

IN AND OUT OF TUNE

by Alanna Irwin

Emma Fielden presents two performance-based artworks at 812B George Street that are like collision studies, investigating how two parts might become one whole or briefly connect. In both 'Andromeda and the Milky Way' and 'The Bells', Fielden and her fellow performer Lizzie Thomson follow strict and minimalist patterns of enquiry to find spontaneous points of connection. The resulting physical encounters between charcoal, sounds and bodies ask us to consider the phenomenon of coalescence, alluding to the imagined merging of two galaxies or, ultimately, two people.



performance by two voices in canon, where the repetitions and rhymes of the poem form tumbling sound passages that seem to pursue each other across space and time. One performer begins the first stanza as soon as their counterpart begins the second so that, as the stanzas lengthen, their timing seems to stretch and snap back together. Simultaneously, Fielden and Thomson move into quadrants on the floor that correspond with the poem's four parts, unconsciously swaying their bodies with the bells overhead and weaving around each other like unfamiliar clockwork. Words accidentally echo and syncopate between the two and, every now and then, when one is spoken in unison, the quiet delight of that equivalence seems to spur them on. This prompts us to reflect upon moments of connection and disconnection between two people whose experiences are deeply interwoven.

During 'The Bells', Fielden and Thomson find themselves variously standing in opposition, side-by-side, and in the same space. Sounds entwine and undo, overlap and break loose as they recite and respond to "the swinging and the ringing / Of the bells, bells, bells". Heads bowed to read from a small black book, their movements are like a superstition without belief. 'The Bells' also pays homage to Samuel Beckett's 1981 television play 'Quad' through the imitation of the stage-like square. Beckett's characters similarly observe obsessive rituals—Molloy distributes and redistributes stones between his pockets; identical bowler hats are removed and swapped and removed and swapped by the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot*. However, whilst the poem and its performers go round and round again in Fielden's artwork, the cyclical arithmetic of their gestures are not futile, nor existentialist in tone. Instead, through the rhythms, imagery and multiple voices of Fielden's performance, there is a natural ebb and flow of coalescences. Fielden invites us to consider how "our experiences with each other are both in and out of time, in and out of tune."

For her newest work 'The Bells', Fielden and Thomson read the poem of the same name by Edgar Allan Poe aloud and in chorus with neighbouring church bells. They fold together spoken word, the "tintinnabulation that so musically wells", and slow movements around a quad marked out on the floor. When read by one voice, Poe's poem traces the stages of an individual life, from tinkling youth to clamorous death. This has been transformed in Fielden's



on the inevitable impact of two galaxies, creating two little universes of charcoal on the floor of the George Street space. It is important to note that our galaxy and the Andromeda galaxy are hurtling towards each other at a rate of 402,000 kilometres per hour, predicted to merge in about 4 billion years. Knowing this, the performers' velvety circles on the ground that grow and grow and eventually merge take on a cosmic resonance. However, Fielden also notes that, "strangely enough, when the two galaxies collide, the probability of any two stars or planets colliding is almost nil." With this, the drama of the grand impact is softened, reminding us of the elusiveness of true connection even on such a massive scale.

It seems within our nature to try to pin the stars to a fixed system, even though these celestial bodies follow their vast paths with or without us. Even the first text to observe the Andromeda galaxy, Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi's 964AD manuscript 'The Book of Fixed Stars', places it as a jewel on the belt of a female figure. Fielden also lingers on human agency and how we fit in, refusing to believe that our place is purely observational. Made up of the same 'star stuff', she pulls a galaxy together through each drawn line. When viewing the performance of 'Andromeda and the Milky Way', we also witness the near misses and collisions of the performers' circling hands as those lines draw closer. Fielden's performances are never tightly choreographed, but instead have underwritten instructions that act more like a gravitational force pushing the performers along. As a result, Fielden and Thomson spend over 5 hours building up their individual drawings on the gallery floor, from the first incision until they have cut out a void they could fall into. Both intent on their own orbits and intuitively observing the closeness of their counterpart, this performance is just as much about our broader universe as it is about the ones that we create for ourselves.

Coalescence is an undercurrent throughout Fielden's recent works and explored across a breadth of scales, from atoms to stars. While she methodically teases out the connecting principles of these physical phenomena, in practice, her works are also very human, where the principles go beautifully awry. Unlike interlacing galaxies or soundwaves overlapping and affecting one another to form a new wave, there is no way for two performers to truly become one. Instead, 'The Bells' and 'Andromeda and the Milky Way' both come infinitely near. They find harmony without anticipation and accept dissonance as part of both science and poetry, creating brief but resounding moments of human connection.

IMAGES

'The Bells', 2021, performance of Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Bells'.
Performed by Emma Fielden and Lizzie Thomson. Photographed by Document Photography.

'Andromeda and The Milky Way', 2019, performance with charcoal.
Performed by Emma Fielden and Lizzie Thomson. Video still from HD video, 5:41 hours, edition of 3 + 2AP.