LOOKING BACK

Chris Fraser

scottsdale museum of contemporary art
AND WE FLEE IN SEARCH OF LAST SUMMER OR NEXT SUMMER, BUT THERE’S NO HARM IN IT IF WE KNOW ALL THE TIME THAT IT’S ONLY A SHADOW SHOW.

In the archetypal American road trip, the windshield of a speeding car frames the endless road, sweeping mountain range and setting sun. Over the course of two years, Chris Fraser spent more than a month driving the remote stretches of highway connecting Arizona’s central Sonoran Desert, northeastern Mohave Desert and southeastern arid grasslands. His pilgrimages provided him with ample opportunity to observe the subtle interactions of light and matter in the breathtaking landscape—the pale yellow dawn, vast blue skies, stark shadows and fiery red sunsets. It also exposed him to the constructed landscape of rural Arizona—vintage fluorescent signage advertising roadside motels; glaring, sunbaked blacktop roads; and radical architectural experiments constructed in isolation.

Chris Fraser: Looking Back alludes to the artist’s longing for a history of the American West—real or imagined—in which hope, speculation, equity and cooperation coexist. Fraser’s art demonstrates his abiding interest in humanist endeavors: history, science, anthropology, philosophy, literature and art. Nineteenth-century descriptions of the American frontier portrayed the landscape as an untouched, uninhabited Eden. Derived from the Greek ou-tópos, a utopia is a “no-place”; the word is also a pun on eu-tópos, or “good place.” This elegant contradiction—a perfect place that does not exist—is woven into the mythos of the American West.

The exhibition’s title references the late 19th-century novel Looking Backward: 2000 – 1887, in which author Edward Bellamy offered a utopian vision of the 21st century: a perfectly equitable society where communities cooperate and share resources made possible by technological advances. Fraser suggested “looking back” as a way of reclaiming the optimistic visions of three unique Arizona sites: Arcosanti in the semi-desert grasslands north of Phoenix, Biosphere 2 at the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains northeast of Tucson and Kitt Peak National Observatory in the Quinlan Mountains southwest of Tucson. Constructed in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, amidst increasing environmental concerns, these projects blended with the natural world and suggested daring possibilities for a sustainable future—high-density cities, artificial habitats to support human life and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the cosmos.

For Fraser’s exhibition, the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art commissioned the artist to design two architectural environments. The resultant works, Atmosphere and Aura, precisely sculpt and control light in ways that encourage participants to move and explore. When titling the two works, Fraser chose synonyms to emphasize the connection between them. The terms “atmosphere” and “aura” are commonly used to describe a distinctive but indefinable quality that envelops or surrounds a thing; moreover, both words relate physically and metaphorically to air, breath and vapor.

Drawing is an essential component of Chris Fraser’s artistic process. While preparing for Looking Back, Fraser filled multiple notebooks with his careful, precise graphite drawings. Initially his sketching exercises followed many different trajectories. As his ideas coalesced and the design became more definitive, Fraser transformed his studies into three-dimensional computer models. These drawings and models helped communicate his ideas to the team of museum staff, fabricators and construction crews who built the large-scale installations.
Atmosphere consists of a voluminous circular structure that fills most of the museum gallery. Its heavy steel exterior and commanding height contrast with the rich light that spills from the central core. A sloping ramp invites visitors to enter and explore the interior where a vertical column of glass tubes projects light, casting silhouettes of visitors onto the environment’s rounded walls. As participants make their way through the space, their movements produce optical phenomena noticeable in their peculiar shadows: when visitors stand upright, their shadows follow their vertical postures but also spread out into clean stripes in a tonal range from dark to light. Horizontal movements cause shadows to disappear. Light levels slowly fluctuate as electrically charged argon and neon mimic the colors of the Arizona sky. Fraser poetically described this multisensory experience: “We no longer just breathe these gases. Now that they are visible—we see them, we wade through them.”
The Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art also commissioned Chris Fraser to design an outdoor artwork for the nearby Civic Center Mall. *Aura* is one of Fraser’s most minimal artworks; its only physical components are poured concrete and scattered glass microspheres. With such limited materials, every detail of the work and its surroundings becomes more conspicuous. The circular concrete pad, scaled in proportion to the grassy basin, allows room for 3 – 4 adults to move comfortably in the interior. The absence of trees minimizes shadows and maximizes sunlight throughout the day. The dazzling optical effects of the environment become apparent when a visitor steps onto the concrete. The key to the participant’s experience is found nestled in the variegated surface of the concrete: nearly invisible retro-reflective glass beads. The glass spheres reflect and refract sunlight, creating shimmering, prismatic halos around participants’ shadows.

