

Charles Stankievech

The Desert Turned to Glass

19 October – 01 February 2025

Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens and Centennial Square

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OAKVILLE GALLERIES

Gairloch Gardens | 1306 Lakeshore Road East, Oakville ON L6J 1L6
Centennial Square | 120 Navy Street, Oakville ON L6J 2Z4

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday: 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM

Closed Sundays and statutory holidays

Monday (available by appointment)

Admission is always free.

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Opening Text by Séamus Kealy

The world is an ecology full of fields beyond just the typical sound field that we are used to, including underwater life in the ocean, the electricity in the ionosphere of outer space, or ultrasonic recordings of bats underground. By listening to the greater spectrum, I hope we have a greater appreciation of the full richness of nature. And, inversely, I hope that such an expanded sensitivity also decenters us as the measure of the world. Charles Stankieveh

Spanning the abyss of space and the depths of the earth, the exhibition *The Desert Turned to Glass* by Charles Stankieveh is an epic meditation on beginnings, endings, and infinity. Altogether, exploring alternative theories concerning the origin of life, consciousness, and art, *The Desert Turned to Glass* is a place where, as the artist writes, “the cosmic and chthonic collide.”

The title makes reference to the melting of sand into glass, which a crashing meteor can induce as has the testing of nuclear weapons in the desert. With the latter, after the Trinity nuclear tests by Oppenheimer in the 1940s, a green glass substance was produced and subsequently coined as Trinitite. The oblivion that the United States played with then that soon resulted in inconceivable catastrophe is not actually referenced in this exhibition, but the association here does lend a dose of gravitas that is discernible in the exhibition nonetheless. The artwork of Charles Stankieveh does not skirt away from massive topics: vastness, sublimity, unknowability, momentousness and all the related terror and awe.

He has had a long interest in profound subjects, having also researched complex natural sciences as well as ancient creation and celestial myths - and acknowledges and thereby circumnavigates the immeasurability and seeming unknowability of the cosmos. The title also however nods towards the madly kaleidoscopic and oddly apocalyptic narrative in the 1966 science-fiction novel *The Crystal World* by J.G. Ballard. And while there is a searching precision to Stankievech's art production, there is also a great deal of storytelling and story-making. "Science fiction," he writes, "is the ultimate conceptual framework to dive into deep time and questions of consciousness, and I adopted this strategy early in my work." There is also a sense of image-making here as the act of discreetly glimpsing out of a cave at a great arc of stars glistening in the night, or as the astronomer gazes through a telescope with both abandon and rational discernment. The artist writes, "there is something about the darkened dome space that fosters an engagement with the world beyond our reach, whether shamans performing rituals in prehistoric caves or contemporary visualizations of dark matter and black holes in the planetarium." Where science fiction also gets up close to political epochs and their aftermaths, and in the case of this exhibition, while mainly we alight upon a delicate, complex conceptual orb shaped by unfathomable mysteries of the universe, there are also unexpected glimpses at social histories. That said, a few central motifs are the meteor, the volcano, darkened caves and the cosmos itself. This could appear at first to be the makings of science fiction, but then actually when viewing his work and considering his seemingly all-consuming approach to his topics of study, it becomes apparent that the artist has long been interested in delving into that grandest of narratives, the meaning of everything. Why would he not be, as someone whose youth was sometimes spent embedded in

religiosity. A few years on, his artwork is now a kind of “fieldwork,” as he describes it, being heavily researched-based and likewise invested deeply in a great pluralism of scrutiny from environmental sciences, meteorology, astronomy, sonics and geology to a tremendous history of literature, art, religion, theory, music and socio-political histories. All these come together to be applied to creating a number of visual and audio constellations paying homage to and beckoning at the mysteries of the universe. Stankievech has not lost his awe of the unknown, and here we are invited to share in that awe.

At the Gairloch Gardens gallery, in dialogue with the landscape, garden and light at this lakeside site, the artist presents a new series of photographs, three new meteorite sculptures - including one that defies gravity (thus remaining a meteor, in fact), and a new video work based on recordings made by the artist during the Total Eclipse at Gairloch Gardens on April 8th, 2024.

