

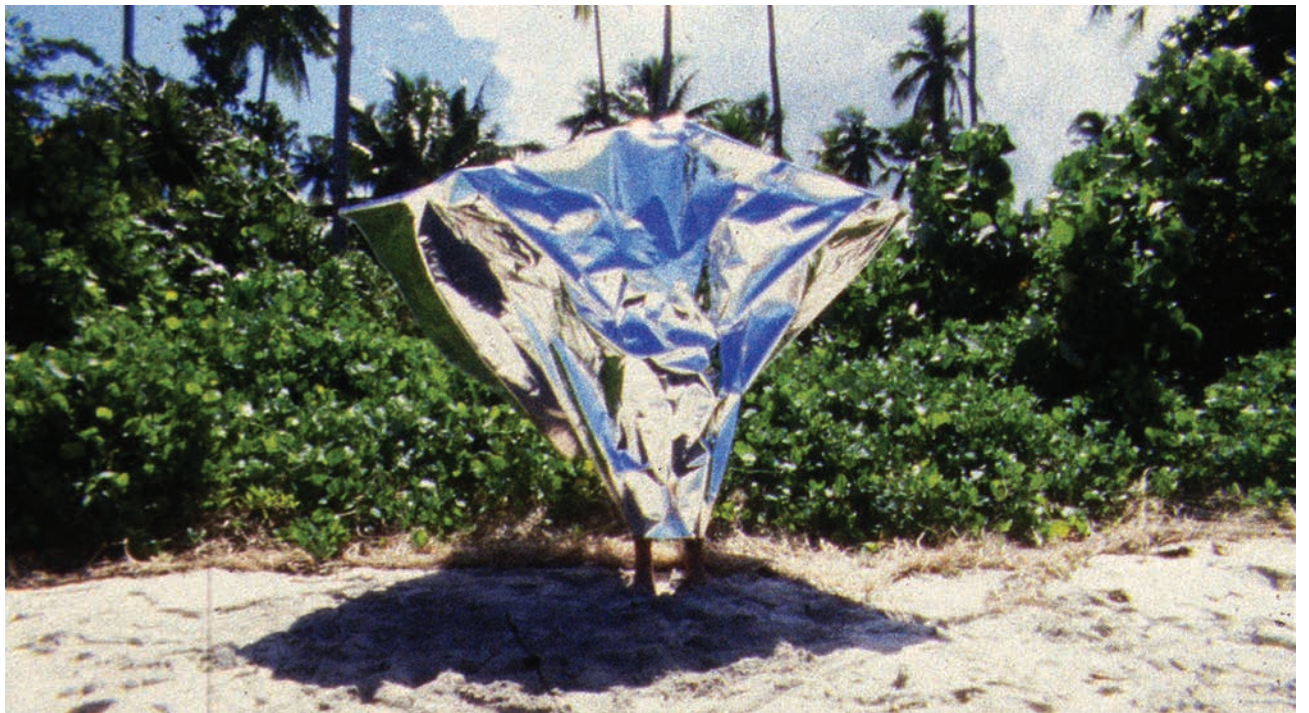
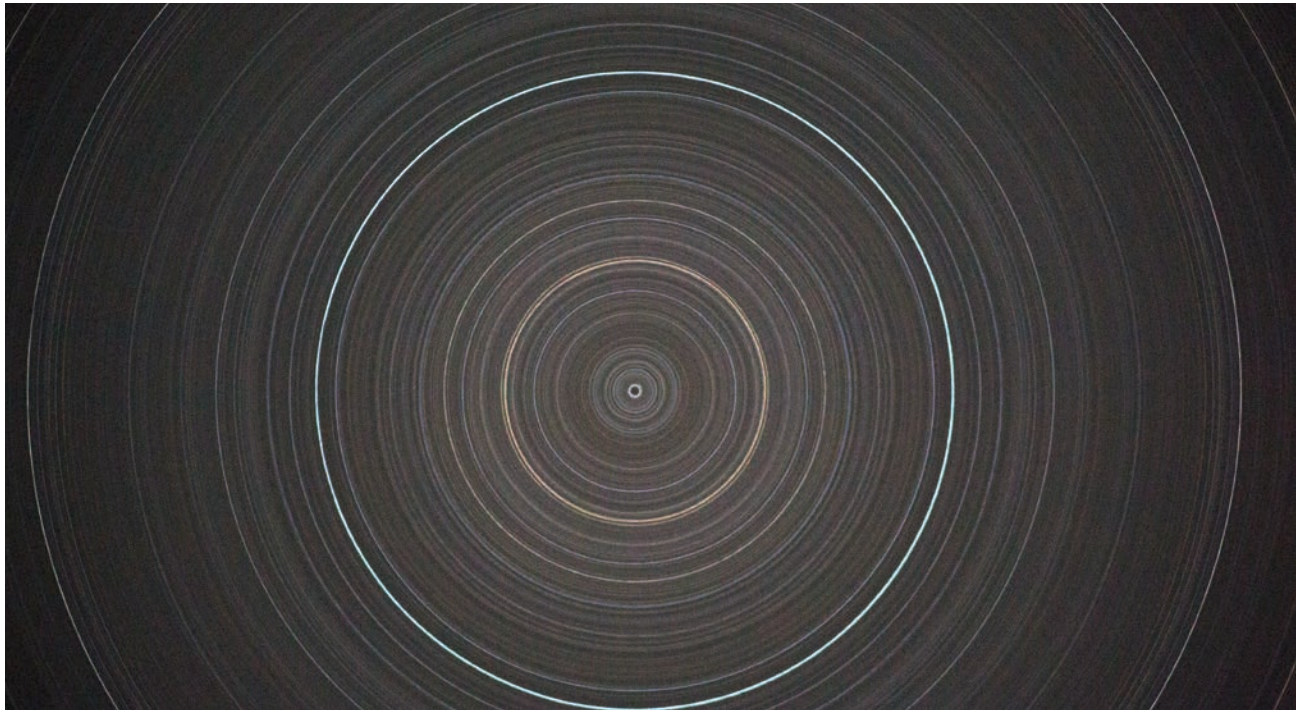
APPEX

