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Russell Crotty's
"The Leonid Me-
teor Show," a 24-inch
globe, from the collection
of Susan and Michael Rich.
Photo by Gene Ogami.

“Bergfeld Array” at Hall Wines in Napa Valley. The six globes feature ballpoint ink drawings, glued on plexiglas, all with California landscapes.



Russell Crotty's paradoxical work revolves (and evolves) around the central idea of a fluid circularity in time and space.

The Enigmatic, Paradoxical Worlds of Russell Crotty

You may run into him and his wife at Papa Lennon's (their favorite hangout) and not know who he is. That's because Russell Crotty keeps a low profile around town.

“When riding a barrel, looking at the sky, there is an almost magic quality there. Time stops.” — Russell Crotty

Story by Anca Colbert

I met him a couple of years ago at Gallery 525, as we serendipitously engaged in a conversation sparked by a small modernist landscape we were both admiring. He thought it looked like a Milton Avery. I said it reminded me of Arthur Dow. So we started talking, in mutual recognition of our appreciation for art; which, of course, brought up smiles and created an instant connection.

Later, I looked at his website and felt mesmerized by his works, which offer a distinctive reflection of his adventures in the realms of astronomy, nature and surfing. His floating globe sculptures, ballpoint ink drawings, mixed-media collages and monumental one-of-a-kind books are the enigmatic, often perplexing traces of his explorations. It also became

evident that this soft-spoken, reserved man was an accomplished artist, absorbed with the sky and the stars, the earth and the ocean, and combining his complex interests into a truly original, visionary, visual storytelling body of work.

With major gallery representation in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Madrid and Paris, with his works included in numerous and significant public and private collections around the world, he enjoys the respect of his peers and a solidly established international reputation. In 2015 Russell Crotty was only one of twelve visual artists to receive a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, an honor that includes a substantial award and significant recognition. In 2014 Russell Crotty started an Artist-in-

Residency program with the Institute of the Arts and Sciences (IAS) at UC Santa Cruz together with the Lick Observatory and other campus partners. His residency project, supported by a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation, will culminate with a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in San Jose in November 2016.

Crotty, his wife Laura Gruenther, a seasoned graphic designer, and their rambunctious, affectionate dogs (three Australian Kelpies) live in Meiners Oaks. They like the neighborhood's funky mix of little shops, older hippies, younger hipsters, and its low-key vibe.

Russell was born in 1956 in San Rafael into a family of artists (his father was a sculptor and his mother a ceramicist);

he spent most of his formative years in Northern California. After receiving his MFA from the University of California, Irvine in 1980, and spending many more years in the Los Angeles area, Russell and Laura left their house in the Santa Monica Mountains near Malibu and moved to Ojai in 2010; but they have had their eyes on this little paradise since the 1990s when Russell used to climb rocks on Pine Mountain.

We recently met at his studio in Ventura near the beach, where he showed me some of his monumental books, drawings and collage works in progress displayed on huge tables set on saw horses.

Based on scientific observation, steeped in astronomical studies, Russell Crotty's mapping of skies, planets and stars are

derived from his lifelong passion and pursuit of worlds far, far beyond ours. Russell has been an amateur astronomer most of his life. When asked for his first memory of looking at the sky and the stars he was quick to reply: “Around the age of 12, when sleeping on the deck in Mendocino, I used binoculars and saw the Milky Way, it was spectacular. The first time I saw Jupiter I was spellbound.” He has two telescopes and still observes from his front yard. Ojai's dark, night skies were a major consideration when deciding to move here.

His equally long connection to bodies of water comes from his physical experience with the flow of the ocean. An avid surfer since the age of nine in Marin and Mendocino, he still surfs twice a week.

“These days I prefer smaller waves with interesting set-ups. On a good wave you're thinking down the line and ultimately not thinking at all, just being in the moment. A lot of the time I go out in junk surf, and belly board on one of my knee boards, which are wide and short; just to evade crowds and have fun.” From his early surf work to now he always felt “it was important to observe and experience.” His body language changes as he speaks about surfing, about what happens “when riding a barrel, looking at the sky; there is an almost magic quality there, time stops.”

