

ARTS

Artists find maelstrom of meaning

An image 55 million light years away has ignited a fire in Melbourne, writes Nick Miller.

In April last year, an image captured the eye – and imagination – of Dr Edward Colless, editor of art publication *Art + Australia*. It was all over the news. On a dark background, a lopsided halo of fire surrounded a blurry black centre.

It was the first “photo” of a black hole: an astronomical monster in a distant galaxy, 40 billion kilometres across, 500 million trillion kilometres away, 6.5 billion times heavier than the Sun, captured by the Event Horizon Telescope, a network of eight individual telescopes across the world.

It was a moment of excitement for physicists: visual proof of an idea that has been explored for centuries by theorists (often credited to Einstein, whose equations predicted black hole formation, though he never accepted that they existed).

It was a picture of a hole punched through space-time: an event horizon concealing an impossible singularity which nothing, not even information, can escape.

But it was also a moment of excitement for Colless, whose journal explores the theories and experiments of contemporary art and their relationship to our world.

“I looked at it and thought, that’s astonishing, that’s an incredible image,” he says. “It’s not retinal, it’s been created out of an array of observations that have been processed and interlaced through an algorithm. It’s 55 million light years away, the image is 55 million years old. But it had this uncanny feel to it: so poignant. In the deepest recesses of space, with an infinite



darkness around it, there’s this halo that’s glowing, the event horizon, an image of something you can only think of. It had a poetry to it, this aesthetic charge.”

He put out a call for papers asking for reflections on the image, its catastrophic nature, the event horizon and the maelstrom around it. As they started to come in, new maelstroms, new cataclysms hit Australia: the bushfire season, followed by the pandemic.

“There was something especially uncanny looking at the extinction of matter and energy, right now,” says Colless. “Writers were telling me they found it difficult to meet the deadline because of the bushfires. Then this other calamity hit, facing

us with the possibility of extinction. And here is this image, almost like an angelic vision of it.”

The Event Horizon issue of *Art + Australia* includes essays on “Spaceship Earth”, the ultimate

‘The beauty you find can be sublime – or terrifying.’

Edward Colless

extinction of humanity, the aesthetics and allegory of the black hole image. One writer asks “are we coming to an end?”. Another tells a

short, poetic, feminist short story about two researchers observing a planet orbiting a black hole while falling into their own.

Many of the papers that came in focused on the science of imaging rather than the astrophysics, Colless says.

Discussions about the nature of an image are a more comfortable place for art writers than the physics of a black hole.

He hopes to address this with a three-day symposium this week, hosted by the University of Melbourne’s Centre of Visual Art and the Science Gallery Melbourne.

The symposium will bring together scientists with artists and curators, to hear about the frontiers



“I thought that’s astonishing, that’s an incredible image,” says Edward Colless of the image of a black hole (above). Main photo: Joe Armao

of research in arts and science. One keynote speaker is Prof Elisabetta Barberio of the school of physics at the University of Melbourne. She is an experimental particle physicist whose main research is trying to pin down “dark matter”: the invisible, so far undetected substance whose existence is inferred from the shape of the universe and which makes up the vast bulk of it.

Her team is building a new machine in Australia to sit more than a kilometre underground “and we wait there”, trying to spot an incredibly tiny and rare interaction between the universe we know and the universe we have conceived.

“I have a lot of interest in working with artists,” Barberio says. “We represent something that is elusive, that you cannot picture in your mind. But art is part of the imagination.”

Art can inspire understanding, make the invisible visible, explore the abstract in a way that equations often cannot, she says – at least not for most people.

Colless says “meaning and pattern are intuitions that guide art and science”.

“And the beauty you find can be sublime – or terrifying.”