



TWELVE EARTHS  
WATERS OFF WHARARIKI BEACH \ 40°07'54"S 172°10'46E



Fathomers and Michael Jones McKean Studio are excited to announce the waters off Wharariki Beach in Aotearoa New Zealand's South Taranaki Bight as the fourth location in Michael Jones McKean's longform planetary sculpture *Twelve Earths*. McKean's *Twelve Earths* [c. 2017-2028 | 2029-2040] is an unprecedented multidisciplinary endeavor that links 12 diverse sites on a 25,000-mile circumference line encircling Earth.



South Taranaki Bight is an expanse of water connecting the North and South Islands with the Tasman Sea. Its waters are the only known foraging grounds for the blue whales of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is also home to at least eight species of whales, including a unique population of non-migratory pygmy blue whales.



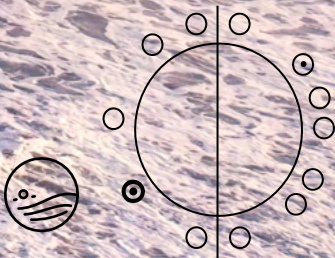


TWELVE EARTHS

WATERS OFF WHARARIKI BEACH  
40°07'54"S 172°10'46E



ARCHWAY ISLANDS OFF WHARARIKI BEACH



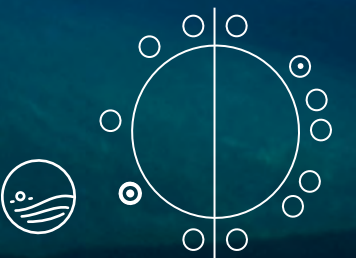


Says McKean: “An encounter with a whale conjures emotions reserved for the most intense experience with the natural world—wonder beyond knowing. A whale might be the most mythic manifestation of life on Earth—the animal-limit of earthly possibility. But even with a colossal oceanic membrane separating our worlds, we share in our lungs the same air.”





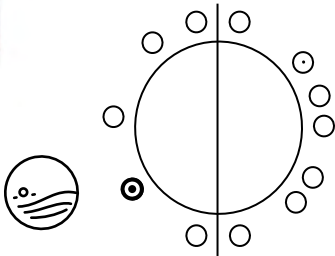
This February, McKean will join Dr. Leigh Torres from Oregon State University's Marine Mammal Institute and a team of researchers from the Geospatial Ecology of Marine Megafauna Laboratory (GEMM Lab) as they continue their research about this unique blue whale population. Torres' research has been instrumental in redrawing our collective understanding of whale life and shaping approaches to species protection and environmental management in the Bight.







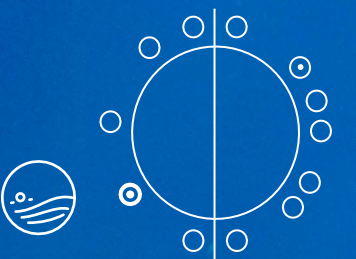
BLUE WHALE LUNGE FEEDING IN SOUTH TARANAKI BIGHT, GEMM LAB





Says Torres:

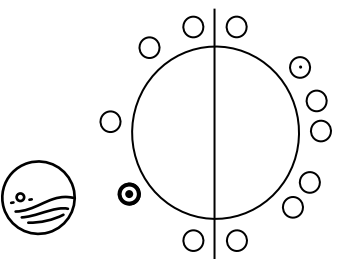
“Studying blue whales in Aotearoa New Zealand for the past 15 years has been a fulfilling journey—from population discovery to population description and now toward a deeper understanding of their health, behavior, and movements. We are thrilled to have Michael on board our research vessel this year, which will help us to see our study system from a new perspective and to share the amazing story of these whales more broadly.”





While on board the research vessel, McKean will help to deploy a specially designed hydrophone at a location directly along *Twelve Earths*' ring path. The hydrophone, a complex listening and recording system, will archive an entire year of mostly infrasonic blue whale calls—haunting communiqués that, while the loudest sounds made by an animal on the planet, are also below the threshold of human auditory perception. These calls travel 100s if not 1000s of kilometers underwater.

