

Keith Tyson
Parasol Unit, London

Review by Estella Hung



The first conclusion you might draw from *Cloud Choreography* is that Keith Tyson has finally chosen an accessible subject matter in which to indulge his artistic sensibilities

Over the years, the Turner Prize winner has illustrated his arcane fascinations with causality, randomness and the way complex organic systems materialise through sculpture, pop art, abstract art, and mixed media. In doing so, his work has been uniquely placed as a connector of the aesthetic with the scientific with the poetic. His audiences are not only invited to survey the way the artist sees the world scientifically but to unveil for themselves the underlying order of nature. For instance, for 2005's *Large Field Array*, based on a slew of radio telescopes in New Mexico, Tyson constructed an "experiential lens" – an assortment of two cubic foot sculptures referencing everything from natural detritus (ie, skeletons) to products of the media (ie, Donald Trump's wedding cake). Art goers were asked to navigate their way through this seeming randomness of imagery, to find a connectedness between the sculpted modules like the psychological process of free association.

But due to the high production values of *Large Field Array* and other celebrated works, certain critics were less impressed by their supposed profundity than by the Jeff Koon aftertaste they left. And those who bought into the profundity criticised them for being too highbrow and emotionally bankrupt. But Tyson's oeuvre, so profligate in its ideas and varying in its forms, is meant foremost to be perceptually rather than viscerally engaging.

That's why *Cloud Choreography*, the headline series of artworks on display at Parasol Unit, seems to catch Tyson's nous in a slightly deflated state. As a result, though, it offers the audience some welcome respite. Tyson has used clouds to demonstrate humankind's relationship with nature, particularly its penchant for assigning meaning to phenomena that occur naturally. One work for instance, *Time Travelling with Clouds*, displays clouds that symbolise various points in human history, such as the mushroom cloud, the smoky residue of burning oil fields in Iraq, the rust-coloured clouds from the film *Gone with the Wind*. Another work consists of photorealistic renderings of so-called chemtrails – the archetype of a cloud-like formation that is pregnant with (real or imagined) meaning.

Cloud Choreography's relatively accessible and non-indulgent nature is carried through to Nature Sculptures, Nature Paintings. This series is made up of fissured cubic sculptures, which occupy the middle of gallery space, plus large-scale aluminium panels that bear chemically-induced patterns portraying natural processes (ie, volcanic eruptions) and landscapes (ie, the lunarscape). The latter are Tyson's way of recreating "emergent systems" using different chemical agents and pigments. Emergent phenomena in nature, such as ripple patterns in sand or snowflakes, are orderly patterns created from a complex chain of interactions between simpler elements. In this way, Nature Paintings are both reminiscent of nature as well as a product of it.

The final part of the exhibition concerns itself with the human act of creation. Conjuring Galileo's famous observation that the universe is written in the language of mathematics, Tyson's Operator Paintings suggest that human creativity, like the material world, can be reduced to mathematical origins. It comprises large-scale meta-artistic propositions with their faux-mathematical formulaic representation. The propositions vary in their level of creativity, from an archaic map of Rome to a screenprinted pigeon from an outdated anatomical textbook to a smog-saturated London.

But look closely and you'll find that Tyson's formulae contain (often hilarious) non-sequiturs, like he's suggesting that a certain level of absurdity lubricates the creative mind just as a certain amount of randomness conspires to make emergent phenomena. But as brilliant as this idea is, for the casual looker, Operator Paintings can be didactic in its approach and conceited in its irony.

Still, Cloud Choreography and other Emergent Systems is probably Tyson at his most conceptually transparent. This is oddly summed up by the Operator Paintings which invites the viewer into seeing how Tyson operates artistically. The Nature Paintings series also allays critics somewhat in that even if it asks us to contemplate the mechanical processes involved in the pieces' creation, you'd have to be blind not to be moved by their beauty.

Until 11 November 2009