

Chapter 13 - Astronomy

"...to fucking Andromeda and back."

Loss, luminescence, annular eclipse, and more

The rest of 2011 featured a few good telescope nights at Sonoma, Mt Tam, sidewalk astronomy occasionally at 9th & Irving and Fairfax, with dwindling volunteer work for the CAS. I became more invested in teaching at the Academy of Art. I did enjoy volunteering at the CAS and the people I worked with, recalling a few names; Linda the coordinator, Paradise the guard, Bing and Jeff at the telescopes, and Leslie the versatile docent who took to astronomy on the roof around the time I stopped helping altogether. It was a good run while I lasted. Sometime in early 2012 was my last volunteer night.

Carol

Carol Strauss moved to her homestate of Missouri after suffering through chemotherapy, then losing her long term rent controlled apartment on 17th & Irving. Sad to see her go...and much sadder when after moving she passed away in 2012. Her good friend Sally [close friends in SF since the mid-1960's] contacted me with that news. Carol and I kept in touch after she moved but her response dwindled.

Moving far after living in San Francisco since the mid-1960's was a stress, and battling cancer. I helped by driving her to Kaiser appointments, and moving. The least I could do; after all the help she gave me, instrumental in getting me in the house where Dobson lived, and how good she was to JD — friends since the 60's, and arranged that his cosmology sessions continued for years at the house whenever he was in town.

Carol also got me connected with the CAS (she was a docent in the previous CAS building) and found me a freelance web design gig during the recession. A friend of Carol is a friend indeed! She was exemplary with kindness and I was fortunate to know her since early 2006 through the Dobson connection. She held a few fun farewell dinners at Shangri-La restaurant near her place, with a small group of her friends. I was honored to be invited!

Louie Lights

Around 9th & Irving I would run into Louis Brill, friend from the Cacophony Society and Burning Man years, professional writer of articles on technology and culture. And I didn't know at the time — an artist of light.

I had done some freelance work for him, formatting and posting his "Media Mechanations" missives about groundbreaking media forms that he liked to cover; big hidedef digital screen displays were a specialty.

I might see him when doing Sidewalk Astronomy, or just around the neighborhood. He asked if I want to be hired for an extensive Adobe Photoshop project on his light art photography, and I thought **sure**. Meeting at his nearby corner apartment on Hugo Street on a day soon afterwards, before entering he says, "Dean, what you're about to see is going to send you to fucking Andromeda and back." in his aptly pithy New York style of phrase.

The Lumia cave

His spacious digs serve as a laboratory in the dark, complete with several vintage dust covered robot tchotchkes, including a miniature model of the **Alien**, Burning Man and science fiction

images are laying about, technical clutter — some of this being his handmade light projection boxes. He demonstrated how they work, by using various pieces of glass secured within the projector, light is transmitted through and onto the wall screen, producing strikingly bizarre and complex light formations. Strange, beautiful, eerie, and yes — *celestial*. Fascinating visuals! He would take a series of photos of these images, picking the most interesting, quality ones.

What he needs my help with, is cleaning them up in Photoshop, editing for a possible book project. I was into this! It appealed on several levels: it's a DIY project, art and light driven, somewhat akin to handmade telescopes. The light refracted has plenty of chromatic aberration, but in this case can provide desired results — unlike the goal of Astronomy — but the images were mostly layers of diaphanous white light on blackness, like the Andromeda galaxy or the Orion nebula might appear. So Louis was onto something with his introductory comment!

In 2012...

SFAA events continued to be inspiring, with one unique standout — an Annular eclipse! That's when it's not total enough to have the sun completely occulted by the Moon, because of its being a bit too distant from Earth to cover the Sun's disc from our perspective. The result is a ring of sunlight shining around the Moon while it's in front of the Sun, so there is no viewing with the naked eye; only through reflections against safe surfaces and vision safe filters.

The SFAA planned an event near Mt Shasta, it was in May, just after my semester of teaching ended and I'd be driving that way then anyway, to Seattle. Talk about a timely eclipse!

The gathering place was at a resort in the Mt Shasta region, at a place where the more flush might stay overnight, while it's still possible to drive back to the bay area by night. I was Ashland bound afterwards, enroute to my usual Seattle destination.