SAM HAMILTON

*Standard Candles*

March 25 – August 13, 2017









## APEX: SAM HAMILTON

Sam Hamilton's *Standard Candles* presents several bodies of work that may appear, at first, to be unconnected. Because the artist's practice is interdisciplinary, or as Hamilton likes to say "nondisciplinary," his work upends our objective assumptions of order and time. His title for this exhibition is appropriate in this context: a standard candle is a measure of luminosity used to determine the relative distance between astronomical phenomena such as supernovas and stars, thus enabling us to draw more of the hidden structure of the universe into view.

Similarly, the seemingly disparate works on view in *Standard Candles* are connected by subjects that could be used to measure our humanity. Hamilton addresses the cosmos, our tenuous ecology, hierarchies of colonial culture and patriarchy, and notions of value. The artist points out that the exhibition functions as "the visible fruit of a hidden, mycelial-like structure." He describes it further as "an ecology of ideas and actions that, when pieced together into an omni-dimensional structure, function like a lens by bringing into focus the bigger picture beyond its dots; a window from which to observe, imagine, and try and understand how our cultural modes of operation may intersect and be intersected by the world around us; and a means of questioning who we are

by questioning how we are: as dual evolutionary results of and active agents of the natural systems and structures of life and matter themselves."<sup>1</sup>

In *David Attenborough Presents: The History of Evolution/The Evolution of History*, Hamilton stands in the foreground wearing the uniform for which Attenborough became known during his six-decade career as a naturalist: light blue shirt, chinos, and loafers. Facing the viewer for a brief moment, Hamilton holds a large stack of books. He then turns and drops the books, one by one, using them as stepping-stones into the horizon. Hamilton recorded the film in East Oregon's Alvord Desert, an expansive, arid landscape that parallels the blank canvas of chaos through which human life leads a "tenuous pathway built on abstract ideas which define how to orient us in a particular direction."<sup>2</sup> The artist shot the film on Super 8, limiting its length to the fifty-foot roll of film. Perhaps fittingly, the film runs out before Hamilton drops the last book.

Set in Oregon, *Taking Solos* opens with a drum kit set haphazardly on a rocky foundation under a waterfall. A logo of *Taking Solos* is emblazoned on the face of the bass drum. Tinny beats of the hi-hat cymbal, made by the force of the waterfall, occasionally can be heard through the sounds of the rushing water.

The invitation to partake in a solo drum performance takes on the implicit hierarchical and patriarchal overtones in the very nature of its compositional structure within Western musical traditions. But when set against a natural backdrop, the drums become antithetical within the context of non-anthropocentric music, which for Hamilton includes the waterfall, frogs mating, or the vibrations spiders use to spin their silk.

