

At the Edge of the Universe

Adam Makarenko's intriguing miniatures portray the tranquil beauty of our world, as well as those that are located light-years away from our galaxy. Nilofer Khan explores.

Since an early age, Adam Makarenko has been fascinated and perplexed by the notion of our existence and our place in the universe. For him, the only way to truly understand these puzzling concepts was by "reaching out into the cosmos." And so he did through the creation of his awe-inspiring dioramas of far-flung places.

 **Burning Bush.**

The Great Beyond

Since he began in 2006, Adam's work primarily focused on landscapes and topography. For him, they are all-encompassing and impressive, through which one can build a larger narrative. "Our relationship with landscape relates directly to our connection with nature and our place within it. We are always looking beyond the horizon and wondering what



 **Eden Tree.**

else is out there. So, I take my viewers and transport them into a pseudo-realistic place," he says.

His initial series depicted magnificent deserts and forests that had a lingering sense of solitude and melancholy. But his recent project, *Exoplanets*, depicts the marvels of uncharted galaxies. "I find aspects of other worlds to be paradoxical. We can locate the planets and possibly hope to find life. But getting there is going

to be the biggest challenge we face. How do we overcome the barrier of space-time? For example, you cannot communicate with an alien civilisation 150 light-years away because a two-way conversation would take 300 years. This idea fascinated me because it remains unknown," he adds.

God of Small Things

Creating these models comes with its own set of challenges. Since there isn't

 **Bee Truck.**







📍 This image: EXP74.

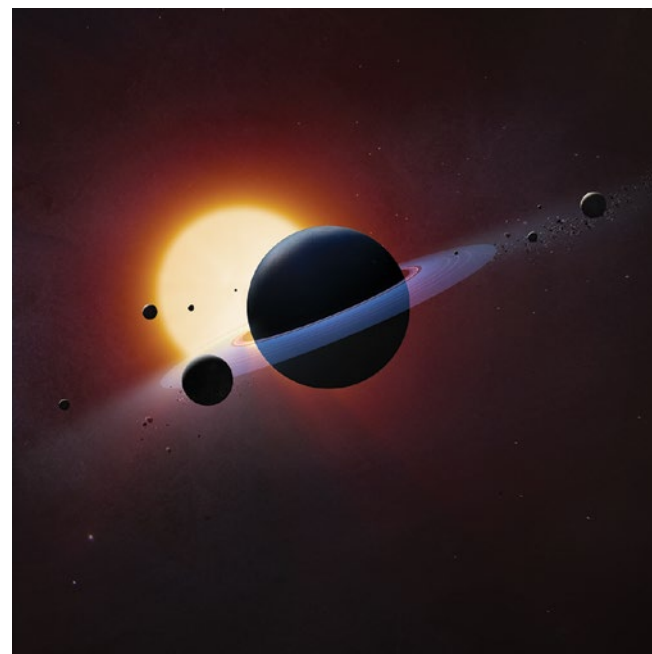
Image on the bottom left: Taby's Star, 2017.

Image on the bottom right: EXP209C.

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Image on the top: EXP202A.

Image on the bottom: EXP272.



enough material available on the subject, Adam goes through a series of trials and errors before his vision takes a concrete shape. "I usually start with a sketch and then experiment with small ideas based on the overall aesthetic. For example, with *Exoplanets*, I experimented with the star backdrops in several different ways. At first, I started punching holes through a black sheet of paper and lit it from behind. Gradually, I began to suspend glitter through a dark translucent plastic," he says.

Then comes the issue of lighting the set. In *Exoplanets*, he uses only one source of light to mimic the sun. "In real life, the light from the sun is filtering through all kinds of atmosphere. To achieve a similar look, I have to tweak the light, as well as the elements on the set. At times, some colour on the set may look odd, so I have to repaint it with another colour."

To get a large depth of field, he uses an aperture of f/22 or higher. He designs his sets as large as 8 x 8 feet, or captures the image using the minimum focusing distance of the lens to get sharper details. "Usually, I have to shoot the landscapes in two or three parts as I can't physically fit them into one space," he says. For the planetary rings, he spins colourful paper on a homemade table and captures the image using long exposure.

Later, these sections are combined into a single photograph in Photoshop. "I don't manipulate too much. The software is a tool to clean the images, stitch them, or correct the colours. Occasionally, I use After Effects because I like some plugins there that can help to enhance the images. For instance, there is a plugin called 'shine' that works well for volumetric lighting," he says.

So far, he has photographed 700 planets. However, the series is far from finished. "It's rarely complete in my mind. As an artist, you are always searching for some kind of sublimity. It's something you can find partially, so it drives you to continue. With my *Exoplanets* series, I am always challenging myself in how far I can take the work. Once I photograph about 1000 planets, I aim to publish them in the form of a book," he explains.

Adam Makarenko has worked on several TV shows, feature documentaries, stop motion films and commercials as a cinematographer and director. He has also won accolades such as the American Photo of The Year and the Bright Spark Award. You can find his work on www.adammakarenko.com and on Instagram @adamgdog.