An early start to get to the event early enough to catch the speakers who are scheduled for the afternoon. The eclipse is supposed to peak later in the day. I had my 6" telescope along, but not for this (no solar telescope filter) just my eye filter, sketchbook, and pinhole reflections, like the partial eclipses I've experienced over the decades.

A mix of tribes

Arriving at the site, there were only a few familiar faces, turning out to be a mingling of various astronomy groups like the SFAA. I recall Paul Salazar was the SFAA organizer, and Jessica, Angie, Michael was there? (wish to remember the few more from the SFAA present). The first speakers in the tented shade out on the lawn were new to me, giving good presentations on Annular eclipses (hours before the actual eclipse began) while people slowly arrived, with solar viewing telescopes being setup around the grounds.

When I say a mix of tribes, I don't just mean different astronomy groups, but the gathering of new age spiritualists joined the same site. Funny how different we were — telescopes and astronomy talks on one side ; sage, chants, didgeridoos, djembe's and feathers around a large totemic quartz crystal on the other!

How Northern California can it be! The opposite approaches worked out fine; we appreciated the soft live ambient music, and I daresay that we were amused by this dichotomy of groups!

"can you feel the energy?!" asks a woman, rhetorically. To my reply, "I always do!" (and I mean that.)

As first contact began, we check out both reflections and filtered telescope views. One of my old favorites is to form a tiny crack of light to shine through my fist, showing a crescent shaped sunlight cast on the ground or on a clear surface. At one point, Jessica held up a pinhole while I drew by tracing the outline cast on a sketchbook page. This was fun! The crowd had around 100 or so people present by eclipse time. Only one of the new age party got briefly obnoxious about chanting, but any problems didn't last and the rest are polite. A harmonic convergence? Mostly!

Beautiful surroundings with Mt Shasta majestic and snow covered, looming large to our left. The shadows skew as the sun gets obscured by the Moon. A layer of clouds roll in, but not enough to negatively affect the eclipse at all.

It's called a *ring of fire* eclipse for its shape when covered by the Moon. It forms a ring, but again, not with our naked eyes. When it becomes the ring shape, everyone hoots and hollered! There was time to appreciate it (5 minutes?) through the unique ring shape cast reflections, single hand held solar viewing filters, and to get a few moments seeing it through of the many solar telescopes! *Beautiful!* I'm glad I attended the group event instead of solo. Great day! The Sun already getting low after annularity ended, so I took off immediately afterwards, to arrive in Ashland at a good time. Of course I took a wrong back road to I-5, delaying the drive by only about 15 minutes. The eclipse was still waning and I guess I was... feeling the energy!

SA

I did some SA in Seattle since I had my easily transportable

TARDIS 'scope along, but not often due to the late summertime's light. This was back on 85th & Greenwood, and late night time usually means more "unhinged" people passing by; later light than the bay area, being at a jump in Northern latitude.

I recall a slightly dishevelled woman stopping to view Saturn, adamantly claiming "that's *not* real!" and storms off in an angry huff. This kind of thing happens in any city... Several times at 9th & Irving, with one time in particular when I was showing a crescent Venus, someone argued "That's not Venus, it's the Moon!", Refusing to have me show her the actual Moon, over by a few dozen degrees in the sky. It's their loss, however that mentality must be expected once in a while.

Back in the bay area, I was now living in the super nice Piedmont avenue neighborhood, and was good for SA when autumn evenings fell. There is a good flow of foot traffic to and from the many restaurants and cafés there. I was able to carry my sidewalk telescope just a half block to the mini triangular square on the main drag on Piedmont avenue. When I used the big 'scope was for the SFAA events on Mt Tamalpais, and spontaneous trips to my favorite spot above Lake Sonoma! There were limits for Yosemite events due to wildfires, so I missed going for a few years.