Russell's surf drawings and sketchbooks speak a muscular, fluid language; they reveal an imagination reminiscent of the freewheeling, dreamlike quality of the automatic

writing and drawing practice favored by the Surrealists. Although Russell Crotty's astronomical works (the globes, meticulously mapped out with ballpoint ink drawings of words and images, measure between 12" and 72" and float in thin air) are of a classical inspiration and highly controlled in their production, his current direction (a series of large, 55" x 55", mixed-media collages using ink, acrylic, plastic, tinted bio-resin, fiberglass on paper) is looser, more gestural and directly connected to his concerns about the transformation and degradation of nature all around us.

This new body of work, "Another Green World," was introduced in 2015 in his solo show at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica. Navigating the waters between science fiction and ecological concerns for our planet, the new works are full of surprises and mark a turning point in his career. These works are enigmatic, and wide open to interpretation; often the hallmark of artworks with lasting power in a cultural memory. Russell feels liberated by doing more imaginary works, "joyful, but spooky; whimsical, but creepy" — and softly comments, "that he does not understand parts of his own work at this point — and he likes that."

Speaking of the courage it takes to make these kinds of turns in an established artistic career, Russell expresses his admiration for Philip Guston's guts and ability to change. "I, along with most artists I know, admired Guston's ability to radically change the direction of his work at a time when the New York art world was anything but receptive to crude imagery and soulful paint handling. Guston's drawings have an honest directness of line that he built upon to make those tough personal paintings in



**The Milky Way
(Northern Hemisphere), 1999-2000**
36-inch diameter globe from the collection of Ron and Ann Pizzuti
Photo by Gene Ogami

the 1970s."

Philip Guston's powerful words come to mind: "Look at any inspired painting. It's like a gong sounding; it puts you in a state of reverberation."

Yes, there is a vibrational, energetic physicality to the experience of art. Just close your eyes and recall a Rothko. His luminous color field paintings have a magnetic force. With Russell Crotty there is also a pull between two worlds, a tension — sometimes exquisite, sometimes puzzling — a solid play with the fluidity of boundaries: the linear and the circular, the luminous and the obscure, stillness and motion; this artist's variations with words and images play with reality and illusion, as he clearly takes pleasure in every step of his process.

Ancient questions reappear in Russell's work and cast doubt on what we assume to know as real. Ambiguity of perception

Guggenheim Foundation's Introduction to Russell Crotty

"Russell Crotty's vast body of work challenges the limitations and preconceptions of drawing as primary medium, pushing the genre towards minimal sculptural installation. His practice chronicles an idiosyncratic commentary on astronomy, landscape, coastal mapping, and the natural and manmade world. Especially known for drawings on paper-coated suspended globes and within large-scale books,

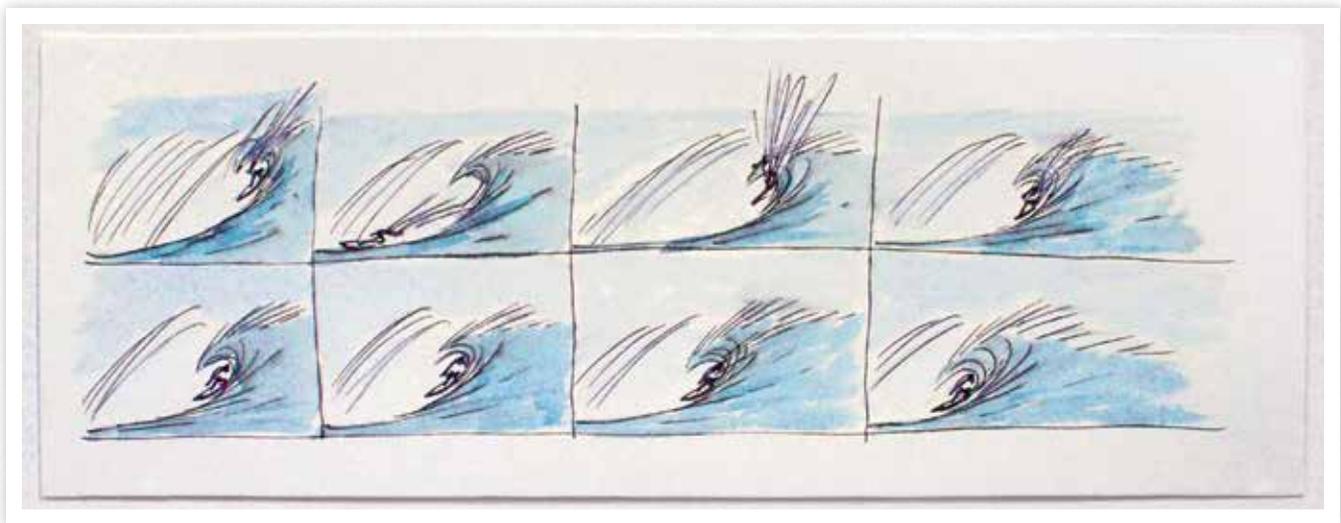
he continues to explore new ideas that investigate and expand the notion of "works on paper." As a serious amateur astronomer, Crotty has studied the night sky for decades, utilizing his own telescopes along with sojourns to professional observatories, and has made observational contributions to astronomy organizations such as NASA and ALPO. His obsessive documentation of celestial phenomenon has resulted in