Fraser is often inspired by seemingly insignificant happenings, such as fractured light glistening on the pavement seen from a moving bicycle, or the interplay of sunlight on a moisture-filled cloud observed from an airplane window. *Looking Back* extends his experiments in building environments that empower us to look more carefully at our surroundings and our place in the world.
A CONVERSATION
WITH CHRIS FRASER
AND LARRY D. BUSBEA

The following exchange took place in August 2015 via email after several convivial meetings between artist Chris Fraser and art, architecture and design historian Larry D. Busbea. The questions were dictated by the common interests Fraser and Busbea share—most especially their desire to understand environment as a perceptual phenomenon and why coming to grips with environment has become increasingly pressing since the 1960s.

Larry D. Busbea The desert is often portrayed as a mythical site of diaspora, utopian experimentation and transformation. How do your works respond to that archetypal conception, as well as the actual desert in central Arizona?

Chris Fraser The desert is home to ideas that are grand in scale and daring in concept. The American West has often been treated as a blank slate. Land has been cheap and people few. With a tradition of limited legislation, politics skews libertarian. This has proved fertile ground for social experimentation. With no one looking over your shoulder, it becomes possible to test notions of community. You can’t offend the sensibilities of neighbors you don’t have.

On my initial trip to Arizona, I was drawn to forlorn monuments of a future past. I didn’t know this at the time. There was something alluring about Arcosanti, Biosphere 2 and Kitt Peak National Observatory, something curious and beautiful. After I returned home to Northern California, I began to realize that each presented a unique vision for the future. More to the point, each argued for what the future should be like.

These spaces would not have been possible outside the American desert. It seems strange now that Paolo Soleri could finance the construction of a new city of concrete from the sale of bronze bells, and with the labor of college students. Stranger still that members of a New Mexico commune could build a multimillion-dollar test site for the colonization of Mars on a plot of land near Oracle, Arizona. Kitt Peak is an outlier by comparison; not a fringe project, but a technological marvel embodying a commitment to scientific progress.

The architects of these facilities were interested in presenting them as forward looking. In hindsight, the sites’ respective shapes bear a strong formal resemblance to the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller or even the drop-out hovels of the Drop City artist community in rural 1960s Colorado. Observatories continue to be modeled on a mid-20th-century vision of the future. In the public imagination, this is simply what an observatory should look like.

These experiments in utopian futurism are all radical syntheses of nature and technology. Arcosanti, Biosphere 2 and Kitt Peak engage nature through the frame of ecology or physics and look to technology as an aid to observation and progress.

As for this present exhibition, Looking Back, I modeled the installations on observatories. But rather than looking outward at the stars, we look closely at the local environment; we look with attention; we notice our presence in it and influence on it.

How do you understand “environment?” Is it the natural landscape? The technical world we’ve constructed around ourselves? Do your works demonstrate distinctions or connections between the natural world and the constructed environment? Your two installations Atmosphere and Aura also seem relevant in this regard.

“Environment” is more than nature. It is a cultural invention of the mid-20th-century that encompasses all the matter, energy and processes comprising a system. It goes beyond the conception of the natural and includes nearly every scene or landscape: the home, the workplace, politics. It’s not just physical, but intellectual and social.

This exhibition links the desert and utopian experimentation through this broad notion of environment. My new works are technological simulations of the atmosphere. I designed spaces that look back at us, casting architecture as a companion, as a relationship between space and inhabitant, as a conversation.

For Atmosphere, glass tubes filled with argon and neon (two abundant atmospheric gases) simulate the color of the Arizona sky. Spanning the height of the installation, the central light column is structured to respond to our actions so we can investigate, play with and probe the air, understanding atmosphere as a phenomenon near to us and as a medium in which we live and act.

Aura is similarly concerned with relocating an atmospheric phenomenon to the ground. Flying into Phoenix last spring, I first witnessed the phenomenon known as a “glory.” On some low-lying clouds, the shadow of the airplane was framed by an unbroken halo. For this installation, I simulated the cloud cover using a slab of concrete and engineered glass beads that mimic the prismatic quality of raindrops. In this environment, your shadow is always accompanied by a halo.

Aura and Atmosphere return to the environmental concept of the common and nearby. At their best, they make the less visible visible, the barely tangible tangible. We navigate through a dense world, crowded with light and sound, bodies and demands, energies and devices. I design spaces that tune out this background noise and allow you to focus on some small aspect of the din, examine it closely and imagine how it might fit back into the world.

Questioning the definition of “environment” was also a pressing interest in the art and scientific discourse of the 1960s and 70s, much of which concerned itself with light, space and perception. How does your work relate to this period half a century ago?

