds at the pace of a forest, reminding us that some of the most meaningful things we do may not be completed in our own lifetime."

You can learn more about The Future Library at the Collective Gallery atop **Edinburgh**'s Calton Hill, where there is a video presentation on its decade of life so far. That's not the main event though, rather it's an adjunct to the main event – Paterson's new show, Afterlife, making its Scottish debut in Collective's grand Dome Gallery as part of the Edinburgh **Art** Festival following its unveiling at last year's prestigious Folkestone Triennial. But, just like The Future Library, it's breath-taking in its scale and ambition, even if it covers markedly less acreage than 1000 saplings.



Afterlife, Katie Paterson (2026) created in collaboration with architects Zeller & Moye, at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh *(Image: Eoin Carey)*

Ranged over two large, hemispherical tables made from sycamore are 197 amulets, each one in its own sanded, recessed hollow. Egyptian, Aztec, Japanese, Chinese, African, Islamic, Viking, Mayan, Inuit and **Celtic** cultures are all represented, though these amulets are facsimiles of the real ones: they have been 3D scanned then copied using moulds, and remade to include materials which relate to landscapes, ecosystems and endangered environments.

The objects are then divided into 10 categories with titles running from Biosphere, Hydrosphere and Cryosphere (the part of the world's surface where water is frozen) to War, Mining and Pollution. And so a red Mesoamerican amulet in the shape of a sheaf of corn from 1200 BC, intended to represent nourishment and life, has been recast containing visible man-made fibres from so-called 'fast fashion' products. Likewise a 3rd century amulet showing the head of a king, from the Sasanian empire which once ruled modern-day Iran, has embedded in it parts of plastic circuit boards found floating in the ocean.

The idea for Afterlife came from Paterson's long fascination with amulets and the role they have played in human history.

"These small, intimate objects, often carved from stone, were carried as protective talismans," she says. "I wanted to connect this ancient human tradition of safeguarding with our urgent contemporary need to protect the planet's disappearing ecosystems and collapsing biodiversity. We are living through a human-induced sixth mass extinction, with more than a million species now at risk."

Other materials she has included in her 21st century amulets include oil spill debris from the Niger Delta, wood from trees burned during Amazon deforestation, stones exposed by retreating glaciers, microplastics from deep ocean trenches, and sand from low-lying Pacific islands threatened by rising sea-levels. All of it is material either created by humans, or created as a result of harmful human activities such as mineral extraction and fossil fuel use.

Her intention, she adds, is for Afterlife to work as a sort of "future archaeology" by "shrinking immense planetary stories into forms that can be held in the hand. I hope to create an intimate connection with crises that can otherwise feel overwhelmingly abstract." Which, ultimately, is the point of art.

But while Paterson is a great advertisement for ambition and for thinking at scale, she's also a proponent of not over-thinking – or, as she reveals, of not thinking at all.

"My ideas rarely arrive through logical problem-solving," she admits. "They tend to emerge when I'm in a state of not thinking – walking, travelling, looking out of a train window. Or simply allowing my mind to wander. It's in those quiet, unstructured moments that seemingly unrelated things settle and connect in unexpected ways ... Almost every project starts life as a single sentence in my ongoing Ideas series. The initial idea is often incredibly simple."

That Ideas series began in 2015 and consists of ideas for art projects which may or may not come to pass. But the short, haiku like sentences – 'A beach made with sand from hourglasses' is one example – become artworks in their own right when projected, painted or stencilled onto gallery walls.

But although many of the Ideas are fanciful in the extreme ('The universe rewound and played back in real time' would be a stretch) it's thinking like this which comes up with projects which do make it into the real world. The Future Library is one, another is Water Drop from 2022, in which Paterson encoded a map of the entire known universe as DNA data, suspended it in a droplet of water, then released it into a waterfall in Iceland. Or how about Vatnajokull (The sound Of), which placed microphones and a telephone line inside an Icelandic glacier? Anyone ringing the number 077570 01122 from anywhere in the world could then listen to the sound it made as it melted.

In fact Iceland and its landscape and environment have played an inspirational role in Paterson's career as an artist. She lived there for a while after graduating from Edinburgh College of **Art** in 2004 and today describes that experience as "transformative".

"Immersed in 24-hour daylight, the Northern Lights, glaciers, geysers and volcanic landscapes, I suddenly had the visceral sense of being on a physical planet," she recalls. "For the first time, it really hit me that we're living on a spinning Earth, orbiting the Sun within an immense universe. The strata in the Icelandic rocks became my first connection to Deep Time, a feeling I later found again in distant stars."



Afterlife, Katie Paterson (2026) created in collaboration with architects Zeller & Moye, at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh *(Image: eoin carey; Eoin Carey)*

Returning to London to study at the Slade School of Fine Art within University College London (UCL), she realised UCL's Rock and Ice Physics Laboratory – fetchingly known as RIPL – was right on her doorstep. "I wandered in, started talking to researchers, and discovered how open they were to these conversations. That opened the door to a collaborative, research-based way of working that has shaped my practice ever since."

As well as reading widely across scientific papers, journals, academic books and historical texts, those conversations have continued – "It's often through conversation that ideas really come alive," she says – and so have the collaborations. To date, Paterson has worked wit,h or been embedded in, organisations such as the Wellcome Sanger Institute, a genomics and genetics research institute in Cambridge, and the Astrophysics Group, also based at UCL.

She also has a long-standing working relationship with Berlin-based architecture practice Zeller & Moye, who have partnered with her on Afterlife as well as on works like 2023's Mirage – 400 glass cylinders, each six and a half feet high, ranged in undulating lines in parkland and made from sand collected from beaches around the world. Just one more example of the globe-encompassing scale at which this most intriguing of Scottish artists pitches her thought-provoking and quietly political work.

Katie Paterson: Afterlife is at Collective Gallery, Edinburgh (until September 6). On August 16 Katie Paterson will be in conversation there with Ingrid Moye, of Zeller & Moye