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Stargazing at the 'Invisible': Photography and the Power of Obscured Light – A Research Partnership with Kielder Observatory.

Helen McGhie




vPICO presentation with slide and display materials for the EGU General Assembly 2021 '#vEGU21: Gather Online,' European Geosciences Union, International Online Conference, 19-30 April 2021.

Stargazing at the 'Invisible': Photography and the Power of Obscured Light - A Research Partnership with Kielder Observatory.
Helen McGhie | Photographic artist & PhD researcher, Northern Centre of Photography (University of Sunderland), UK




This practice-led photography research project explores what new encounters with dark skies emerge when a photographic artist and an astronomy organisation (Kielder Observatory, UK) work in partnership.

Through methods of creative reflective practice, the work reconsiders the clichés in ubiquitous Astro-photography through new perspectives, engaged with place and encounter.



Kielder Observatory is an educational outreach charity situated under the protected dark skies of Northumberland International Dark Sky park. More than 20,000 visitors attend events each year.

The PhD project is funded by the National Productivity Investment Fund (part of UK gov's 'Industrial Strategy'), enabling impactful researcher-industry partnerships. This project is designed to mutually benefit the photographic field and Kielder Observatory by supporting a new art programme, and offering a model for future art and 'science outreach' collaborations.



<https://kielderobservatory.org/>
Image: Kielder Observatory

Blog: <https://invisiblestargazing.blog>
Contact: helen.mcghie@research.sunderland.ac.uk

Have you ever looked at a photograph of the night's sky and felt disappointed? For me as a non-scientist, Astro-images create unreasonable expectations of what outer space 'looks like'.

I am a photographic artist, PhD researcher and lecturer at the University of Sunderland, UK. I'm interested in how clichéd images operate within science and society – and the problems that occur when enhanced 'spectacular' representations of science appear authentic to the non-specialist. My current work seeks to unpick this problem in dark sky tourism and find alternative modes of visualisation.

My project aims to create new encounters with dark skies at Kielder Observatory, a 'local' astronomy outreach charity in Northumberland International Dark Sky Park, UK. It aims to create cultural capital for Kielder whilst testing new lens-based methods to communicate science – shifting the focus from ubiquitous starry skies to more of an emphasis on place and experience.

Through 'creative reflective research', I have made fine-art photography in response to the 'dark sky experience' at Kielder that considers the personal - from the anxiety of driving in complete darkness without a phone signal, to the hopeful anticipation for a clear night on a cloudy day. I have produced a series of portraits of observatory staff, landscapes shot under dark-adapted vision and still lives of astronomy-related artefacts inspired by my conversations with volunteers. I have recently begun exploring image sonification and a augmented virtual exhibition.

Dissemination is vital in both the arts and sciences, and I have shared the work in art, museum, and tourist contexts. I plan an online display of work to be shared with observatory audiences this year and a physical exhibition of sound and the moving image at Kielder next year.

See more of my work in the display materials. Thank you.