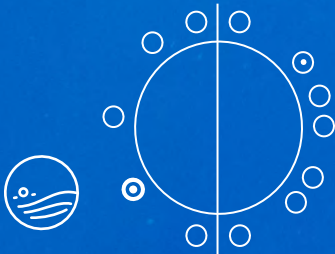
The hydrophone, designed by Cornell University's K. Lisa Yang Center for Conservation Bioacoustics and customized by McKean, is hermetically sealed within a buoyant 17-inch glass sphere. The device is robust enough to survive demanding conditions in the mesopelagic zone, which extends up to 1,000 meters below the surface, where light and temperature decrease markedly. The hydrophone bears a titanium disc, a *Twelve Earths* cipher, which includes markings and symbols from each site on the ring path. The custom disc subtly gives this scientific device a double life as a sculpture.







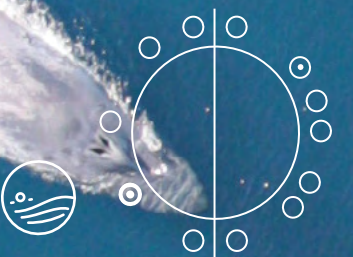
PYGMY BLUE WHALE





Says Stacy Switzer, curator and executive director of Fathomers:

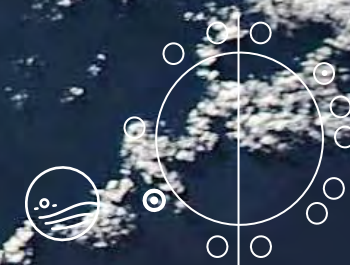
“We are thrilled by this announcement. In important respects, this site epitomizes some of the core commitments of *Twelve Earths*: deep and practical engagement with scientific experts, careful relationship-building with local communities, and artistic experience that spurs us to imagine with greater sensitivity our place on the planet.”





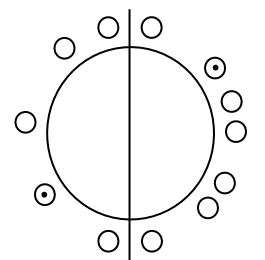
Looking ahead into 2027, McKean will build deeper local connections in Aotearoa New Zealand with a residency at Te Whare Hēra in Wellington.

This announcement follows Cerro Pachón and Tololo in Chile, where McKean is working as the Vera C. Rubin Observatory Artist-in-Residence; Abrigo do Lagar Velho, a paleolithic archeological site in Portugal; and Nördlinger Ries, a thriving city in southern Germany sited within a 15 million-year-old impact crater. At each location, McKean is creating individual sculptures that together, connect each site as part of an unfolding portrait of Earth.





**FAQ: What is *Twelve Earths*?** *Twelve Earths* [c. 2017–2028 | 2029–2040] is a planetary sculpture exploring connection, time and meaning along a 25,000-mile circular path, linking 12 diverse locations around the planet. Together, these locations form an emergent commons to practice creative intimacy, empathy, and communion with Earth—its matter, histories, temporalities, and life—in all its manifold expressions interweaving us all. **Who is making *Twelve Earths*?** The project is led by artist Michael Jones McKean with critical, long-term support by Fathomers, a creative research institute based in Los Angeles, California in the United States. Working alongside McKean are a number of international thinkers and practitioners from the sciences, arts, philosophy, government, history, business, technology, philanthropy, and more. **Who is the project for?** *Twelve Earths* is an artwork that operates at a planetary scale, forging hyper-local connections with partners and individuals at each of the 12 sites, while also building a decentralized audience—people interested in art, ecology, the sciences, geopoetics, and more—who might not be geographically near the ring. A central value of *Twelve Earths* is to hold connections across disciplines, backgrounds, and borders, centering relationship-building as an organic process. As such, these connections might coalesce in myriad forms and scales: from a simple conversation after an event, a group visiting a site, or a volunteer effort to remediate a grass plain. The project attempts to dissolve the theatrical distinction of “actor” and “audience,” enfolding them as one. **Is *Twelve Earths* a sculpture?** Yes. Early on in the project’s development, McKean, a sculptor by training, imagined Earth as a natural human threshold—a common plane of shared material existence that we ourselves are composed of and also bound within. This materiality, in all its recombinant potential,





forms an alchemic foundry of Earthly possibility, acknowledging that all matter exists in a state of “becoming.” The project imagines sculpture as an expanded creative tool, one of deep learning tied to empathic rituals with people, matter, making, and transformation.

