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Illuminating the beauty of life's equations

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Dewi Cooke

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Somewhere in the space between the physical world and the abstract, infinite universe you'll find Ryoji Ikeda.

Mathematics and its pursuit of pure, beautiful solutions has long intrigued the enigmatic Japanese electronic artist, whose light and sound work straddles the visual need for art that can be seen, heard and felt, and the mathematician's quest for intellectual rigour.

It's a rarefied world, for sure, one where conversation ranges freely over theoretical and cosmic contemplations on the enormity of existence, but stalls at the exact meaning behind his art. The Paris-based Ikeda doesn't do many interviews, nor does he like to be photographed (one of the few pictures he offered was a computer-generated image of black and white bars, a nod to his piece at the forthcoming International Symposium of Electronic Art in Sydney).

"I don't speak anything about my work because my words reduce the freedom or interpretation of the experience," he says gently.

Described as "an amazing autodidact" by one friend, number theorist and Harvard maths professor Benedict Gross, Ikeda says while he never studied formally as an adult, working instead as a DJ and joining art collective Dumb Type in the '90s, he sees an affinity between maths and classical composition.

"When you listen to classical music, really classical music like Bach, Mozart, Handel, Haydn, actually you are listening to a kind of mathematical structure. You count, you appreciate, you taste the mathematical structure of Bach on the piano, for example."

To Professor Gross, who collaborated with Ikeda on a 2008 project to visualise one random and one prime number as two huge canvases filled with minuscule digits, Ikeda is a rare kindred spirit in the world beyond maths. "He has this visceral sense of what we do and what's important to us," says Gross. "I've never met a person outside of mathematics who has that kind of sense."

Ikeda has one piece in Sydney as part of ISEA2013, an iteration of his *test pattern* work, a huge, immersive installation people can walk up to and around. But his most monumental offering for Australia will appear as part of Dark Mof's *Beam In Thine Own Eye* program in Hobart, the first foray for David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art into large-scale public art. For the duration of the festival, *spectra's* 49 military-grade searchlights will be pointed up, beaming up to 15 kilometres into the night sky and illuminating glimpses of the world above - clouds, sky, birds, dust. As people walk between the lights they'll trigger waves of sound, ensuring no one aural experience is alike.

The sheer scale of *spectra*, in which individual beams appear to blend as a tower of light, is undeniable. People's jaws tend to drop, Ikeda says (in Paris, they kissed). In Hobart's mid-winter chill, he is intrigued to see what will take place.

A beam of light reaching to the heavens is probably as close to a visual representation of infinity as you might find in Ikeda's work, and the impact its vastness has on understanding our place in the universe seems as likely a pursuit of the sublime as any Turner painting.

"It's a very powerful, a very intense experience you can have with *spectra* and I think that's enough," is all he will allow himself to say.

MONA senior curator Nicole Durling goes further.

"Say you've got somebody who is dealing with these very complex ideas such as Ryoji and is incredible ... but the work kind of transcends those obscure and difficult to comprehend ideas. It breaks through that and creates these very elegant representations of that information," she says. "If we are all just stardust then we're all just made up of these equations. So in a way, it's like looking at our own self."

See one of Ryoji Ikeda's [installations here](#).



Ryoji Ikeda's *spectra* in Paris.

test pattern [no.5] is on display at Carriageworks, Sydney, until July 1. Dark Mofo runs from June 13-23.

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