a body of astronomical work informed by actual scientific research, yet infused with his own interpretations. His personal and artistic pursuits also involve a deep love of the ocean and the coastline, resulting in an extensive oeuvre of landscape and seascape drawings, globes and books." (*Excerpt from the Guggenheim Foundation's introduction to Russell Crotty*)



ABOVE LEFT: "Pier Two," 2014 – ink, acrylic, plastic, bio-resin, fiberglass on paper – courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery
 ABOVE RIGHT: "Listening Platform," 2015 – ink, acrylic, plastic, bio-resin, fiberglass on paper – courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery.

BELOW: "Estero Rush," 2010, Ink and gouache on paper.
 BOTTOM: Work in progress on "Around the Vast Blue," a 60-inch globe commissioned for the Nevada Museum of Art's 2015 exhibition, "Tahoe: A Visual History." Photo by Laura Gruenther.



**“I thought of a labyrinth of
labyrinths, of one sinuous
spreading labyrinth that would
encompass the past and the
future and in some way involve the
stars.” — Jorge Luis Borges, in *The Garden
of Forking Paths* (1942)**

is at the core of his complex works. Just as it is manifest at the core of contemporary art.

Russell Crotty's paradoxical work revolves (and evolves) around the central idea of a fluid circularity in time and space.

In his globes the earth and the sky merge in a soft puzzle mode, get flattened and wrapped around each other. Russell's words flow in automatic style writing, as rivers of sediments around the earth and towards its center. Primitive looking trees (or are they people?), rooted in a labyrinth of words, stretch out their branches towards the sky. Hauntingly beautiful images come back to memory from the epic "2001: A Space Odyssey" as I wonder if we hear some kind of music from outer space around these floating globes; or do we hear a great galactic silence?

In his recent collage works, the space moves around and inbetween the sci-fi structures, oil rigs in the ocean of an imagined future world, and as one experiences the group of works in a gallery installation, the viewer becomes the center and the axis upon which the experience is predicated.

With his surfing drawings he keeps exploring the dynamics of a body in and over water, and the movement of the waves, again and again, never the same. There is pleasure in the exercise, a form of meditation maybe. These are the intimate journals documenting life in motion.

While discovering Crotty's worlds I kept thinking of "the unimaginable universe" of Borges; how profoundly his dream world tales affected me when I first read his "Circular Ruins" as a teenager in Paris. Artfully casting doubt on reality, while meticulously describing it, layer after layer. Not unlike "The Arabian Nights," Borges' favorite book, where night after night Scheherazade's never-ending story wraps its net of seduction around Sultan Shahryar and around time. Ah! The power of good stories.

Asking questions is one of the key roles of artists in society. Today more than ever, with a world in precarious balance, we need them to actively hold that space.

Living an artist's life is also a precarious proposition. It may well be an exhilarating adventure. But it takes courage and perseverance. Committed artists have no choice about doing



Crotty is a serious amateur astronomer, using his observations to inform and inspire his art. Here he is at the historic 36-inch Great Lick Refractor Telescope on Mount Hamilton near San Jose, with Elinor Gates, staff astronomer, and Tony Misch, archivist. Photo by John Weber.

what they do. We know that. Let's listen and pay attention to what the visionary messages are from these artworks, which I believe can refine our attention and our perception of life.

Russell Crotty keeps going with the flow of what he is obsessively drawn to draw. He looks, listens to and explores with his keen intellect and finely tuned intuition the shifts and mysteries of the universe. He makes us reflect on our place in this world, above and below, in time and space. 🌌