



GRAY MATTERS

# Michael Petry's multiverse

Where art, science, Alan Turing and glassblowers collide

By Molly Glentzer | April 6, 2015 | Updated: April 6, 2015 4:46pm



Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist



IMAGE 1 OF 4

"A.T. the Core of the Algorithm," as it appeared recently in a seven-story tower in Belgium.

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"I would go an inch that way," Michael Petry said to an assistant on a scaffold.

They were at [Hiram Butler Gallery](#), hanging 47 clusters of heavy colored glass bubbles on thin wire cables from the ceiling — a radical re-imagining of Petry's latest installation, "A.T. the Core of the Algorithm."

"It's a little bit of jiggy-pokery," Petry said, using a laser pointer to show the assistant where to put holes for bolts.

Exactly the kind of language you would hope to hear from a brilliant, internationally known artist who will give the Campbell Lecture Series Tuesday through Thursday at the Rice Media Center.

Petry, who directs the Museum of Contemporary Art in London, attended Rice University from 1978 through 1981 because Harvard and Stanford wouldn't let him major in both mathematical science and fine art. Born in 1960 in El Paso, he's lived in London since 1981 — long enough to acquire hints of a British accent.

He's calling his lecture series "The Trouble with Michael," offering a different talk each night. But he was really no trouble at all during our visit, talking with the speedy enthusiasm of a guy who has a lot to say and knows it could overwhelm people whose brains aren't as balanced as his.

Petry wanted the spheres to look as randomly placed as stars in the universe.

"Hopefully when it's finished, you don't see the work," he said. "It's just there, like it happened. Of course it's never like that!"

Sunlight will likely throw reflections from spheres onto the walls, and some hang low enough that you can look

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## THE TROUBLE WITH MICHAEL

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[Michael Petry speaks](#) at 6 p.m. Tue., Wed. and Thu., April 7-9, at Rice Media Center on the Rice University Campus; 713-348-6072. Admission is free but reservations are required: Email [campbell.lecture@rice.edu](mailto:campbell.lecture@rice.edu).

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through them to see their colors interact — green through brown, blue through pink, and so on.

It's a metaphor for the multiverse, Petry explained. "Each of the bubbles represents a multiverse. Current science imagines that our universe is like a soap bubble that attaches to another one, and the points where they intersect is where things can go from one universe to the other."

He designed the installation for a spiraling, vertigo-inducing seven-story tower at the Glazenhuis in Lommel, Belgium. Some of the wires there were six stories long. Butler's Houston gallery is a one-story minimalist barn, with horizontal daylight from a large plate-glass window.

"It's the same number, but it's going to look very different because it's compressed," Petry said. "What I wanted to do here, instead of having it soar, is to have it swoop down, to use the window. Here we're looking at the notion of cloud computing; like it's trying to get out the window and be free, slowly eking its way there."

There are 47 clusters because 47 is a prime number. Some of them are singles, actually. In Euclid's time and in contemporary mathematics, one isn't considered prime, but this piece references a period of history when it was, Petry explained.

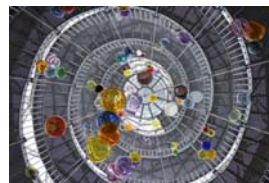
He was unpacking spheres, spraying them with Windex, wiping them and then re-wrapping them so they'd stay dust-free until the hanging was done. "They're much easier to clean before they're hung," he said.

The "A.T." of the work's title is a hint:

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## GRAY MATTERS

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**Michael Petry's multiverse**



**How to prevent police violence**



**My first seder in the South**



The piece is an homage to one of Petry's heroes, the British mathematician Alan Turing.



**Open-carry legislation:  
It's a white thing**

Each of the bubbles has an opening, like somebody took a bite from it. It's a reference to the cyanide-laced apple that killed Turing, who in spite of breaking the Nazis' Enigma code during World War II, was convicted — and eventually destroyed — because he was homosexual.



**Second life for the  
Eighth Wonder**

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Petry knew about Turing well before seeing Benedict Cumberbatch channel him in "The Imitation Game."

Petry's math-and-science background often comes into play in his art. It gives him a means of designing structures, he said.

He developed an algorithm with glassblowers (Gert Bullée, Nadia Matthynssens, Ben Verhaegen) to create this show's spheres: Only sets of prime numbers were allowed; each sphere that collided with another had to be bigger than the first; and each had to have a piece bitten out of it.

According to current mathematical predictions, there will most certainly be a universe out there where "all the prime numbers, all the glass, all the apples, all the algorithms, all the spheres, all the lovers will collide," Petry writes in his artist's statement. "And it will be beautiful. It will be poetic and Mr. Turing will be there smiling, waiting, loving."

You don't have to understand any of the math to appreciate the spirit of brilliance. Or to gain something from Petry's talks this week.

Tuesday in "Growing Up Public," he'll give an overview of his career and how difference is at the core of his practice.

Wednesday's talk, "Reading a Life," is about his writing. (He's written several groundbreaking books sprung from his projects. The latest is "Nature Morte," a stunner of a coffee-table book with a hologram on its cover. It's based on an exhibition Petry curated that opens in Norway in June and will travel across Europe.)

He finishes Thursday with "The Art of Ethics," looking at institutional sexism, racism and homophobia and how they've affected artists, institutions and audiences.

*Bookmark Gray Matters. It's where all the prime numbers, all the glass, all the apples, all the algorithms, all the spheres, all the lovers will collide.*



**Molly Glentzer**

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