Marin events with Andrea

Andrea Freeman, poetry author, naturalist and astronomy enthusiast! We met in Fairfax at my telescope in front of the Good Earth several years ago. She even had me as a roommate in Woodacre for a short few months. One of the cool things she does is to hold Astronomy events in Point Reyes, scheduled and paid by the park service. Her specialty was the constellations

and their mythology, and to add to the astronomical appeal she hired me to bring my bigger telescope to show deep sky phenomena for the paying audience — clear sky permitting. Twice this happened with a good manageable sized group, sky quality, and delightfully good times! [2012-2013] Andrea also was a regular at Mt Tam nights; always good to have up there, who genuinely loves the cosmos!

Lumia art

Louis has me stop over weekly to work together on his light photography images, which Thomas Wilfred started around 90 years previous, calling it *Lumia* art.

The images are, as I mentioned, quite astronomical in nature, but not astronomy. We'd spend a few hours of teamwork each week, editing and often elaborating the image components into collages that seem very sci-fi more than sci. In the summer of 2012 I brought Louis along to a public Mt Tam star party, but he wasn't interested as much as I expected — him being more about creativity and culture than the cosmos themselves.

Observational astronomy is not for everyone

While I really like to think it's for everybody when the striking phenomena is presented to them, for some it's probably too challenging to bother with looking through an eyepiece to not see a multi-hued Hubble image. They can see those in hi-res on their computer screens at home. For me, those photos are both dazzling, and are useful tools for understanding the structure of the deep sky objects depicted. So when I find the object in real life, my appreciation for it is enhanced instead of diminished despite being dim, distant, colorless and small in appearance. Reminding myself of the Richard Feynman wisdom, to "imagine the way things really are!" is a good way to establish greater

appreciation for scientific phenomena. I personally am more thrilled to find a faint, fuzzy looking galaxy through a telescope with my own eye than looking at vivid professional photographs. Fortunately I have both!

I have heard some say that astronomy is relatively visually too small for them, preferring large scale paintings, sculptures and cinema. Fair enough. These differences distinguish us Astronomy buffs from the opposite.

The Lumia editing sessions

...yielded a series of reworked and reimagined images that became a set of art cards, a website gallery, and a book! Our teamwork worked, with a productive tug of war between the urgency of Louis and his aim for expediency to "it's good enough", and my critical painters eye, saying "not yet — this is barely 90% there." We enjoyed the ***Aha!*** moments when an inspiration became manifest on the computer screen! Louis had an eye for seeing fantastical representative figures and faces in the abstractions, like reading clouds as recognizable forms. I have the technical expertise to extract and composite them since I was a Photoshop teacher and painter.

Louis also worked with light wire, instructing El Wire workshops with Steve Boverie, mainly for the Burning man event. So with that and my astronomy interest, we shared an affinity for glows in the dark!

Sacred Destinations and journeys along the way was self published and printed by 2014, with a celestial mood to much of it. Good collaboration ! We'd grab a bite after feeling accomplished by the Photoshop sessions in the 9th & Irving 'hood where he lived, and the 'hood where I moved to! So my sidewalk astronomy presence increased there around that time.

Farewell JD

Then in early 2014 the inevitable happened. John Dobson passed away, in Los Angeles at the age of 98.

I found out that day by a message from Ken Frank while I was in Minneapolis during a polar vortex week, and I happened to be at my friend Anthony's house for an afternoon visit. He met JD a few years back, when visiting me in the bay area, I took him to cosmology class, and was impressed by JD's insights. [the same Anthony of the 1991 total solar eclipse in Mexico in chapter 3]. He has a dvd of a Dobson lecture that I gave him a couple of years previous, that just so happens to be sitting out on a table in the open. So we instantly watched it, absorbing his every word loaded with character, knowledge, wisdom and wit. A perfect way to think about John on that day of sad news. Farewell JD — one of the great teachers and influences of bringing Astronomy to anyone interested. I was fortunate to have known him, who is responsible for enriching many lives around the world.

9th & Irving, nightly

Clear skies nearly every single night for a month in January / February when I returned meant having the opportunity to do sidewalk astronomy in Dobson's honor. I lived on 12th & Irving, so I carried my box 'scope up the street to JD's famous intersection on 9th. My arms had quite a nightly workout. Jupiter was prominent as was the Moon. I had JD's telescope *Tumbleweed* out once that month to best commemorate his wishes, but it's mirror became too seriously corroded, so my 'scope was it.

