

## ‘I’m trying to make these huge questions more tangible and more personal’

Thanks to synaesthesia Lucy McKenna experiences the world differently to most people, and now, following a stint at Cern, she’s trying to explain huge questions in science with art

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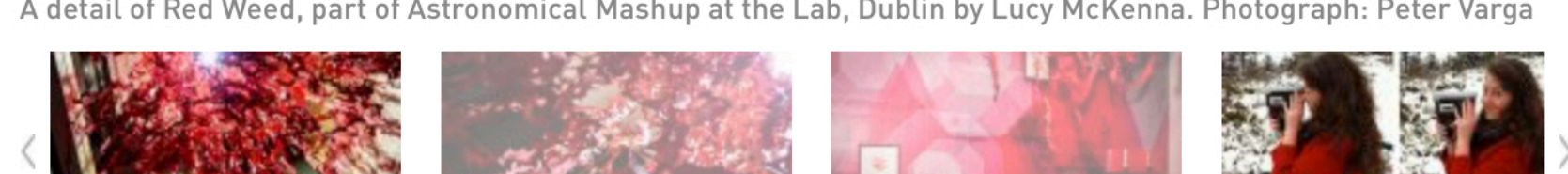
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**Gemma Tipton**



A detail of Red Weed, part of Astronomical Mashup at the Lab, Dublin by Lucy McKenna. Photograph: Peter Varga



Lucy McKenna isn’t what you would expect. From her work I had imagined someone intense, nerdy and scientific in a scary way. Her artist’s CV includes: exhibitions in Ireland, the United States, Canada and China; installations at the [Electric Picnic](#) and stints at [Cern](#) in Switzerland, the Armagh Space Observatory and Facebook; and residencies in Iceland, Ireland and, coming soon, the prestigious ISCP in New York. Based on this, I imagine a driven, hard-nosed achiever given to throwing words like juxtapose, interrogate and problematise into her sentences.

Instead, McKenna seems softer, in a good way. With clouds of brown wavy hair and an expression that switches from amused to focused (and back) in a flash, she speaks with delight and without pretence about big ideas. That softness is actually an openness to finding different, illuminating ways of seeing some of the deeper mysteries of the world.

She’s one of those people who wear their intelligence lightly, one of the lucky ones, blessed with plenty, but without the need to remind you of its presence. She also has synaesthesia: the neurological phenomenon that connects different senses – those with it may, for example, hear colour, or smell sound. It’s a fascinating condition; famous synaesthetes include *Lolita* author [Vladimir Nabokov](#), artists [Wassily Kandinsky](#) and [David Hockney](#), and inventor [Nikola Tesla](#).

In McKenna’s case, this means she associates letters with colours. Growing up in Kilkenny, she didn’t realise this was any “different”, imagining – when she thought about it at all – that everyone did the same.

Instead she found out while studying textiles at the National College of Art and Design. “Randomly,” she recalls. “A girl I got chatting to was writing her thesis on it. I’d never heard of it. She put me in touch with [researchers at] [Trinity College Dublin](#), who were running tests and experiments on volunteers. So I got involved and did lots of strange experiments.” She recounts one in which “they poured gel on my head and put a cap on with all this wire on it. So I got to see my brainwaves. It was amazing.”

### Remember things

She uses her ability to help remember things, which, she says, she isn’t otherwise very good at. “Each word will have a colour, so I might remember it as a yellow name.” I ask about “G”. “It’s grassy green, really nice. It’s pretty hard when people get offended by the colour I have for their name; it’s not my fault, I don’t choose.”

The idea of seeing abstract concepts through images is key to McKenna’s work, which is currently on view in the Cube space at Dublin’s Lab gallery. It draws on her experiences at the observatory in Armagh, and from a life-long fascination with astronomy and space.

“It’s amazing how things you learn about as a child or a teenager stick with you and influence your work. I read a lot of books about space and physics,” she says, adding that when she gets to the maths part she gets lost. Instead, what grabs and holds her are what she describes as the “magical properties of physics”. Before I get concerned that she’s about to get all Harry Potter on me, she launches into a discussion of how matter changes its behaviour once it goes past a certain level of smallness – below the size of an atom.

“It does different things. Gravity doesn’t apply. Things can change from a particle to a wave. Or be both. Or be in two places at once. It becomes,” she says, in an understatement, “very difficult to grasp in terms of the way we think of the world.” Her project is to, as she describes it, “see with intent” – that’s looking and observing as opposed to just seeing.

Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger, who spent some time in Dublin in the 1940s (the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies was set up by de Valera to entice him here), showed that the act of observing something changes it. “It’s very weird,” agrees McKenna, “how this intervention of a conscious human observing something can change its behaviour – it can’t be all about us, but on the surface it seems as if our consciousness is changing something.”

### Observable unknown

Why does this matter beyond the labs and halls of scientific institutions? In McKenna’s mind, it connects with bigger questions of spirituality, which she describes as “the observable unknown”, or rather, a way of describing or seeing the otherwise unknowable: God, time and eternity, quantum physics, spirits, angels or whatever you’re having yourself.

“It touches on what we’re all searching for, however you’re searching, whether it’s religion, science, spirituality: it’s how we got here.” We pause to think about that for a moment, before she continues, animated: “These little mysteries in the tiny pockets of matter in the universe are so enchanting. Obviously they’re huge questions for science, but they’re also flying around us in tiny particles every day. I’m trying to make these huge questions a little more tangible and democratic, more personal.”

At the Lab this manifests as a small, tightly-packed installation in which cut paper red fronds cascade from above, against a digital wallpaper that shows a schematic of the volume of Google searches about space: from “Mars” to “NASA found a bible on Mars . . .” Alongside that are photographs taken from the telescope at Armagh. These have been developed, through a process created by McKenna, on to glass balls (recommissioned light bulbs). There are also paintings based on 19th century Irish astronomer Charles E Burton’s descriptions of the planets he observed. Burton, who worked for [Lord Rosse](#) at Birr, was one of the first people to draw Mars.

In McKenna’s world, all this connects. The red fronds refer to the red weed from HG Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, which was written in 1897, at a time when people became fascinated about the possibility of life on Mars – telescopes seemed to show canals on the red planet, and imaginations on earth took flight. The images on glass are of the star cluster, the Pleiades, also known as the Seven Sisters. “One of the astronomers told me: ‘Lucy the light from this star cluster is 440 light years away.’ So the light left the star before telescopes were invented. Before the glass bulb was invented.”

She describes such things as a “flattening of time”, and I’m tempted to think of the work of fellow Irish artist [Grace Weir](#) in this context. “I’m trying to get people to think about something that’s much much bigger than them,” says McKenna. “Much farther away in time, to bring those huge vast times and distances down to a very small, familiar and comfortable level. When you see something transformed into colours, shapes and opacity, suddenly you can understand the bigger picture. It’s valuable to think about the bigger picture.

“It’s something we should all do. Like the president’s amazing speech about philosophy in education, it’s trying to see the ‘All’, how everything connects to everything else.”

*Astronomical Mashup by Lucy McKenna is at the LAB until March 26th [dublincityartsoffice.ie/the-lab](http://dublincityartsoffice.ie/the-lab)*