



# AMY HAFT

700,000:1 | TERRA + LUNA + SOL

MASS MoCA



# A Mote of Dust Suspended in a Sunbeam: The Universe of Amy Haft

By Denise Markonish

**“If we pay close attention to the life and activity of the great celestial powers—the sun, the moon, and the clustered stars—we will see that even these entities, so commonly associated with height and vertical transcendence, seem to emerge from, and return to, the lands beyond the horizon.”**

—David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996)

The Lars von Trier film *Melancholia* (2011) begins with an 8-minute slow-motion prelude, devoid of dialogue, and set to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* (1859). Opening with Kirsten Dunst’s character, Justine, in close-up, birds fall from the sky behind her, an eerie portent of the impending doom wrought by Earth’s twin planet, Melancholia. This sequence, which references films *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) and *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972), and Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), ends with this new, depressive planet, swallowing the Earth: an extreme celestial event ushering in an age of melancholy.

*Melancholia*’s prelude reminds us of the inconsequential nature of humanity when faced with the vastness of the universe. Carl Sagan emphasized this imbalance after seeing the photo of Earth taken by Voyager 1 while 4 billion miles from Earth, picturing the planet as a point of light equivalent to 0.12 pixel. In *Pale Blue Dot*:

*A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (1994) Sagan writes “Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives... every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.” He goes on to remind us that “Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.”

Von Trier’s celestially apocalyptic film, and Sagan’s reminder of our infinitesimal place in the universe, are what inspire artist Amy Haft to make experiential installations that grapple with the disequilibrium of human existence on planet Earth. Haft’s exhibition *700,000:1 | Terra + Luna + Sol*, consists of three installations inspired by the Earth, Moon, and Sun, which in concert make us palpably aware of distance and proximity, the curve of the earth, the odds of disaster, and our own place suspended in a sunbeam.

As visitors enter MASS MoCA’s third-floor galleries they encounter a set of three installations together titled, *700,000:1*, the



Detail of *Pale Blue Dot Revisited*, 2020.  
Image by NASA/JPL-Caltech

mathematical odds of a person being hit by a meteor while minding their own business. In his February 9, 2016, *National Geographic* article, "What Are the Odds a Meteorite Could Kill You?" Brian Clark Howard writes that "Astronomer Alan Harris made a similar calculation, finding that a human being has a 1 in 700,000 chance of getting killed by an impact from space in their lifetime, with most of the risk coming from a large-scale event." While Howard describes the odds as not so probable compared to "1 in 90 by a car accident, 1 in 250 by a fire, 1 in 60,000 by a tornado, 1 in 135,000 by lightning, 1 in 8 million by a shark attack, or 1 in 195 million by winning the Powerball lottery," it's hard to deny that the odds are a little too imaginable than feels comfortable.

Hauft puts her viewers actively in the middle of her installations, making sure that we feel the phenomena she is recreating in our own bodies. *Terra* is no exception. This work is made from two enormous sphere-caps facing one another: one on the floor and the other on the ceiling. Viewers can ascend the artificial-turfed sphere-cap

from any direction they choose, but if they select the series of shallow steps, they are in for a reward. [Going back to the opening sequence of *Melancholia*, these steps recall a shot in which Charlotte Gainsbourg's character is seen slowly sinking into the grass of a golf course, her footsteps sucked into the surface as if the sod was memory foam.] Using the steps to ascend to the highest point of the grassy sphere-cap, one's head intersects with the upper blue sphere-cap, made from lengths of side-by-side tufted blue chenille. As the visitor stands, head enveloped within the upper blue bowl, their view is limited to the inside of its interior surface—a seemingly limitless panorama of blue. Other visitors in the gallery witness a headless body obstructed by the top of the installation. This work addresses both wonder and worry, the awe of being on the ground and in the sky simultaneously, and the not-so-unfathomable possibility of annihilation by meteor. With *Terra*, Hauft provides a place to bury our heads for a moment and experience the world anew.