**Why 12 sites?** *Twelve Earths* lives in communion with mythic, folkloric, and spiritual traditions that celebrate interconnectivity. The number 12 has held significance in cultures around the world, showing up in everything from timekeeping systems to musical notes, astrological houses, counting systems, magic symbolism, and much more.

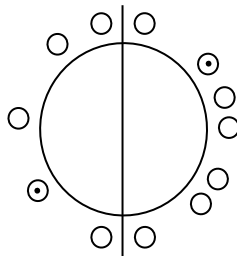
**How were the locations determined?** Determining 12 sites, each linked formally along a continuous path around the globe, required three years of research. The process began with the development of a coordinate database hosting thousands of global locations that each relayed different chapters of Earth’s larger story. An algorithm was then developed to sift through the database spatially, drawing millions of paths, or rings, around the Earth. Out of 67 million potential routes, a handful of rings emerged that, against geographic odds, connected a few locations in our database. These few dozen rings were studied by hand over many months to reveal four rings—each remarkable, strange, mysterious, and tonally idiosyncratic—that were then studied in more granular detail. Through this thorough research, supported by conversations with partners around the world, *Twelve Earths’* ring path gradually and gracefully emerged.

**When is it happening?** Currently. Initially developed in 2017, *Twelve Earths* will continue to “unfold” across 12 years until 2028. At this point, the project will then “enfold” over an additional 12 years, reaching its full articulation by the September equinox of 2040. By design, the work exists in different forms indefinitely, continuing to pose questions along deeper timelines in the future.

**Why take so long to finish an artwork?** *Twelve Earths* takes cues from the natural speed of the planet. As a team, we are prioritizing building slow, respectful dialogue with local stakeholders at each site. Relationship building takes precedence over predetermined outcomes, allowing true conversations—and friendships—to blossom. We think of slowness not as an obstacle to surmount, but as a care practice that deepens engagement and helps us to be in right relationship with each other and the Earth.

**When will the sites be revealed?** Though all 12 sites were determined in 2019, their announcements to the public will be staggered with locations being revealed in the years leading up to 2028. Three sites have been announced so far. The first location, announced on the equinox of September 22, 2022, is Cerros Pachón and Tololo. Located in the Coquimbo region of Chile’s Andes Mountains, this site houses a cluster of powerful telescopes destined to capture the most complete map of the universe ever created. The second site, announced one year later on the equinox of September 23, 2023, is Abrigo do Lagar Velho. This rock shelter, located in the Lapedo Valley of Portugal’s District of Leiria, contains the 29,000-year-old remains of a four-year-old child that questions our perceptions of what it means to be human. The third location is Nördlinger Ries, a 14.7-million-year-old meteorite impact crater hidden in plainview in Bavaria, Germany.

**How do I experience *Twelve Earths*?** *Twelve Earths* exists as 12 physical locations whose connections are being articulated sculpturally and poetically. While it is certainly possible—and would be rewarding—to visit each *Twelve Earths* location, the artwork can be experienced without any travel at all. Local and regional programming will be developed over the longer arc of the project. Participation, however one may define it, may encompass events hosted by affiliated institutions or virtual opportunities for engagement wherever you and your devices may be. While *Twelve Earths* is deeply rooted in specific, singular places, it also exists through ideas, which allows it to be experienced from numerous