In the galleries at Gairloch Gardens, we first encounter the floating meteor over a carefully-arranged mound of black sand. At once, the desert remains the desert here but the meteor in its levitation echoes the idea of a hallucination, as we might not quite believe our eyes when we come upon it. The artist speaks to the charged nature of this meteor in its inbetweenness as that relating to the human world. A meteor flying through space, the artist reminds us, evades the language and categories of our world of boundaries and those of the systems of property. Legally, once it has hit the ground, a meteorite - even though it is a former celestial body, a free spirit - is then to be owned by the proprietor of the land upon which it rests. By never touching the ground, the meteor defies such claims to ownership. Such claims are

highlighted in particular by the stories behind this actual artwork, which is molded on the historic meteorite Manitou Asinîy. This meteor fell to the Earth long ago and has been a sacred object to several First Nation communities in the Canadian Prairies. In 1866, Manitou Asinîy was stolen from the land by a Methodist missionary who believed that bringing it along with his mission would draw more indigenous people into Christianity. The meteorite was eventually moved to the University of Toronto and then the Royal Ontario Museum's collection. It has since been returned to Alberta temporarily while the construction continues for a new interpretive centre to safeguard it. The artwork thus references what is simultaneously a sacred entity and a scientific object considered essential to understanding the origin of our solar system: two stories, the artist tells us, "that while might be different, can coexist if we suspend our excluding narratives and allow the meteorite to float in space as a unifying act."

This floating sculpture sets the stage, conceptually, politically and formally, for the entire exhibition. The two smaller meteorite sculptures on plinths are also based on actual meteorites, themselves with their own unfathomable origins, stretching far back before human consciousness awakened.

The series of four photographs collectively entitled *Eye of Silence* are meditations on the Sakurajima—Japan's most active volcano. Upon closer inspection we find that the photos are subjected to a vertical mirroring technique. This method echoes the well-known

Rorschach technique, where mirrored images are shown to patients with the intention of revealing the unconscious to the analyst and then further gently conveyed to the analysand. This vertiginous effect of doubling an already immense and destructive force is spellbinding, as is the beauty of these photographs. The photographs also hint at scenes and encounters from the film *Eye of Silence*, which can be seen at the Centennial Gallery.

The last work in the Gairloch Gallery, *Elliptical Eclipse*, is a new work, a video made exactly at this location on April 8th, 2024, during the solar eclipse. We see an infinite loop where a constellation of stars turns into a meteorite, only to disappear into darkness and be born again. The sound composition here is made from the electromagnetic recordings of the sun's radiation interacting with the Earth's ionosphere, recorded by the artist only meters away in the garden during the eclipse. Charles Stankieveh elaborates on his sound recordings and "field work" in the interview excerpts below.

At the Centennial Gallery, the artist presents the 30 minute film, *The Eye of Silence* in an immersive black box video installation. Evoking the sublimity of Earth's evolution and existence, the film depicts a vast tapestry of creation and destruction. High atmospheric footage of volcanoes and the atmosphere lead to images of other otherworldly aspects of our planet's terrain - deserts, meteorite craters, cave paintings - and fields of stars inside a darkened cave. Created using various extra sensory photographic and sound

equipment, and combining both resulting image and sound in a spectacular intensity, *The Eye of Silence* embodies metamorphosis and the sublime while skirting around notions of the limits of knowledge and experience. As an unfolding, ebbing echoing of the abyss, a flowing, immersive riddle of vastness and unknowability, this film may also be, in part, a mirroring of consciousness, its origins and its future. The artist presents a filmic mise en scene that stages the Earth's origins and evolution against passages conjuring sweeping vistas of vast creation and destruction, a meeting of the cosmos and the earthly, life and non-life, matter and emptiness. The artist writes, "*The Eye of Silence* calls forth otherworldly experience from within the depths and heights of this world, at the same time cultivating an aesthetic disposition to receive them."

