

# EAST QUAY

## VERTIGO

Nye Thompson

20.05.2023 - 03.09.2023

### AN INTRODUCTION TO *VERTIGO*

*VERTIGO* is a solo exhibition presenting existing and newly-commissioned work by artist Nye Thompson. It invites us to open our eyes to the world of surveillance, satellites, and the new frontier that is space. It explores how humans interact with technological ecosystems and the complex ethical, political, and cultural questions created by our intertwined relationship with machines.

Thompson highlights how the technology and infrastructure we rely on day-to-day mean that humankind has a deep connection to machines. We are ever more reliant on a vast network of unseen, and largely ungoverned, satellites that orbit the Earth. Reflecting on this, Thompson asks what it means to watch and be watched, flipping the view from human to technological, allowing the audience to see the world from a perspective of 'machine gaze'.

Downstairs, in Gallery 1, projected on both sides of a large screen, Thompson presents *INSULAE* ('Of the Island'). First shown in 2019, *INSULAE* takes the viewer on a six-hour, bird's-eye journey around the coastline of the British Isles, endlessly and obsessively patrolling its borders.

This is the first time that *INSULAE* has been shown in a coastal location, giving it extra salience. From a seafaring town with a once global reach, it invites us to reflect on the idea of borders in the aftermath of Brexit and the extent to which our island status plays into our colonial past and the construction of British identity. By highlighting the role of the machine in constructing this image of our borders, Thompson references how artists' portrayals of natural beauty have always encoded a host of cultural and political ideas about the country's identity and place in the world.

The exhibition continues upstairs in Gallery 2, where Thompson presents *CU Soon*, a new installation commissioned by Contains Art CIO. *CU Soon* encourages us to look upwards into space at the hidden machines which circle above our heads.

### IN CONVERSATION WITH NYE THOMPSON

By Tessa Jackson OBE

**Tessa Jackson: Why did you decide to call the exhibition *VERTIGO*?**

Nye Thompson: The whole exhibition is about engaging between high up in Earth's orbit and down to Earth's surface. The title activates this deep volume of space between the two. This is very apparent in *INSULAE* in Gallery 1, which is all about looking down at the water from a height. In Gallery 2, the notion of *VERTIGO* is connected to Earth and activity far up in space. The satellite network, as part of Earth's surveillance and communications infrastructure, is a really complex system. Earth's orbit where it's located is a kind of Wild West space, hostile and dangerous, but also really physical, filled with machines and tumbling hunks of metal. It's a space we can only experience indirectly, never directly. That gives me a queasy sense of *VERTIGO* when I try to think about it.

**TJ: When you were invited to exhibit your work at East Quay, what approach did you want to take and how did you want to occupy the two galleries?**

NT: *INSULAE* is a work that's been exhibited in various forms, but I was excited that it occupied all of Gallery 1. I also really loved that *INSULAE*, a piece about the sea, is exhibited right next to the sea. I can't imagine a gallery that could be any closer to the sea, so that was a real thrill. Upstairs, it was an open discussion. I wanted to put something in there that resonated with *INSULAE*, so the two galleries would speak to each other. What we have upstairs is something completely new, created specifically for that space.

**TJ: Let's move on to *INSULAE* in Gallery 1. How does *INSULAE*, meaning 'Of The Island', connect and build on earlier works?**

NT: *INSULAE* was interesting because it was the birth of a new project for me. I hadn't worked very much with satellite imagery before — it was just something that I'd been fooling around with. In *INSULAE*, I'm playing with ideas connected to the machine gaze - how technology networks have these unseen power dynamics embedded within them. I'm also interested in the relationship between image and ownership. These ideas are constant threads that go through all my work.

