

# Jeanne Storck

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## Artweek

### Modality Room

*Renée Gertler at Blank Space Gallery  
May 2009*

In *Modality Room*, Renée Gertler's latest mixed media installation, the artist translates the mystery of cosmic phenomena into the language of domestic interiors. Celestial abstractions such as black holes and exploding stars reveal themselves in the visual equivalent of an IKEA showroom.

In the main gallery, a table, bookshelves and decorative hanging fixtures mimic the framework of a living room, but the furnishings are at once familiar and alien. Furniture and decorative objects that appear solid on closer inspection turn out to be foam; for the viewer, the realization causes a giddy shift in perception – a hint of what astronauts feel as they float free of earth's gravitational pull. Foam acts as a disruptive element throughout the show; with its semblance and its "seeming" it becomes a perfect metaphor for the slippery polarities of space – matter and anti-matter, gravity and anti-gravity, weight and weightlessness.

On a bookshelf, chunks of foam painted to look like meteorites serve as bookends, propping up a row of blackened foam books. Foam sculptures covered in shiny jet-black acrylic resemble molten lava, their gooeey surfaces bristling with a delicate, geometric latticework of basswood sticks covered in gold, copper and silver leaf; the mixture of amorphous and linear shapes could very well be the expression of some cosmic equation.

Gertler also plays with the idea of implosion and explosion, of energy alternately furling and unfurling. A macramé sculpture reminiscent of a 1970s plant holder hangs from the ceiling, its tight patterns of black woolen knots fighting the desire to unravel. On another wall, a cascade of rope and hemp skeins degrades as manic tangles relax into fragile, airy loops.

Gertler's color palette is muted. Battleship grays and jet-blacks impart a flattened tone that give objects in the room a generic universality. Gray suggests dusk and the border between dark and light while black conjures up impenetrable mystery. Gertler punctuates the somber palette with the equivalent of a solar flare – the occasional metallic burst of copper, gold and silver leaf or the aurora borealis glow of lavender, violet and pink.

"International Dark Sky," is Gertler's most luminous piece. Using natural light and mirrors, she concocts a miniature space observatory. Viewers peer into five brown paper bags lined up on a shelf. Each bag is painted black inside and filigreed with pinpricks that allow light to filter through and scatter in miniature constellations across the mirrored bottom of the bag. But what looks at first like the sparkling of stars in space is in fact the golden glow of the power grid burning across five continents – a spectacle both magical and menacing. A dreamy vision of stars turns into the specter of light pollution beaming from our urban centers.

The centerpiece of the show is "OMG: Void," a booze-addled living room in the middle of the gallery where beer cans, matches, lighters and empty tumblers litter a table. The scene suggests that the exaggeration of reality brought on by alcohol might approximate the head-spinning mysteries of space. Each of the objects on the table is painted black, wiping out color and variation and

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plunging the piece into an apocalyptic funk. Counteracting the dark tone though, is a series of cotton-candy pink foam letters on the floor at the foot of the table that spell out OMG. It's an expression so overused and banal it reduces awe and mystery to a text message emoticon. In the context of the show, it's a humorous, guilty wink – an admission that when faced with the inexplicable we turn to the comfort of familiar and prosaic forms.

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