Accompanying the exhibition is the publication of the same title, which collects new work by Charles Stankieveh alongside texts by J.G. Ballard, Karen Barad, Walter Benjamin, Douglas Cardinal, Dehlia Hannah, Takashi Ikegami, Takafumi Kawakami, J. David Lewis-Williams, Clarice Lispector, Ala Roushan, Nadim Samman, Barbara Sherwood Lollar, Charles Stankieveh, and Kim Tait.

The following are excerpts from an interview between Charles Stankieveh and Ala Roushan, from “Fieldwork: Conversation on Methodology.” **The Desert Turned to Glass: Charles Stankieveh.** Hatje Cantz. 2024, speaking about their recent collaborations leading up to the production of the exhibited artwork and the accompanying publication:

AR: You mention how sound is a fundamental aspect of fieldwork and many of the locations for your last project were to record sound and model the reverbs. Your work requires a unique way of hearing space or listening to the field. There is a profound stillness that is required for such durational participation and really staying within the sonic realm that emerges from the environment. Can you speak about your field recordings?

CS: I think most field recordings are about capturing sound effects or sound objects, which I see as comparable to a photo safari, but I approach field recording more as experiencing spaces. Often that means they are quiet and subtle. I’m thinking of two examples while recording for Eye of Silence that entailed descending into closed worlds: in the Yucatán, diving into hermetic underground caves sealed off with water, and then later dropping into the sequestered depressions of volcanic craters. In these places, understanding sound as attunement helps expand our normal everyday ideas of what sound is and how we perceive the world around us.

Field recordings are foundationally about listening. I was fortunate enough in grad school to be the Teaching Assistant for R. Murray Schafer, who coined the term “soundscape” in 1970. A composer and Luddite, Schafer set about creating a sonic archive of the disappearing soundscape of our world continually being drowned out by “progress.” As a fundamental artistic gesture, field recording hopefully teaches us to slow down and listen to the world around us and appreciate it as a soundscape—not just see it as “landscape” which has so much pictorial and extractive baggage.

The contemporary development in field recording, which I've been a part of, breaks the limitations in traditional conceptions of listening. Listening need not be restricted to certain frequencies through certain organs of the body. It's a very holistic embodied experience and it's also not separated from other senses. Listening can also directly translate and transcode. What I realized in my work that mapped the history of military outposts in the twentieth century is that we shifted from experiencing the environment through our senses to sensors. This was literally the role of the avant-garde in the history of warfare: from World War I sound mirrors, through World War II bunkers, to Cold War radar stations. In this last example, the electromagnetic pulse can be transcoded into the ping of a radar screen detecting an enemy bomber. The main effect of this shift resulted in a deficient understanding and instrumentalization of nature, something Walter Benjamin would say is based on an optical connection to the universe versus an ecstatic engagement with the cosmos. But we can also subvert

this military industrial complex technology to enrich our perception of the world and decenter ourselves.

AR: We should discuss the fact that your last film, *Eye of Silence*, begins as a sound project. The sound in your film isn't an afterthought merely synchronized with the image; instead, you begin with field recordings that serve as the driving force. In essence, sound has been the generator of the visual layer in your practice, much like the ancient cave art you discuss in your work, where the rituals involving sound resulted in the drawings that remain today. Can you speak to why you begin with sound?

CS: The primacy of sound has been there ever since the beginning of my practice. Ever since I can remember, I've been suspicious of the image. I grew up deeply religious and my early education focused on the mystical. Sound is the medium one gravitates toward when engaging the sublime, when working with the interconnections of the universe, when contemplating the invisible, and when being receptive to that which you can't see. And then, just before becoming an artist, I worked as an X-ray technician in the industrial landscape and as a camera assistant for MGM and Disney; this first taught me that there is something behind the image and then later pulled back the Wizard of Oz curtain and made me critical of the "Culture Industry."

AR: And there is another element here: *Eye of Silence* evolved from field recordings that then led to a series of performances in spaces that were critical to this research, including caves, lava tubes, and volcanic craters. This was a generative process of creating, where each of your performances transformed your composition and eventually morphed into developing the visual component of the film. And within each space you embraced the sounds that emerged. I will forever vividly remember the flock of birds excited by your performance, playfully chirping and circling around you and the speaker's setup at Hacienda Ochil. You seem to be drawn to complex spaces with unique acoustic properties. What is your relation to these acoustically potent spaces?