**TJ: How have you selected the images and what do you feel they express about national identity and borders?**

NT: With *INSULAE*, I didn't select the images per se and that's quite typical of the way that I work. I set up a system, it might be a software pipeline or a set of decisions or criteria, and as a result of following that system, certain material is selected. *INSULAE* was made in the aftermath of Brexit, and I was thinking a lot about the idea of borders and isolation. I wanted to make a work that depicted an endless sort of patrolling — a circling of our water borders.

In effect, I was drawing a line around the British Isles, using Google Earth, and then sending a virtual camera along that line. I was thinking about the relationship of our island status, with the sea as a buffer zone amidst the endless nostalgia for ideas of Empire that were circulating at the time. In 2018, I was interested in how the sea played into that constructed fiction of a British historical identity and how much of it was based on this accident of geography; the fact that we are an island that happens to have a plentiful supply of warm water ports, which have given us easy worldwide military and trade access.

**TJ: How do you think *INSULAE* fits into the tradition of artists working with and reflecting upon notions of landscape?**

NT: For me, it is very much part of that tradition. I think there is sometimes a tendency when you're working within the digital art world to conceive it within its own history, but *INSULAE* is part of a long tradition of presenting the landscape in a way that looks natural but actually encodes a lot of cultural and political ideas. This is something that Google Earth also does. It looks like reality, but it's not. For example, all the clouds are stripped out. When you watch *INSULAE* you will sometimes see a few fugitive clouds that have escaped this cloud culling process. There is also something that I've heard, and I would love it to be true — in Google Earth it is always springtime because that is when the world is considered to look the most beautiful. *INSULAE* plays with this tension between the natural and constructed and all the manipulations that are behind the idea of this 'natural' vision of the world.

*INSULAE* has a similar approach to some Land Art; I think of it as a kind of drawing because of the path the camera takes — it's a drawing around the sea.

**TJ: What excited you about the images you selected?**

NT: When you're watching *INSULAE*, it's a continuous six-hour journey travelling over the sea, but it's also a collection of still images. The film environment is created from satellite photographs, so an image that is a nanosecond of time is stitched to another image from six months or two years later. It is this patchwork of images, each representing these different frozen moments in time. You can see weird wakes of water or where a wind turbine has been spinning. So, the film takes these frozen moments and places them into a completely new time frame.

**TJ: For *INSULAE*, have you chosen to include Watchet and its surrounding context?**

NT: The work is a complete circuit around the British mainland, but it's been edited, otherwise it would have been three or four times longer. For this version, I have added extra content to the viewing journey, to include across the Bristol Channel and then down past Watchet. I thought it would be nice to have a few sections of harbour and rock that people might recognise.

**TJ: Let's go upstairs to *CU Soon*. The making of *CU Soon* has involved you sending five different images to satellites that are orbiting the Earth. Tell us about the relationship you have with these satellites and why you wanted to communicate with them?**

NT: While I was making *INSULAE*, I started thinking about the satellites up in space generating the images, and it made me think about just how ignored they are. I became really interested in what is going on in Earth's orbit — so much military sabre rattling, political power plays, and commercial jostling. It's a space where there is no meaningful enforceable governance. There's nothing more than best practice which we hope people will follow — they don't always. It's also a space which is heavily gatekept, both practically and because technically it's quite difficult to understand. We're not encouraged to think about it, yet we are intimately involved, and it will have a direct impact on our future. I wanted to see if I could challenge the sense of powerlessness I felt in relation to this space and if there was a way that I, as an artist, could subvert that power dynamic and bypass the gatekeepers. I wanted to have a different, more direct personal relationship with the satellites and find a way I could use a satellite to create a piece of art.

