

Sonja Thomsen: Glowing Wavelengths In-Between

"There are faint stars in the night sky that you can see, but only if you look to the side of where they shine. They burn too weakly or are too far away to be seen directly, even if you stare. But you can see them out of the corner of your eye because the cells on the periphery of your retina are more sensitive to light. Maybe truth is just like that. You can see it, but only out of the corner of your eye." —Janna Levin

As astrophysicist Janna Levin points out, the deepest forms of truth often elude careful scrutiny. This is true even within the fields of math and science, which are perhaps humankind's most direct line to empirical truth. Dark matter, a shadowy substance that we now know makes up more than half of the mass in the Universe, cannot be seen because it neither emits nor absorbs light; however, we can mathematically measure it. The existence of the Higgs boson particle, a fugitive that evaded scientists for years, has now been confirmed. Understanding the particle's properties is crucial to predicting the behavior of matter on a subatomic level. These are two examples of what the fields of science and math do best. Like magic, they can open up the Universe in ways that map the future and the past, the visible and the unknown, allowing us to predict the behavior of the matter that surrounds us. But ultimately, our discoveries always lead to more questions. As we chase answers, the dark and mysterious corners of the Universe often fissure, moving deeper into more abstract and ever fainter territories.

It is this mysterious territory that fascinates artist Sonja Thomsen. The quote at the top of this page appears in one of her artworks called *at work, vol. 2* as an enlarged copy of a page from Janna Levin's *A Madman Dreams of Turing Machines* (2006). A work of fiction that is rooted in fact, Levin's book embellishes and builds upon the biographies of legendary mathematicians Karl Gödel and Alan Turing, two brilliant although tragically flawed protagonists who interrogated the idea of truth and found profound beauty in mathematics. As an artist, Thomsen is captivated by the ways these mathematicians discovered unseen patterns within the practice of mathematics and changed the course of how their entire field perceives reality. She draws on aspects of their stories in her appropriation of the book page, which she then uses as both inspiration and raw material, altering its appearance and juxtaposing it among other texts and images. In addition to the inclusion of Levin's quote, the artwork features a page from Robert W. Marks's influential but now dated 1964 primer *The New Mathematics Dictionary and Handbook*. The charts and figures in the handbook are cold and matter-of-fact in contrast to the prose in Levin's book, but they take on a poetic magic through Thomsen's addition of iridescent strips of vinyl, which are placed over portions of the writing. The colorful bands gleam and vivify the words on the page; however, they also cover up and obscure several passages of text. With her alterations, Thomsen fragments the clarity of the text's original information and brings us into a magical moment of possibility, where her reformation of ideas appears as pure sensorial experience. She riffs on codified knowledge and opens texts up to discoveries beyond rational meaning. Her process becomes a new iteration, less objective but more wondrous.

At work, vol. 2 is presented in a gallery setting as a folded booklet that opens up like a double-sided map. The folding and unfolding of the page interrupts a fluid reading of the information and handling the document can feel like an echo of the vacillating complexity of the Universe in miniature. Faceted or folded forms repeat throughout Thomsen's work, not only in small, handheld booklets, but also in enveloping, wall-sized murals. The recurring structure lends her enigmatic installations a scaffolded sense of complexity, where repeating shapes and textures converse with appropriated texts and materials. She supplements her more cerebral works with abstracted images of the human figure and formal studies of color and light. Many of the abstract works include polychromatic elements that glitter and transform in relationship to the body. These dynamic ocular experiences interface with mathematical theories, weaving elements of ethereal mystery into a rigorous and factual fabric. Ultimately, Thomsen is fascinated by the world that surrounds us, and the ways fragments of knowledge can be drawn out of the immeasurably complex Universe to be analyzed, with the big picture remaining incomprehensible in its entirety.

Rainbows appear over and over again in Thomsen's studies and animate the link between the known and the unknowable. Though easily explained scientifically, rainbows are visually stirring and rich with symbolism. In Thomsen's hands, they are frozen in photographs, embedded in shimmering material, and broadcast as beams of light that play on gallery walls and illuminate artworks. Across all of her depictions, the prismatic glow never sits comfortably in the realm of the known. It is oblique and wondrous and Thomsen seeks it out. To quote the artist, "There should always be a place for wonder; it is a direct line to new knowledge."

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