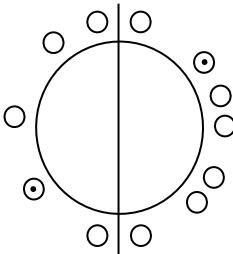






BLUE WHALES SURFACING THE WATER

vantage points. *Twelve Earths* by and large is a cognitive antenna that helps modulate concrete aspects of the Earth into signals—stories—that help re-mythologize place, re-worlding our conception of Earth. [Is there an archive?](#) Yes. The project’s physical archive is currently housed at McKean’s studio and will be relocated to the Institute for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art after the project’s completion. The archive acts as a crumb trail to the project’s origins, its methodologies, early and ongoing conversations, source materials, and library, as well as its location research, history, geology, current events, and more. A curated archive will also exist and continue to be updated on the [Twelve Earths website](#). At each site, a number of artworks are being developed, some with an eye toward long durations, in effect serving as an in situ planetary archive. [How is \*Twelve Earths\* being funded?](#) *Twelve Earths* has maintained critical support from Fathomers since 2017. The project has also received early generous support from a number of organizations, including the National Endowment for the Arts, Sable Systems, WeTransfer, Blueprint Pictures, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. *Twelve Earths*’ unusual form, both as a large-scale artwork wedded to a planetary body, and as one temporally stretched out over non-traditional time horizons, creates funding challenges still to be solved. [How can I become involved?](#) In many cases, the best way to experience *Twelve Earths* is through deep and active involvement. An artwork at this scale and complexity requires the uplift and support of many voices and skill sets: engineering, material sciences, bio-sciences, geology, wayfinding, philanthropy, and so much more. If this sounds like you and you wish to learn more about ways to contribute to the work itself, or if you’d like simply to receive occasional updates and advance notice of public events and announcements, please be in touch at [office@twelveearth.com](mailto:office@twelveearth.com). If you wish to explore ways to help lift the project through financial support, we are also eager to speak with you.

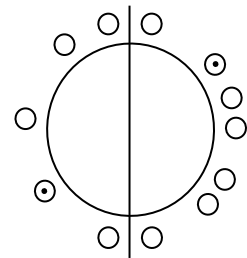




**MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN** (b.Federated States of Micronesia, lives/works in the US and France) is a sculptor whose work explores the nature of objects in relation to folklore, technology, anthropology, and geography. McKean has received numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Nancy Graves Foundation Award, and has lectured and shown his work extensively around the world. He is currently an Associate Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Sculpture + Extended Media Department, a Contributing Editor for Art Papers, and the Artist-in-Residence of the Vera C. Rubin Observatory, the Museu de Leiria, and the Centro de Interpretação do Abrigo do Lagar Velho.

**FATHOMERS**, founded in 2016, is a creative research institute based in Los Angeles, California dedicated to producing sites and encounters that challenge us to live and act differently in the world. They nurture the ideas of die-hard dreamers, cultivate projects whose horizons span decades, and enlist expansive thinkers across disciplines. In all their work, they aspire to enlarge the limits of scale, scope and support for artist-led projects.

**THE WATERS OFF WHARARIKI BEACH** are located in the extended region of Aotearoa New Zealand's South Taranaki Bight, where a recently identified population of non-migratory blue whales lives. One of the most mysterious cetaceans, the blue whale is the largest animal known to have existed on Earth. Wharariki is a remote ecosanctuary, located at the northernmost tip of New Zealand's South Island and is accessible only by foot. For the Māori, the area is known as o te wairua o nga tangata o te Waipounamu and is recognized as a spiritual portal between worlds.





TWELVE EARTHS  
Doce Tierras  
十二地球  
Ip-ki Te-ki Nok-in Au  
Ngā Ao Tekau mā Rua  
Doze Terras  
Zwölf Erden  
Двенадцать Земеля  
Teruich Mea Teblong El Beluulechad  
Он Екі Жер  
дванаццаць зямель  
Mëbêngôkre kabĕn

For more information about *Twelve Earths*, McKean’s work in Aotearoa New Zealand, or how to become involved or help support the project, please visit [TWELVEEARTHS.COM](http://TWELVEEARTHS.COM), or reach out to [YES@FATHOMERS.ORG](mailto:YES@FATHOMERS.ORG).

