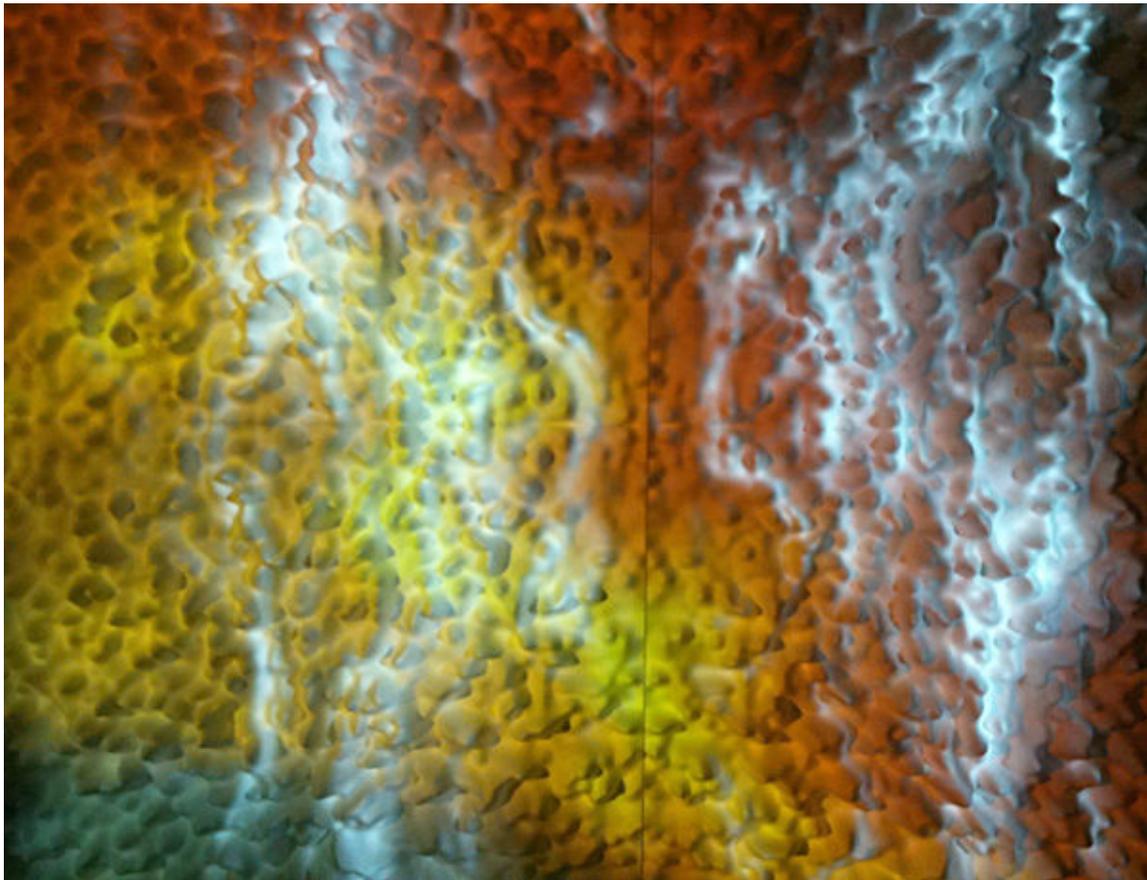


Taste buds that resemble a moonscape

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(Image: Patricia Olynyk)

Yellow and orange splotches swim over what looks like a terrestrial model of Mars - or a close-up of lizard scales. In reality, it's a computer-sculpted foam board leaning against the gallery wall, and the bumps in its topography are modelled after scanning electron microscope pictures of wild mouse taste buds. A video of a psychedelic sunset is projected onto the board, creating a changing landscape of colours and shadows.

The artwork, called *Dark Skies*, is the newest exhibit at the University of California, Los Angeles, Art|Sci gallery, a petite room surrounded by science labs on the fifth floor of the California NanoSystems Institute. The piece was created by artist Patricia Olynyk, known for using nano-images to mess with our sense of scale: the “seduction of scale” is what she calls it.

As I move around *Dark Skies*, wavy white lines begin to creep into the persimmon waves and eventually transform the landscape into a black and white moonscape. Again, there’s no telling whether I’m on the moon or inside a mouse’s mouth, but it’s fun to try to guess. Hollow rumblings from speakers on either side are meant to “shrink the viewer down to the microscopic level”, according to the artist.



(Image: Patricia Olynyk)

Plunging deep into the nano-environment and back out to the macro world, the ultimate goal of the piece is to make us think about how science and technology affect our society. Although it’s not readily apparent, *Dark Skies* was inspired by the phenomenon of light pollution and how its ever-present yellow haze has changed life on Earth. Turtles have trouble nesting near beach resorts, and small rodents’ immune systems can be compromised under too much artificial light. Humans may have adapted to living in light-polluted cities, but streetlights

obscure our view of the sky, stifling curiosity about our place in the universe. “It’s about contemplating the nature of matter, of what we’re made of,” says Olynyk. A cosmologist might say the same thing about his or her own research pursuits.

The shared sentiment fits well with the mission of the Art|Sci Center + Lab, which runs the gallery. The centre was started in 2009 with the goal of “preserving and promoting the evolving Third Culture”, a reference to C. P. Snow’s two cultures: scientists and literary intellectuals. The “third culture” would be a place where scientists interact regularly with artists, artists draw on science for inspiration, and collaborations highlight creativity as the “fundamental source for innovation in any endeavor” (according to the centre's website). The centre hosts symposiums, lectures and exhibits to try to intermingle art and science. Most of the gallery’s artworks involve immersive technology, which is an easy way to bridge the gap and put the viewer in a contemplative frame of mind.

Dark Skies is a rudimentary form of immersion compared with things like virtual reality - it’s just a foam board, two projectors and two speakers. When I step between the orange projection and the foam board, though, the white projection from the other side fills my shadow space. It makes me feel more aware of my own body shape and movements. “We live in an increasingly technology-mediated environment,” said Olynyk. “It’s interesting to focus on what brings us back into our body.”

Dark Skies is currently on display at the ArtSci Center at the California NanoSystems Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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