

# Playing with Space

**ARTISTS' BOOKS** American artist Heidi Neilson's books explore the mysteries of the universe via miniature props and ingenious invention, writes Sarah Bodman

American artist Heidi Neilson's inquisitive book works encourage playful and open engagement with scientific matters. Creating models and rescaling elements through microscopic capture, the props used in her photographic books may include tiny flakes of fake snow, action figure dolls and toy mechanisms. Through inventive use of materials and careful consideration of scene constructions, Neilson allows us to peek at the world through our comparatively tiny human scale, to consider the mysteries of the sky above us and the weather it brings and, further out into the surrounding universe, to offer a better understanding of the elements and the galaxy.

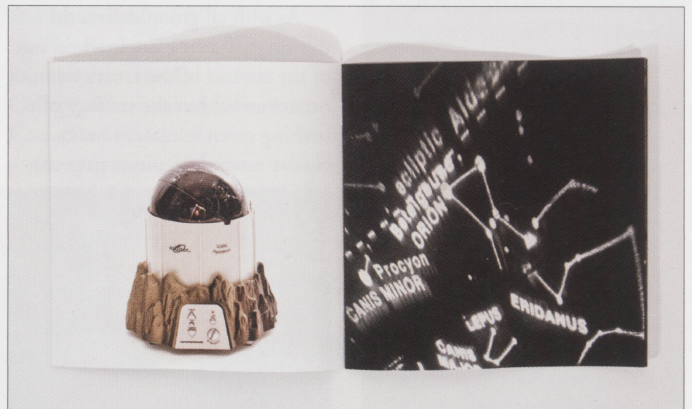
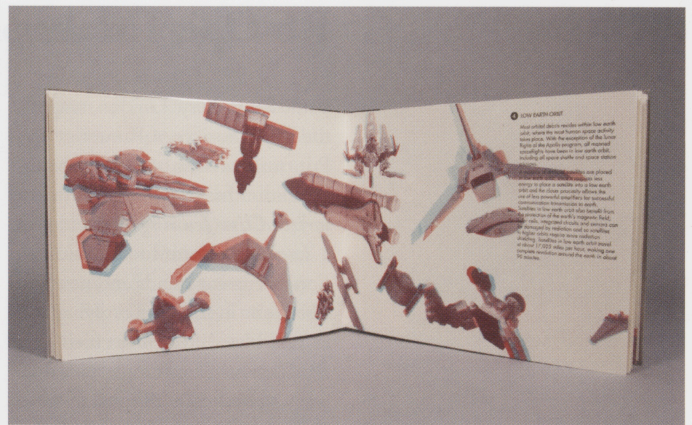
For *Home Planetarium Survey* (2008), Neilson photographed seven different toy planetariums as they projected the constellation of Orion onto photo-sensitive paper. Each resulting photogram is shown alongside the toy that created it. As she explains: the results are clearly of Orion, but the differences vary hugely between each, and this perhaps shows us that our childhood views of the galaxy can also depend on how they have been introduced to us.

*Orbital Debris Simulator* (Women's Studio Workshop, 2010) was screen- and letterpress-printed to be viewable in 3D with anaglyph glasses enclosed in the book's side pocket. After researching 'space junk' in the earth's orbit, 'showing points of interest between the moon and the earth, such as geosynchronous orbit, medium earth orbit, and the International Space Station,' Neilson mapped out the scene using toy spaceships, miniature replicas and action figures from science fiction stories, in place of the real orbital debris, to bring a human scale and relationship to the subject.

Recent work includes *Tranquility Base* (2012) a visual catalogue of items left on the moon at the landing site of the Apollo 11 mission. Each item is carefully recreated in miniature handmade models that are then photographed in a diorama setting. Neilson's conceptual play with scale also alludes to the romantic notion of the great explorer; when I asked her if she had a childhood love of great adventure stories, she said: 'I love adventure stories and science fiction. I'm also inspired by natural history museums and how the natural world is depicted in them. I love the way there's a fiction created (in, for example, dioramas – an idealisation produced from artificial objects) that is intended to serve an understanding of the non-fiction, real world.'

## Houses for Ideas

Neilson made her first artist's book in 1997, *Another Attempt to Map Space*. 'It is a small book, about 5 x 5 inches, that folds out into a single map collage – an image of a 3D-line-cube (a "Necker cube"). The idea is that the small map unfolds as you open it and, when you see the image, it continues to "unfold" into imaginary space. I revisited map work recently with *Atlas Dream Sequence*, where a map series creates a kind of narrative.' Neilson works naturally in the book format: 'books offer both a sequence in time and also a way to encapsulate a collection of things, or both of these simultaneously,' she says. 'They are a natural way of housing ideas – because of the concise, compact format, opening "reading"



text or images or both, gives the impression of being bigger on the inside – or expanding in your mind as ideas. So they capture adventures very nicely.'

Neilson is just as interested in weather patterns as outer space. *Cloud Book Study* (2011) is a 752-page series of cloudscapes with a 50-second video that shows the book paged though at high speed, revealing a time-lapse film clip of cloud motion across the pages. *Fake Snow Collection* (Visual Studies Workshop Press, 2010) is a beautiful study of 40 varieties of fake snow, each arranged in its own miniature mountain cabin diorama, interspersed with narratives about snow. 24 samples of the snow specimens are pinned inside the back cover, demonstrating the actual scale whilst inspiring consideration of what else could be portrayed in other dioramas.

Neilson is also co-founder of SP Weather Station ([www.spweatherstation.net](http://www.spweatherstation.net)), an ongoing project organizing lectures, publications and exhibitions. Artists are invited to 'report' on the weather data gathered from SPWS's rooftop station in Long Island City, New York, to produce art that engages with human observation of weather patterns.

Neilson recently joined Artists' Books Cooperative and will exhibit her books on the ABC stand at the *NY Art Book Fair* (27-30 September at MoMA PS1, Long Island City, Queens, USA). Next spring, she will spend time as a Research Fellow at the Provisions Library in Washington DC, an organization investigating the intersections of arts and social change. Neilson will be part of a team exploring topics relating to our connection to outer space. I look forward to seeing the books that will emerge.

Heidi Neilson is showing in *DIY: Photographers & Books* at the Photography Gallery, Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106, USA, until 30 Dec. [www.clevelandart.org](http://www.clevelandart.org)

## Contact

[www.heidineilson.com](http://www.heidineilson.com)

## Images

*Orbital Debris Simulator* 2010. Screen & letterpress printed, handbound with aluminum covers, 203 x 254 x 20 mm

*Home Planetarium Survey* 2008. Digital-offset printed, saddlestitch bound, 190 x 190 mm