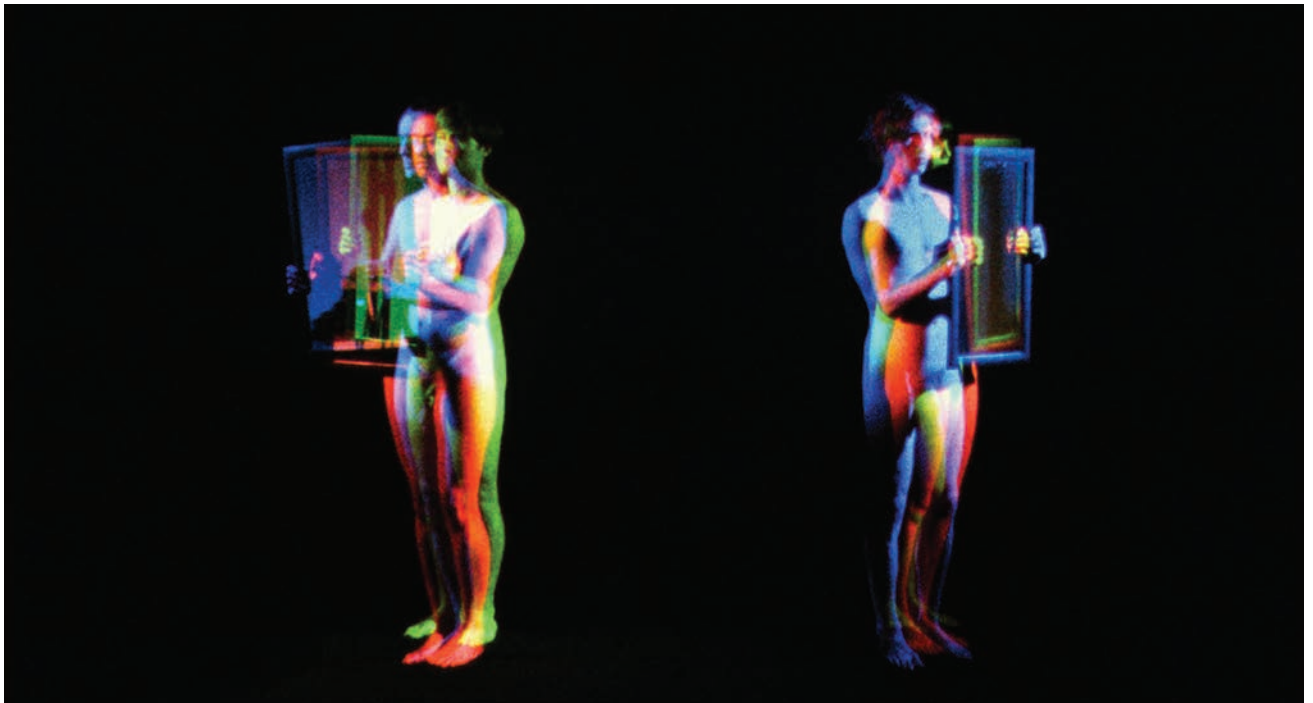
Music often plays an important role in Hamilton's work. In *Letter to Kenny G*, Hamilton pens an open letter to the saxophonist. In gold acrylic paint, Hamilton writes how, after reading through the comments section on a YouTube clip, he overcame his own prejudices and judgment about music. It is a reminder to be mature and a lesson in how to understand and engage more constructively and positively with the world.

Similarly, *More or Less Rubbish* questions the artist's role. Set in a forested area and filmed in black and white, the film follows Hamilton as he uses a litter stick to clean up the site. His actions in this natural setting raise a number of questions: Is the role of the artist simply to beautify? Can the value of an artist's work be brought on through a process of reduction rather than accumulation? Hamilton asks further, "In its most reduced state, perhaps the purpose of art is simply to ensure we constantly question the mechanics by which we assign value to things. How does taking a second look shift how we value a thing? Is it more or less beautiful, or more or less meaningful than before?"