One of the most appealing aspects of the philosophies of environment in the 1960s and 70s is the emphasis on connectivity, whether from the standpoint of ecologists looking to turn toward the natural, or the cyberneticists advocating greater harmony with our technologies. Both felt the alienation that grew out of mechanization and mass production, and neither believed it was inevitable.

At that time, artists exploring phenomenology turned away from discrete objects and instead focused on perceptual stimulation, participation and circumstance. They reimagined conditions as art. Unlike many naturalists, these artists did not assert
a romantic rejection of technology. On the contrary, Light and Space artists in California, GRAV in France and Group Zero in Germany used technology as a means of perceptual activation. Even Hans Haacke’s Condensation Cube, undeniably a discrete object, was made to point back at the climate within the gallery.

We find ourselves now in an analogous time of technological revolution, where the pace of change is faster than our ability to adapt to it. As slowness, rest and physical encounters wane, I find I want them more. I embrace technology on most levels, but it needs to address me as a total person. Its priorities cannot be solely those of production, efficiency and profit. The desire to make spaces that better complement our bodies, our social selves, our sense of purpose, our need to protect our focus—I feel this acutely, and I do not believe I am alone.

**Has your residency in the desert provoked changes in your work, and, if so, how?**

What began as an interest in quirky architecture evolved into a pursuit of radical relationships. I’ve become more conscious of how architecture shapes our actions, guiding personal and social behaviors. I’ve maintained my interest in how perceptual environments can mimic and modify our senses, but I’ve become more concerned with how they can complement and modify the body. The mid-century utopians spent a lot of time imagining technology that did not alienate the self, and experimenting with architecture that responded to the body. I set that as my challenge: How can space feel intimate? How is the environment part of the self? How is the self part of the environment?

Architecture reflects our civic values and sets boundaries for our social interactions. Good architecture can liberate, bad architecture oppresses. Tuning a controlled environment has been a feature of my work since my photography turned sculptural. I wanted to put viewers in direct contact with the things I found beautiful and worthy of attention. But I’m no longer satisfied with presence before the world; I want involvement. The newer spaces encourage activity, changing when you enter the rooms and continuing to change as you investigate them. In these relational environments, the viewer is essential not just to the performance of the space, but to its identity.

**What do you expect from a viewer? Your works lack a strong authorial imprint; instead they seem to be setting up perceptual situations in which the viewer is required to interact with the work, or even to complete it. What are your hopes for, or expectations of, the viewer?**

I wouldn’t say my work lacks authorial imprint, rather that discovery is a defining feature of it, as both a means and an end. Curiosity is essential to my working method. My architectural spaces are prescriptive to a degree. By limiting what phenomena are present, I make room for only certain activities. But those activities become the work, with the viewer featured prominently as maker or co-creator. I want my art to provoke unreserved engagement. I cannot supply an outcome and become the work, with the viewer featured prominently as maker or co-creator. But those activities become the work, with the viewer featured prominently as maker or co-creator. I want viewers to see the same phenomena everywhere they go. I’m not inventive, just perceptive. Attention is a habit that requires practice. The more you do it, the better you get, and the more the world opens up to you.
All works in the exhibition are by Chris Fraser. Born in Sacramento, California in 1978, the artist lives in Oakland, California.

**Atmosphere**, 2015
Structure: drywall, steel, wood, paint and rubber membrane. Lighting element: argon and neon gases, glass, acrylic, metal, electricity, transformers and programmable dimmers
Exterior: 21 feet 7 inches in diameter, 9 feet high
Interior: 21 feet in diameter, 8 feet high
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

**Study for Entrance, Aerial View**, 2015
**Study for Interior, Aerial View and Exterior, Side View**, 2014
**Study for Installation Interior, Cross-section View**, 2014
**Study for Light Column, Side View**, 2015
**Study for Projection and Shadows, Aerial View**, 2014
Five drawings, graphite on paper
Each 6 ¼ x 8 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

**Aura**, 2015
Concrete, retro-reflective glass microspheres and sunlight
16 foot diameter, 4 inches deep
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

**Architecture + Art**
Chris Fraser: Looking Back is the fourth exhibition in the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art’s ongoing series Architecture + Art that presents ground-breaking projects by individuals whose work explores and challenges the boundaries between architecture and art.

**Architecture + Art**
Chris Fraser: Looking Back

**October 3, 2015 – January 10, 2016**

Chris Fraser, artist and co-author
Larry D. Busbea, associate professor of art history and co-author
Claire C. Carter, curator and co-author

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Visit Aura, an outdoor sculpture located a short walk from the Museum.

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