

MORGAN LEHMAN

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# Wall Street International

ART

## Kysa Johnson. The Long Goodbye

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Kysa Johnson, *blow up 260 - The long goodbye (hello, hello) - subatomic decay patterns and the star forming region RCW 49*, 2015, High Gloss Paint and Ink on Panel, 14 x 16 in

'Decay' might be a somewhat misleading term as it is used in regard to subatomic particles. If we are talking about beta decay, for instance, this simply describes a process in which an atom with an overabundance of neutrons experiences the spontaneous change of a neutron into a proton, creating another element completely while also discharging a fast moving electron (a beta particle). Atoms experience this type of change due to their 'instability' and become more 'stable' afterwards. For instance, C14 has 6 protons and 8 neutrons and this is an unstable state for Carbon. So, poof, a neutron spontaneously can change to a proton and now you get 7 neutrons and 7 protons, which then gives you a more stable Nitrogen atom (the difference between types of atoms depends on the number of protons in the nucleus – lose a proton and you become something else).

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There are five types of subatomic decay that can happen and two-dimensional traces of these processes can be visually captured and are referred to as subatomic decay patterns. Artist Kysa Johnson has been using these patterns consistently in her artwork through the years and at an amazing show called 'The Long Goodbye', opening this Thursday at Morgan Lehman Gallery in New York's Chelsea art district, Johnson uses repetitions and combinations of different subatomic decay patterns as a type of visual alphabet to depict macro-astronomical phenomena like star clusters, the deaths of stars etc.

So she seems to be using patterns of imperceptible particles demonstrating a movement toward stability, strength and permanence in order to create images of grandiose yet moribund astronomical superstuff. Indeed, given the Second Law of Thermodynamics, we can readily say that all of these huge space things and clusters of space things are in the process of dying. Recent research out of Australia seems to indicate we are already approaching old age as a universe.

So my take is that we seem to be dealing with two types of decay in Johnson's pieces – one toward stability and one toward expiration – the first type of decay involves matter being reduced to a stable form but the macro decay depicted seems to be all about the inevitable loss of energy production when hydrogen and helium burning drops and the star is overtaken by the forces of gravity. In fact, electrons and neutrons actually prevent total 'black hole' collapse in low and medium mass stars. So the first type of decay is being used to help visually depict the second type of decay. Actually we get 'descriptions' of subatomic decay being used to represent 'images' of astronomical superstuff: as if we can never really even see or experience natural phenomena directly anymore due to our overactive cognitive capacities. All experience comes through the mediation of the intellect now.

To me, Johnson's process also helps to highlight the losing battle a universe functioning under the edict of the 2nd Law is waging and reveals a universe of massive but ultimately absurd and fruitless effort. Energy will ultimately be depleted leaving lots of useless chunks of matter floating around to be gobbled up by black holes or whatnot. It brings home the fact that everything runs down, everything declines, everything degenerates. Newton's God was a watchmaker but Einstein's God is a Las Vegas gambler, and a bad gambler at that. As C.P. Snow wrote, describing the three laws of thermodynamics in gambling terms (to paraphrase): 1) Living in this universe is a game you can't win since new matter and energy cannot be created; 2) You can't even break even in this game because disorder and entropy are always increasing (you are always wasting energy which can't be reclaimed in full); and 3) You can't even leave the game (for obvious reasons).

But by depicting dying astronomical megaphenomena with these subatomic patterns now revealing stability, Johnson could also be making a more defiant and optimistic statement: "Sure the stage we have been forced to strut and fret on sucks if you really think about it, but some of us made something out of it. We created meaning. We created merciful gods who forgive us, love us unconditionally and challenge us to rise beyond the material world and the cynicism, skepticism and nihilism of many scientists and their depictions of the universe." By looking at the smallest stuff and the largest stuff and recognizing that ultimately it's all for naught, you have to ask, "Is it really all for naught? I can eek out 70 or 80 years in this system, should this giant scientific conception of ultimate wastefulness have any impact on me, or why doesn't this have much of an impact on how folks live their lives?"

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This is, nevertheless, a universe in which Buddha, Francis of Assisi, Dostoyevsky, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. hung out in for a while and so I tend to think they found something permanent beyond all this decaying crap and we can too when we say “This is wrong! I won’t do it!” or when we dedicate our lives unselfishly to our families or resolve on a moral quest or try to become something amazing and benevolent that everyone says we can’t become. It’s as if Johnson is challenging us to add an addendum to Stephen Crane’s poem: “A man said to the universe: ‘Sir, I exist!’ ‘However,’ replied the universe, ‘this fact has not created in me a sense of obligation.’” Our addendum: “Well, it should have.” Maybe we need to be cautioned in regard to the nihilism and callowness that pure science can instill in us if we are not careful or if we buy into it too deeply.

The particles and astronomical superstructures could also represent the two extremes of scientific empirical observation and the limits of this – the extremes and limitations of the legacy of von Leeuwenhoek and Galileo. We can now trace subatomic changes and we can see clusters of galaxies, yet, how did something come from nothing or how could something have always existed? Basically we are studying the characteristics of a pretty flawed and messed up place without any hope, apparently, of cracking the toughest nut (the origins of it all). Furthermore, this purely empirical look at the world and a blind devotion to the god of description (as I implied earlier) may not help to answer the most pressing of existential questions and the dogmatic dedication in the modernist tradition to the saving effects of science and technology has, in fact, left us with a partially crippled and war-ridden planet.

Yet the images are so beautiful – just on a surface level, I was awed by looking at Johnson’s work. To me she may, therefore, also be addressing how NASA, for instance, has been promoting and publicizing its discoveries. They often offer us colorful, pretty, swirly stuff against a black background and without even knowing what the swirly stuff is we are prone to say, “Wow, isn’t that beautiful! Isn’t the universe beautiful!” Interestingly, in the past the artist has used scientific diagrams of toxic pollutants which have also looked amazing and wonderful and beautiful. What most people often derive from NASA photos and nature in general is pretty patterns – that’s not good enough.

-Daniel Gauss