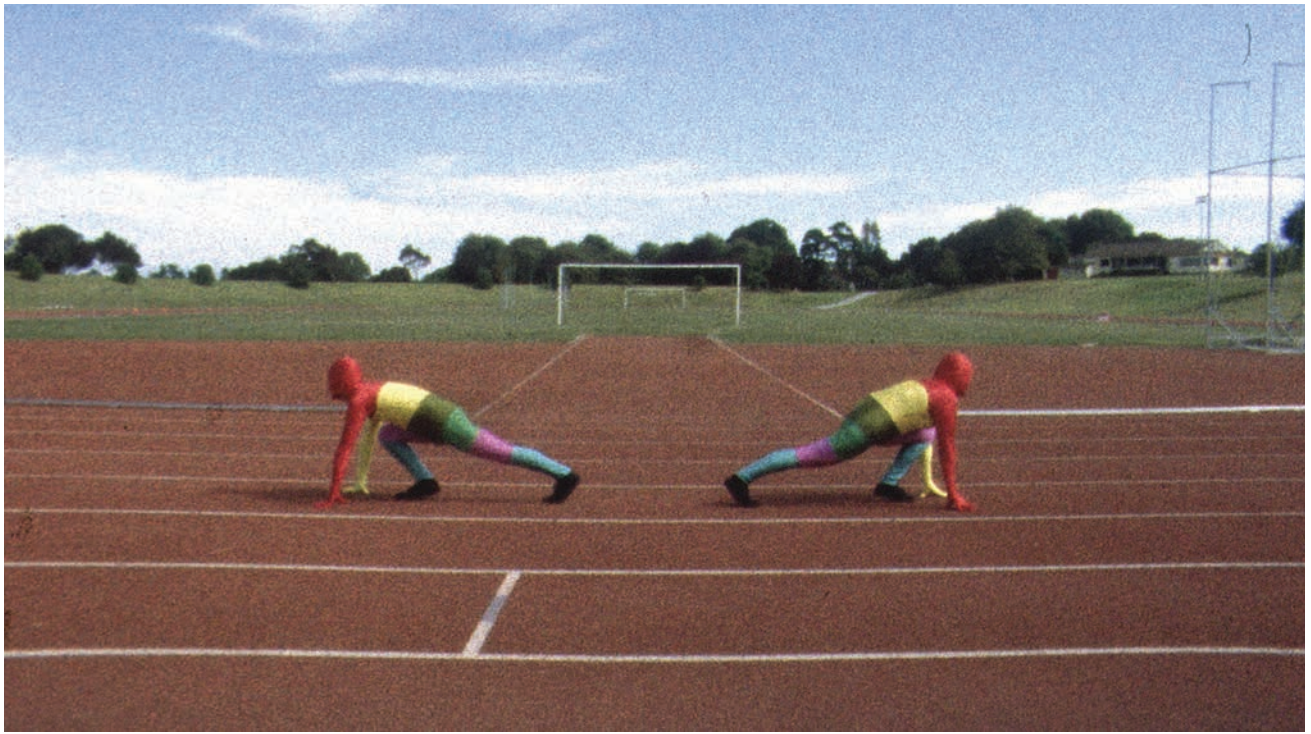
For *Fossil Records*, Hamilton created two albums in ceramic, though the works retain the pattern of grooves, palpable thinness, and shine of their vinyl counterparts. Here Hamilton is drawn to our physical relationship to the analog sound storage of an LP record and its potential as a means of identifying an "epoch of life on earth," connecting its physiology to archeological endeavors of discovering fossils, or the impressions of what once was.

Installed facing each other along a north/south line, the two records reveal the history of two extinct species. *Side A* is the Southern Hemisphere, represented by the Stephens Island wren, once found throughout New Zealand but exterminated in 1895 after a single housecat named Tibbles decimated its last nesting grounds. *Side B* is the Northern Hemisphere, represented by Oregon's Alvord cutthroat trout, bred out of existence when a nonlocal species was introduced for fishing.

Hamilton's feature-length film *Apple Pie* is perhaps his most ambitious work to date, stringing together the artist's various interests and concerns into modular concepts to create an otherworldly whole. Filmed in 16 mm and transferred to HD, *Apple Pie* is made of a suite of ten films—shot in New Zealand, Samoa, and the Oregon high desert—loosely combined to create a conceptual and aesthetic experience of the cosmos, our solar system, the ecology of our species, and time. The playful title *Apple Pie* comes from a popular quote by astronomer Carl Sagan: "If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the







universe.”<sup>5</sup> The ten films include *Pluto*, *Sun*, *Mercury*, *Venus*, *Earth*, *Moon*, *Mars*, *Jupiter*, *Saturn*, and *Neptune*.