Breaking the bad news to many in the neighborhood who knew him over the years was my task, and hopefully with honor.

Someone had to do this at that particular intersection, and there I was, living a couple of short city blocks down the street. Familiar faces returned to look through my 'scope frequently [whose names are forgotten]...and local friends, Bruce, Louis, Kurt, and Carol's good longtime friend Sally [who also knows JD from decades back] was always good to see pulling up on her bicycle.

I love sidewalk astronomy.... Thank you, John Dobson !

John Dobson memorial at Lands End

While there was a formal memorial service in LA at the Vedanta center where he lived, the San Francisco gathering was an outdoor event on *ISAN 7* (the 7th annual International Sidewalk Astronomy Night) starting in the day. Thoughtfully organized by Ken (i think) for the afternoon of March 8th in the parking lot where the SFAA hold city star parties. I spread the word, telling those who might be interested but out of the loop. Cheryl was interested. I called John Muhilly who was close friend of JD's for decades, but moved to Sonoma County a few years back, resulting in a more isolated lifestyle. When I told him about the memorial the result was shock — a week after the fact and no one had told him or Loretta — two of Dobson's closest pals. I felt bad for this, but at least he is now informed, though not in a good style. I imagine that Ken didn't mean to leave them out, not able to tell everyone.

March 8. A nice spring day, I bicycle there. Seeing maybe around 80-100 people showing up. There are around a dozen telescopes displayed of varying size — some of the oldest Dobs were brought — but not yet for use in the daylight. We take turns saying something about JD; his oldest confidantes and students having the most to say, including his son Loren who I'd

never met before, who didn't live nearby. He inherited some of his father's bigger telescopes; Ruth, his mother spoke, who I did meet when clearing JD's apartment in 2010. Donna made it up from LA. A few of us newer students and SFAA members said a few words ; John Dillon, Peter, Dave, Ken, Paul, Michael, me. I didn't say much at this somber event. Cheryl showed up with a friend, silently. Loretta and John surprisingly missed it... I imagine they remember JD in their own personal non-public manner, not needing an event.

Clouds prevented a good, local telescope night. No matter, there will be more clear sky nights.

The world seemed like a dimmer place knowing that JD is gone. Yet that didn't stop me from taking the telescopes out that year! SA and Mt Tam nights were great, and I even ended up in a radio interview about astronomy events, recorded on Mt Tam in the dark. [and part of a tv newscast at a point.]

With SFAA members Doug, Dave (with 20" hand ground mirror — color would pop from Messier objects!), Anthony (relatively new and very involved), Angie, Paul, Linda, et al; and I got more friends to show up — Rango Keshevan joined the SFAA and attended more astronomy events. Karen and Vincent became regulars on public nights. Kathleen joined too. Seb finally made it up. Andrea who I mentioned earlier. Tracy, Richard and Hannah continued showing up, and Joe and Jane. All great to have there! Jamie and Althea visited from the Midwest during a public night and loved it. I loved spending time hiking the surrounding mountain trails, above the fog or with a clear view of San Francisco from up the hillside from the parking lot before the sunset to setup 'scope — a paradise to me really.

The great news that year was my brother Brian's successful

lung transplant! This happened in Minneapolis, and I no longer went to Seattle to help him out. This meant more bay area times, for more local astronomy.

TXR

In addition to SA in Fairfax and the city neighborhood, I discovered Terrapin Crossroads — the music venue / restaurant owned by music hero Phil Lesh! In San Rafael along the canal, I was gifted a few live music tickets from my concert going friends Kathleen, and Rango. Kathleen is such a live music-goer who often overbooked so gave me a few of the Terrapin shows! With Rango for sometime similar reasons or to generously treat me to an extra. To the point is that if there's a Moon out before the show it was another place for Sidewalk Astronomy! A few people really took to it, either going to the restaurant or to the show. The music and setup and scene and staff are fabulous, and I soon became a regular there for years afterwards!

2013/2014

No big telescope trips, but busy. Those years up through 2015 had consistent astronomy for me through SFAA events on Mt Tam, and the monthly lectures at the Randall museum. The following years posed serious personal change and challenges.

Dean Gustafson, May 2021