CS: I can never separate sound and space—space shapes sound and, inversely, sound shapes space. It's a Möbius loop relationship, so I can't really think about one without thinking the other. I'm not a composer that looks at the score (two-dimensional thinking: duration x pitch); my compositions build from three-dimensional spaces that create harmonics, tones, and rhythms. For me these elements organically arise out of listening, in sensing space, and out of defining space. This even occurs in the extreme examples of virtual environments, such as headphones, immersive design labs (like at ETH), or inside planetariums. By just using sound, we can create a sense of place or an impression of space using the same principles.

AR: I want to talk about the fact that much of the production hinged on spontaneity. We did plan for the specific locations—aware of the season, aware of the geological conditions (such as the volcanoes being highly active)—but at the end what transpired in the film were moments that emerged out of unique conditions and that were not repeatable. I’m also aware that your practice is deeply research-based, and that you anticipate some of these occurrences, but equally you are interested in a kind of border between reality and fiction. Specifically, you often work in the genre of science fiction. So, for me, these moments of serendipity were a coming together of very unconscious and often surreal conditions.

CS: Of course, nature is not static, so, in planning a shoot, recording, or performance, one is obviously aware of certain cycles that are present. I don’t blindly parachute in or just show up somewhere unprepared. Actually, many of the locations—except for one—were in close proximity to where other commitments were happening and places that we have built a connection to. The work emerged from a network between these places and listening to the earth. In order to engage or experience these places it’s about letting them reveal themselves. That’s why the work is somewhere between documentary—which is a kind of witnessing and letting the event unfold before you—and a retroactively constructed fictional scenario. It’s important to say that none of the work is scripted and storyboarded. There are no characters in my work. I’m not subject to a scripted dramatic arch with its planned climax or the environment artificially expressing a character’s inner psyche for

symbolic ends. My narratives are about nature unfolding in the absence of humans—often in the aftermath of humans, but more recently before humans—and so the natural events structure the actual works themselves. I was lucky that I cut my teeth in the camera department of B science fiction productions for Hollywood studios (e.g., *Outer Limits*, *Stargate*, etc.), as the genre stuck with me. Through a critical lens, science fiction is the ultimate conceptual framework to dive into deep time and questions of consciousness, and I adopted this strategy early in my work.

AS: *Eye of Silence* came together unexpectedly from so many incredible elements—a very crucial one being the insertion of the hallucinatory state that you created in editing the film. While it seems like a fictional layer, it reflects some of our own experiences on the production locations, where sensory deprivation (for example, being in total darkness) results in interior visions that are hallucinatory. You consciously insert this into the film, capturing the exterior landscape as well as the interior reflections. Can you talk about this cycle of your work?

CS: Once you start to appreciate a fuller spectrum of your senses or try to attune yourself to other creatures' perceptions, you start to realize how constructed our sense of reality is. This is not to say that everything is relative fantasy—the opposite. A purely objective perspective wouldn't be a perspective, it's just the Real, and would be even more extreme than any hallucinatory perception. There would not even be a self to see the hallucinations.

Pure crystallization. I learned this through some deep experiments in ego loss with anesthetics, where, after losing consciousness, I started to reconstruct reality very slowly, regaining a sense of consciousness, then a sense of space, then eventually individual senses, and then locomotion and language. These were experiments in trying to existentially reconstruct what it would be like for an early Homo sapiens to gain a sense of self-consciousness—that incredible shift that happened at some point when our ancestor consciousness doubled from conscious to self-conscious. The archaeologist David Lewis-Williams's research into the Upper Paleolithic development of art and consciousness was important in my original experiments and then manifested in the film *Eye of Silence* both as subject and subjective experience. In the film, the hallucinatory split occurs when life is seeded on the planet, and so I use the symmetry as the acknowledgment of the organization of life against the entropic chaos. And then finally, the constructed hallucinations in the form of the film fold with the history of cave art at the end of the film's narrative. There are no characters in the film, but the hope is that the spectator/listener projects themselves into the world of the film, following our ancestors. The film was made originally for a planetarium's curved screen, to echo the curved screen of the cave wall.

