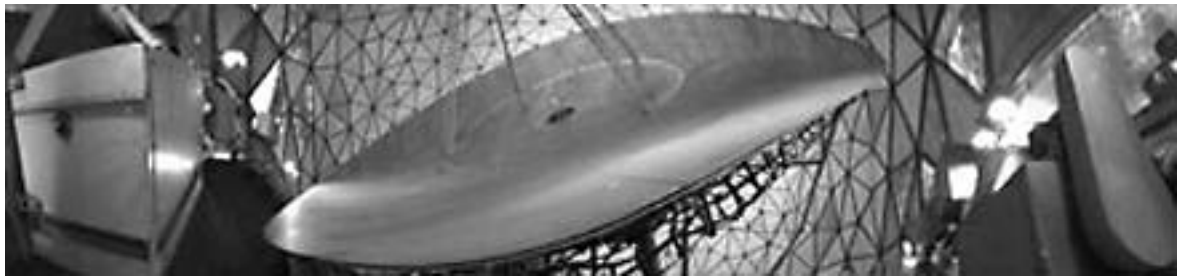
Telescopes, the final frontier



INNER SPACE: Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon capture 'The Dish Lens' at the Haystack Observatory.

Visual Arts
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When Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon embarked on a mission to photograph the enormous radio telescope at MIT's Haystack Observatory, they were peering into places where even this formidable apparatus had never looked. Instead of capturing 360-degree views of galactic wonders, they made 16-foot-wide panoramas of the observatory's control office, its geodesic dome, its library and its roller-coaster network of radar-tracking equipment.

Mysteries of space and time lurk within these earthbound places. Swirls of books, of metal girders, of computer hardware hold secrets usually associated with more dark and distant reaches. "Observing the Observers: An Exhibition by MIT Artists-in-Residence Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon" - at the MIT Museum's Compton Gallery through May 6 - reveals these spectacular visions of a place where the human and cosmic worlds intersect.

On a typical day, the Haystack radio telescope sets its sights on the universe. Probing far beyond its Westford home with invisible radio emissions, the instrument has shed light on phenomena as remote as space debris and as close as the motions of the earth's tectonic plates. The radome - so called because the radio telescope is housed in a geodesic dome - was used to map the moon's surface in preparation for the Apollo landing, and to test Einstein's theory of general relativity. After such lofty pursuits, Wenyon and Gamble's telescopic self-portraits could have seemed modest indeed.

They have created stunning images, however - panoramas that combine precision with exquisite beauty. In so doing, they echo the more classically "scientific" data in the observatory's files and suggest that the disciplines of art and science share more than meets the eye.

Historical precedents loom large in the minds of astronomers and the team of Wenyon and Gamble. During past projects, the artists have investigated Isaac Newton's lacy drawings of light, sketched to document his study of optics. They have employed the light magic of holography while working at the Royal Government Observatory in England. At a Scottish observatory, they found visual equivalents for 19th century research into the electromagnetic spectrum.

The three-year Haystack residency gave Wenyon and Gamble the chance to build - in true scientific manner - upon their earlier efforts and upon the work of those who preceded them. In "Radio Waves from Space," the pair fashioned a rainbow of holographic images of data stored in the observatory's myriad files. Glowing like canisters set into the gallery wall, the 13 holograms depict such information as "Venus 12/24, stacked output, 19Aug70." The content of the tapes remains elusive, but Wenyon and Gamble harness the poetry of the quest: Venus on Christmas Eve, gleaming green.

For most of their other Haystack art, the team has borrowed mapping techniques as old as photography, and applied them to the mapping device instead. Composite images formed by the sweep of a camera fastened to the rotating telescope recall pioneering 19th century views of the American West and 20th century depictions of the lunar surface. In all three cases, the tiled-together panoramas hint at a vastness beyond measure and a human desire to fathom the infinite.

"The Haystack Radome Mapped with Its Own Telescope" translates this search into the faceted geometry of the dome's triangular panels, interspersed with triangular windows onto the outside world. Other works, such as "The Dark Side of the Dome" and "Dome Explored in Lunar Form," treat the observatory as if it were a celestial body, spinning from darkness to light, or spliced together from multiple viewpoints. In keeping with the spirit that has driven astronomers since ancient times, Wenyon and Gamble's crystalline photographic prints celebrate the exhilaration of looking as much as the splendor of the objects under scrutiny.

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On April 12, from noon to 1 p.m., Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon will discuss the work that has emerged from their Haystack residency at the MIT Museum's Compton Gallery, 77 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge. Admission to the gallery is free.