**TJ: You refer to the images as 'postcards of the surface of the earth'. How did you choose the images and what did you want to communicate to a satellite?**

NT: Once I'd worked out a way I could contact a satellite, by sending something and the satellite sending something back to me, I had to think about what I wanted to send. I liked the idea of sending a postcard because it's an affectionate gesture, as if we're engaged in a direct conversation. The postcards themselves are images from my earlier work, *Backdoored*. They are all surveillance images taken by software bots through security cameras. I did not want to lose sight of the fact that surveillance is a major function of satellites and that they can see us in great detail, while we can't see them. I was really interested in that asymmetric relationship, so the images needed to have some reference to this surveillance network. The images I chose were taken by machines to send to machines. Some are images taken by machines of other machines which are watching the skies. I mentioned cloud stripping in *INSULAE*, so I deliberately chose images that

had a lot of clouds and sky. When I was researching the satellites, I came across little love messages, like 'C U Soon' and 'I am very happy', which people have written to these satellites. I liked how the playfulness of postcards cuts across the coolness of the technology. The satellites collect the postcards I send and then broadcast them back down to Earth. During that process, the images are deconstructed and made anew by the engagement of the satellite and by their wild journey into space and back. The satellite has collaborated in bringing these new images into being. There's an element of call and response.

**TJ: A digital Valentine card in a way?**

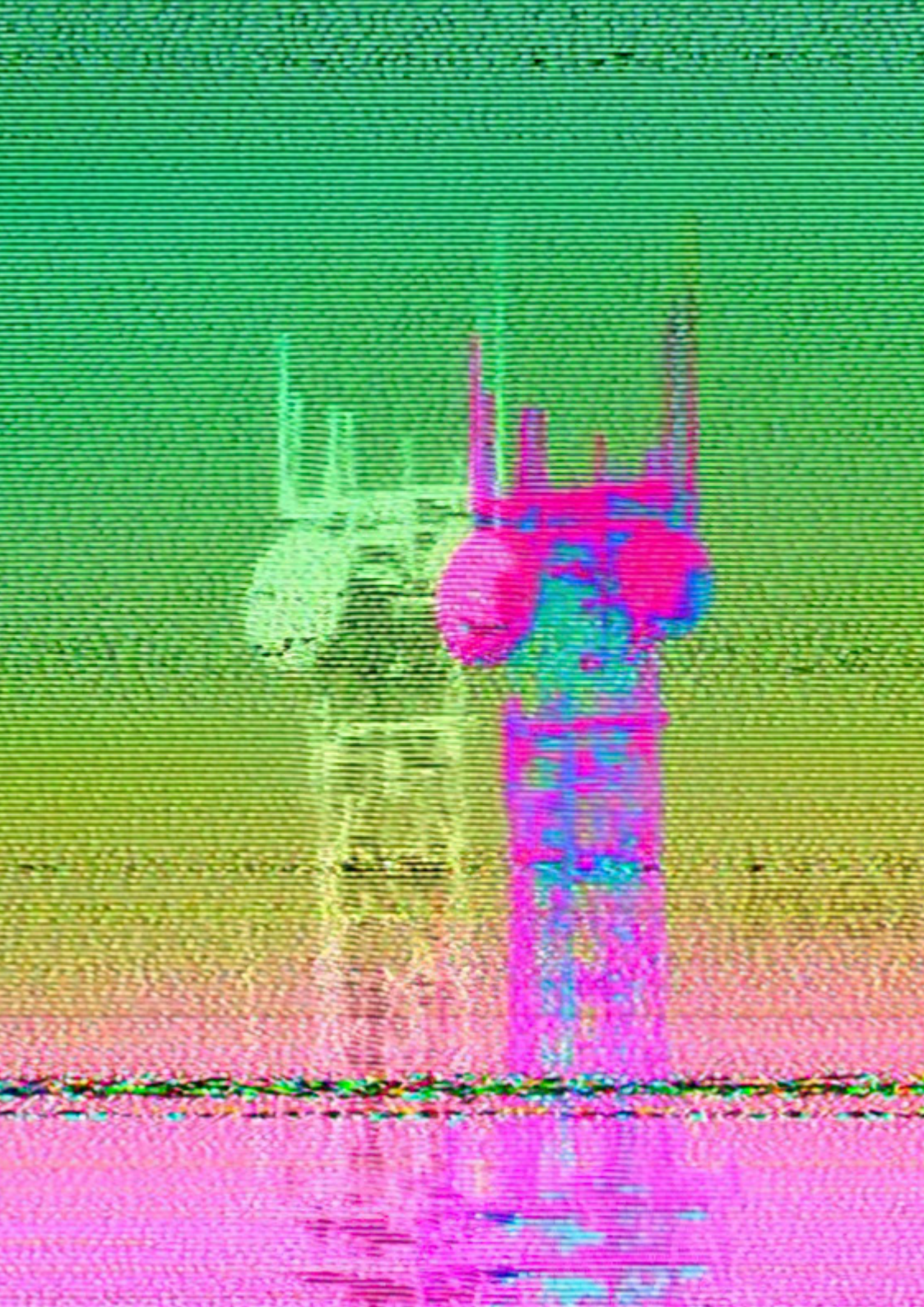
NT: Yes, exactly. It's because these machines will spend their lives out in space. After they've finished their useful lives, many of them will continue orbiting for centuries. They become ghosts. They're often still transmitting signals; they're there and we can see them with radio, but we will never see them physically. The postcard is a way of saying, 'Hi, I'm here. You're there'. Fundamentally, I think, this piece for me is about that really basic communication.