Charles Stankieveh is an artist redefining "fieldwork" at the convergence of geopolitics, deep ecologies, and sonic resonances. From the Arctic's northernmost settlement to the depths of the Pacific Ocean, Stankieveh's practice uncovers the paradoxes of our existence on the planet by engaging with the imperceptible. His award-winning work has been presented at institutions such as the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal; Kunste Werke, Berlin; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark; National Gallery of Canada; TBA21, Vienna; as well as several biennials from Venice to SITE Santa Fe. As a composer he mentored under World Soundscape founder R. Murrery Schafer and then Alvin Lucier, leading to the premiere of his work Radiance for Philip Glass' MATA foundation. He has lectured at dOCUMENTA (13) and the 8th Berlin Biennale, and his writing has been published by Verso, MIT, Sternberg Press, e-flux, and Princeton Architectural Press.

Exhibition curated by Séamus Kealy, Executive Director, Oakville Galleries.

Events:

Opening Reception (both galleries)

Date: Saturday, October 19, 2024

Time: 2:00 PM - 5:00 PM

Shuttle buses are available between locations.

Concert by Charles Stankieveh: The Glass Key

Free Admission | Ticket required

Date: Saturday, November 23, 2024

Time: Doors open at 7:30 PM, Concert begins at 8:00 PM

Location: Trinity College Chapel, University of Toronto

Roundtable: Charles Stankieveh with Séamus Kealy (Executive Director) and Ala Roushan (Curator and Writer)

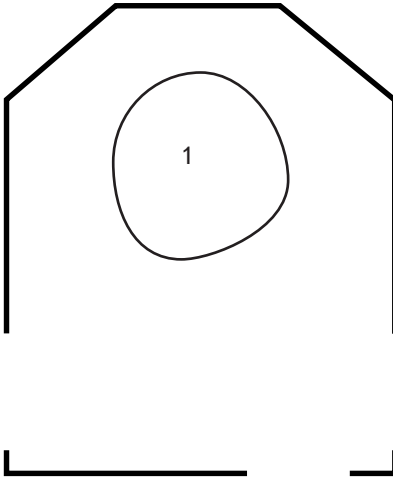
Date: Tuesday, January 28, 2025

Time: 6:00 PM

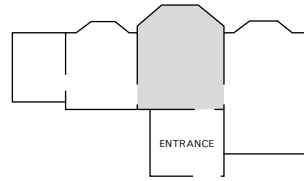
Location: Gairloch Gallery, Oakville Galleries

All events are free and open to the public.

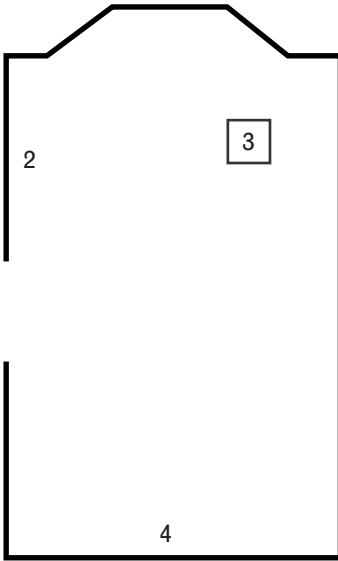
Charles Stankieveh: *The Desert Turned to Glass*
Gairloch Gardens



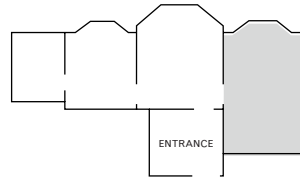
Central Gallery



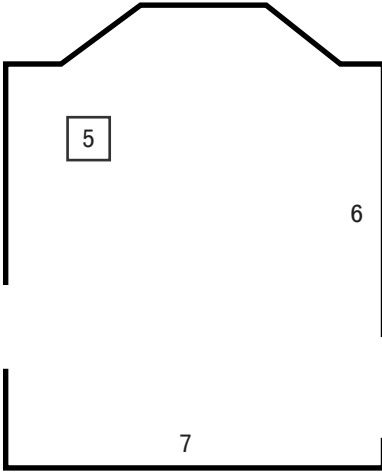
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- 1 *Desert Turned to Glass*, 2012/2024
Floating meteorite sculpture, volcanic sand