Abstractly framed, *Pluto* serves as the introduction, marking mortality as life’s beginning. The following work, *Sun*, opens with golden curtains, punctured by a deep wave of sounds. Whimsical figures in costumes orbit each other, representing nuclear fusion within the sun and stars. In *Venus*, Hamilton points to complications in gender identification, influenced by the work of Joan Jonas’s *Mirror Check* (1970) and Guy Sherwin’s *Man with Mirror* (1976). *Earth* is perhaps the most minimal and meditative of the suite: with no musical score, sounds from the natural surroundings take over, offering a reflection of Earth’s innate beauty. While *Moon* offers the most straightforward connection to the subject in the title, the simple orbital relationship is represented by the artist and his father. It is a remarkable meditation of the connection of our relationships, not only to kin, but to all matter. *Jupiter* serves as the climax in the suite. Hamilton describes it as looking at “anthropogenic efforts in relation to cosmic time.”<sup>6</sup> Ending with *Neptune*, time is encompassed in relation to the ocean in Samoa—otherworldliness found on our own planet. Hamilton’s work is a self-conscious look at our species. While touching on looming global concerns, he equally points to our world’s many splendors, and perhaps proposes a new way to consider our current epoch.

Like memories,  
Matter changes when it’s visited.

A world without death, would also be a world without cheese,  
beer, wine, kimchi, sauerkraut, chocolate, bread, and pickles.

Like the Cretaceous Tertiary Boundary, the omnipresent line  
drawn in the fossil record, marking the last great extinction  
event in earth’s history,

Death can be an evolutionary intersection too.

Disaster capitalism isn’t new,  
It’s as ancient and as natural as extinction itself.

The tree that’s known by its fruit

To avoid drowning, become the ocean<sup>7</sup>

—Grace Kook-Anderson

The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art

<sup>1</sup> Sam Hamilton, e-mail message to author, March 17, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Sam Hamilton, Portland, Oregon, March 15, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Hamilton, e-mail message to author, March 17, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Sam Hamilton, Portland, Oregon, March 15, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 218.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Hamilton, e-mail message to author, February 6, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Hamilton, *Apple Pie* (Aotearoa, New Zealand, 2016), 16mm film transferred to HD.

## BIOGRAPHY

Sam Hamilton (b. 1984) considers his practice to be fundamentally interdisciplinary, or rather “non-disciplinary.”

“I prefer to consider my practice in terms of it being an ecology,” he says. “No section, be it from music or film, walk or cooking, thinking or constructing is independent of each other. They are rooms to occupy, windows to look out from, tools, and subsets of tools to use.”

Hamilton’s formal practice embraces music, composition, sound art, film and video, performance, sculpture and installation, photography, writing, and curatorial projects. Hamilton’s global reach is similarly expansive, including spending months in the Amazon jungle in Brazil, Colombia, and Peru field recording and researching intersections between sound, compositional theory, and ecology. He regularly composes and tours with the internationally acclaimed choreographer Lemi Ponifasio/MAU Dance Company in addition to touring his own music. Hamilton’s independent and collaborative work have led the artist to itinerant practices in Finland, Japan, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, Canada, Samoa, Mexico, Germany, Russia, and New Zealand.

Hamilton is from Aotearoa, New Zealand, and currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

## ARTIST ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## APEX

An ongoing series of exhibitions featuring emerging and established artists living in the Northwest. Presenting contemporary art in the context of the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwest Art, this program continues the Museum’s 120-year commitment to exhibiting, collecting, and celebrating the art of the region. APEX is supported in part by The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Endowments for Northwest Art, The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, and the Exhibition Series Sponsors.

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## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### Apple Pie, 2016

16mm film transferred to HD  
82 minutes, loop  
Collection of the artist

### David Attenborough Presents: The History of Evolution /The Evolution of History, 2012

Super 8 film transferred to HD  
2:21 minutes, loop  
Collection of the artist

### Taking Solos, 2017

16 mm film transferred to HD  
2:45 minutes, continuous loop  
Collection of the artist

### More or Less Rubbish, 2017

16 mm film transferred to HD  
2:45 minutes, loop  
Collection of the artist

### Fossil Records Side A, A Southern Hemisphere: The Stephens Island Wren, 2017

Ceramic  
12 inches diameter x 5/16 inches  
Collection of the artist

### Fossil Records Side B, Northern Hemisphere: Alvord Cutthroat Trout, 2017

Ceramic  
12 inches diameter x 5/16 inches  
Collection of the artist

### Letter to Kenny G, 2017

Gold acrylic paint on 300 GSM watercolor paper  
24 x 18 inches, unframed  
Collection of the artist

Cover: still from *David Attenborough Presents: The History of Evolution / The Evolution of History*, 2012

Rest of the images are: still from *Apple Pie*, 2016