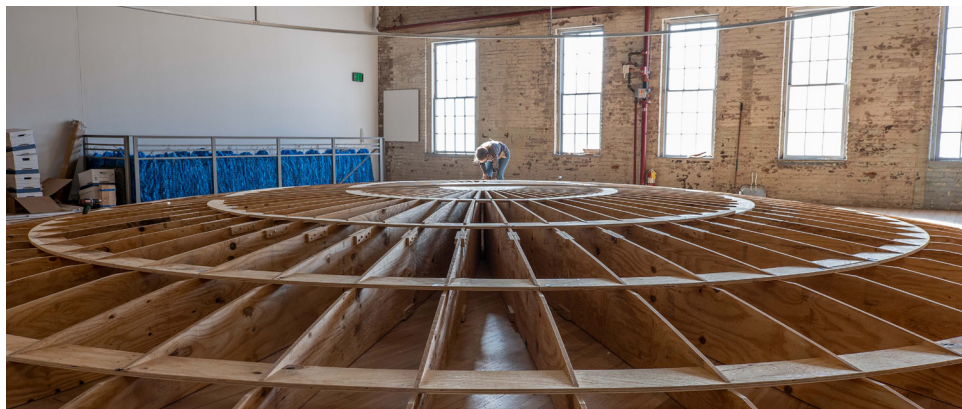
Adjacent to *Terra*, Hauft presents *Luna*, the Moon. Hauft is intrigued by the unfathomability and allure of Earth's satellite; however, she does not immediately satisfy our desire for proximity. Instead she hides an inverse cast of the Moon behind a hallway wall. Mounted on the floor is a step stool and handhold, enabling the viewer to climb the wall. Once in this precarious position, a visitor can put their head through a hole in the wall (with a periscope view available in the adjacent room). The hole is a portal, and visitors discover themselves enveloped within a giant sphere—an inside-out casting of the moon—complete with its familiar crater-pocked surface but inverse. This reversal produces an optical illusion that confuses the eye, concave becomes convex, and

the vulnerable space is just beyond the grasp of fathomability. One can never see the whole of it, just like the moon itself, but instead one palpably feels its presence looming behind the hallway wall. It is reminiscent of Italo Calvino's 1965 short story "The Distance of the Moon," in which he postulates a time when the Earth and Moon were more deeply connected. Calvino writes "We had her on top of us all the time, that enormous Moon: when she was full—nights as bright as day, but with a butter-colored light—it looked as if she were going to crush us; when she was new...as for eclipses, with Earth and Moon stuck together the way they were, why, we had eclipses every minute..." By the end of the story, Earth and Moon have pulled apart, and we are once again denied proximity just as in Hauff's work.

In the third gallery, Hauff presents us with the blinding light of the Sun, this time in the form of a large handblown Venetian glass chandelier. Created out of clear glass infused with gold, hanging too low, and blazing too bright, this object becomes its own satellite, one that magnetically draws us in yet blinds us if we look too long. All three works in

this exhibition reveal and conceal, while begging us to both stare and close our eyes to the wonders around us.

In his book *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard writes about the idea of "intimate immensity," the poetic concept of shifting scale where the small can become vast and vice versa. In the text, he quotes Polish poet Czesław Miłosz's *Amorous Initiation: A Novel of Sacred and Profane Love* (1910): "Oh, space, you who separate the waters; my joyous friend, with what love I sense you! Here I am like the flowering nettle in the gentle sunlight of ruins, like the pebble on the spring's edge, or the serpent in the warm grass! Is this instant really eternity? Is eternity really this instant?" Here, as in Hauff's work, we are reminded of our deep connection to the universe. *700,000:1 | Terra + Luna + Sol* reminds us that whether or not a twin planet is absorbing the Earth, we can row out to the moon, or are a mote of dust in a sunbeam; we hold inside of us the abstract knowledge that we are standing atop a twirling ball hurtling through the solar system, live in the blink of an eye, and are subject to endless variables in life, and the universe.



Amy Hauff working on *Terra*. Image by Sofia Taylor



**Amy Haft** has exhibited her large-scale architectural installations in museums and galleries worldwide including the Brooklyn Museum (NYC), the New Museum (NYC), the International Artists Museum (Poland), The American Academy in Rome (Italy), and MoMA PS1 (NYC), among many others. She has been the recipient of significant grants including the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, PEW Foundation Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, the Howard Foundation Fellowship, and a NYC Public Art Fund Grant, among others. She has been awarded residencies to work abroad, including at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation Fellowship in Umbria, Italy, and the International Artists Residency Fellowship in Łódź, Poland. She has taught at the Tyler School of Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, and the University of Texas at Austin, and is currently based in St. Louis, Missouri, directing the College of Art in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University.

## **Amy Haft:**

### **700,000:1 | Terra + Luna + Sol**

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Curated by Denise Markonish

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Interior flap: Amy Haft, detail of *Luna*, 2022.

Image by Sofia Taylor



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