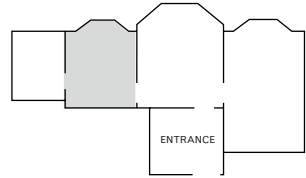
North Gallery



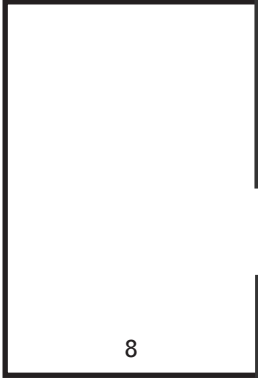
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- 2 *Eye of Silence (Crimson Crater)*, 2023
Archival Pigment Print,
133 x 100 cm
- 3 *Desert Turned to Glass (Henbury)*, 2024
Hand-blown glass and Trinitite
28 x 16 x 13 cm
- 4 *Eye of Silence (Tectonic I)*, 2023
Archival Pigment Print,
220 x 60 cm



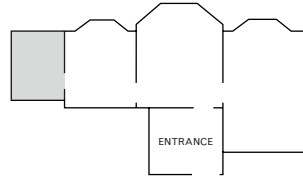
South Gallery



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- 5 *Desert Turned to Glass (Diablo)*, 2024
Cast glass and Trinitite
12cm x 8cm x 8cm
- 6 *Eye of Silence (Sakurajima)*, 2023
Archival Pigment print
133 x 75 cm
- 7 *Eye of Silence (Tectonic II)*, 2023
Archival Pigment print
220 x 60 cm



Salah Bachir Gallery

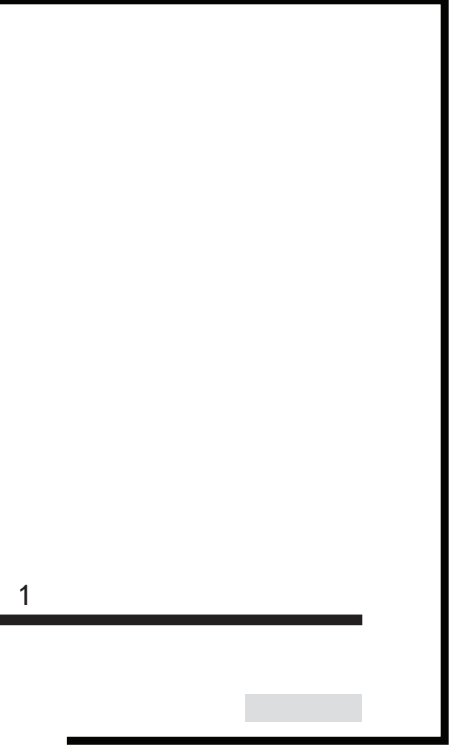


8 *Elliptical Eclipse, 2024*
Video, 2mins loop

Charles Stankieveh: *The Desert Turned to Glass*
Centennial Square



- 1 *Eye of Silence*, 2023
6K video, 7.1 audio, 30 mins
Collection of the Vega Foundation



Oakville Galleries is located on Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat and the Haudenosaunee. The treaty lands are covered by the Upper Canada Treaties, namely the Head of the Lake, Treaty No. 14 (1806) and Treaty No. 22. At the same time, Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens and at Centennial Square is uniquely situated along the shoreline of Lake Ontario and Sixteen Mile Creek. These waterways are unceded territory and the Mississaugas have unextinguished aboriginal title to all water, beds of water, and floodplains contained therein. As an institution, Oakville Galleries recognizes the importance of establishing and maintaining meaningful and respectful relationships with the original inhabitants and keepers of the land, and we are grateful for the opportunity to operate on this territory.

Oakville Galleries would like to thank the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation for the open conversation around truth and reconciliation.