

The Universe at the Tip of His Ballpoint Pen

Andrew Itkoff for The New York Times



Russell Crotty's installation of acrylic-and-paper globes at the Miami Art Museum.

By **HILARIE M. SHEETS**

MALIBU, Calif.

THE stars that shine brightest in Malibu are not the celebrities dotting the beachfront properties but the celestial bodies parading nightly over Russell Crotty's observatory high on a cliff above the Pacific. Since moving to this breathtaking spot 12 years ago (he and his wife were facing eviction from their downtown Los Angeles apartment when they heard that this 130-acre ranch house needed caretakers), Mr. Crotty has re-engaged with his childhood passion for astronomy. It has become the subject of meticulous ballpoint pen drawings in handmade books as large as 5 by 10 feet and on globes that hover at eye level in beautiful minimalist installations.

"We moved here and went out on our front porch and there was Jupiter," said Mr. Crotty, 47, who at his former abode couldn't see the skies for the smog. He retrieved an old telescope from storage, cobbled together a makeshift observatory and started what he calls "obsessive amateuring." This is old-school visual observation — not using cameras, videos or computer enhancement, just making notations in sketchbooks while perched on a ladder at the eyepiece of his telescope.

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Later, in his studio, Mr. Crotty translates his sketches into drawings inked with thousands of tiny pen strokes that can take weeks of eight-hour days to complete. "Certain drawings I literally have to hold my breath for every little mark," he said. "It's all about the weight and the pressure." He is pleased that the results mimic 19th-century etching and engraving, the media in which classical visual observations were frequently recorded.

Some drawings are faithful observations of planets or stars. Others, like the globe with a meteor shower radiating over a silhouetted landscape — just completed for a show of his work at the Miami Art Museum through June 27 — are more romantic accounts of Mr. Crotty's experience of a night and a place.

Mr. Crotty graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute and got a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of California, Irvine, in 1980. He spent the next decade trying to be a painter, without much success. During that period, he kept surfing journals filled with little drawings of figures battling waves. (He grew up surfing in Northern California, near his hometown, San Rafael, and during summers in Mendocino, where his parents were involved with the Mendocino Art Center.)

"The surfing pictures had a lot more meaning for me, and some friends just convinced me I should be doing that," Mr. Crotty said. He began to use Bic pens (because they were cheap) to make large-scale grids of figures surfing in sequential motion within tiny cels (one included in the Museum of Modern Art's 2002 "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" show had close to 40,000 cels). "I found that by simplifying the materials, it became much more interesting and subtle, not so bombastic as the abstract painting."

As with surfing, his interest in stargazing dates back to summers in Mendocino camping out on the beach. When the stars presented themselves to him again in the Malibu sky, they struck him as a natural progression for his art. "I had sort of gridded myself into a box and so I started drawing galaxies," Mr. Crotty recalled. And after a trip to the British Museum in 1993, where he admired the enormous volumes collecting dust on the shelves, he started rendering those galaxies in gigantic sketchbooks.

Scale is central to Mr. Crotty's work. "Take something like Uranus," he said. "Just to find it is exciting. You know this thing's immense, but within the eye of the telescope, it's just this little fuzzy spot. So do you translate it on to a huge globe or make it a little observational drawing? It twists your mind and plays games with you."

Which is what Mr. Crotty's globes do, too. They are basically inverted planetariums, in which the dome of the expansive sky has been turned in on itself to form a contained object that you can interact with. Yet when installing a room full of them, he's careful to hang his globes, which are made of acrylic and layered with close to 1,000 strips of Japanese paper, at the uniform height of pictures in a gallery, to avoid any science-fair connotations.

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But Mr. Crotty admits to having become something of a science nerd, and seems at least as engaged by that world as by the contemporary art world (where he cites interest in the work of Alighiero e Boetti, Agnes Martin, Peter Doig and Vija Celmins, among others). He was a member of the Association of Lunar and Planetary Observers, where he earned a certificate for observing Saturn in 1996, and frequents "star parties" filled with retired aerospace techies who make their own telescopes.

"There's a performative aspect to what I do here," he said, "learning the stuff, going to star parties, building the observatory, doing the research, looking at these things, recording them and then figuring out what to do with all this data, what a scientist would call data reduction. But it's all done with a bit of exuberance to it, a sense of 'Wow!' "

Such wide-eyed enthusiasm comes out in what Mr. Crotty calls his "bad poetry" — handwritten text he builds up in loopy rows like sedimentary layers to fill in the landscape of some drawings. A snatch might read: "M42. Great nebula in Orion. The bewildering field of glowing nebulosity. As always, drawing this object is near impossible. It repays repeated observations."

He also likes to lift language directly from real estate ads to underscore the selling of the California dream: "Synergy of man and nature in a rarefied setting. Malibu point of view. Palmy oasis high above the Pacific."

Mr. Crotty, who can peer out on the homes of Barbra Streisand and Axl Rose or spot Cher over the bluff, is perfectly positioned to experience the conflict between untrammelled nature and encroaching development that is an undercurrent in his work. But he clearly prefers to keep the focus upward. Lynn Herbert, who organized a solo show of Mr. Crotty's work at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston last year, said: "There's something very romantic in his reconnecting with nature. Just the thought of one person, one pair of eyes, standing on planet Earth, looking up at the night sky. He's found a way to reduce it to absolute simplicity."

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