**TJ: Did you get a immediate response? How does the response come back?**

NT: I worked with and was supported by an amazing international organisation that promotes democratic access to space technology, called the Libre Space Foundation. They have a global network of satellite ground stations set up by enthusiasts, which can communicate with satellites as they go overhead and make all the data collected publicly available. We used this to pick up the broadcasts that were sent back down to Earth. When the image is transmitted, it comes back down almost immediately. Afterwards there is a process of collection and quite a long pipeline to decode the images, some of which is shown in the work.

**TJ: Sound is usually an important component in your work. What is important about offering an audible experience to visitors?**

NT: Sound has become increasingly important to my work in recent years because we experience sound very differently to how we experience with our eyes. I think that we have a more direct visceral and emotional response to sound. It can act like a bridge if the sort of imagery that you're working with is quite strange, or in my case, often machine-focused or aimed at a machine. Perhaps it's designed for machines to watch rather than humans and the sound can offer a human entry point.



**TJ: We're aware that satellites have a variety of uses from weather forecasting, broadcasting and communications, to navigation and military. With their development linked to politics and propaganda, why were you keen to use them?**

NT: I think their primary driver is military. That's one of the things that I find fascinating about say Google Earth, or all this satellite imagery that we see. It's so beautiful. Yet, the main reason that we have access is because of its huge value to a military agenda. The act of making the world visible is the act of making the world into potential military targets. It's that military aspect that is hidden behind the lovely aesthetics.

**TJ: Why are you particularly interested in having a relationship with the satellites? What is it that fascinates you about the relationship between human and machine?**

NT: It felt like this was a politically, militarily critical space that I had been deliberately excluded from. My initial agenda was to find a way in. When I started exploring that space, I found a poetics and drama that I hadn't expected and there was no real language or way of talking about this aspect. I became really interested in the idea of the machine gaze because it was a way of seeing the world, maybe the closest thing to seeing the world, as an alien world. I've always been fascinated with the notion of the familiar represented from a completely new perspective as something strange, new, and different. It's not about technology, it's about communication. It's about an attempt to communicate, which is such a deep-seated human impulse.

### About East Quay

East Quay is a brand new arts venue in Watchet, West Somerset. It is home to contemporary art galleries, artist studios, a paper mill, print studio, restaurant, an education space, and accommodation pods. It is run as a social enterprise that seeks to signal how community-led renewal can empower people, help them to develop agency, and rebuild a local economy in a turbulent and uncertain global context. Please visit our website to learn more about our programme of exhibitions and events. This exhibition is presented in partnership with Lumen Art Projects and generously supported by Arts Council England.

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