



Artist Biography

Andreas Nottebohm

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Andreas Nottebohm will never forget that moment in 1981 when he watched the first space shuttle rise into the Florida sky.

"The ground was trembling, and people were cheering like crazy, screaming and crying," said Nottebohm, a Santa Venetia artist who was invited by NASA to attend that first launch — and who watched the final blast-off of the Space Shuttle Atlantis at the Kennedy Space Center on Friday. "I was in the press area, and Walter Cronkite was standing 10 feet away from me, with tears running down his face."

Nottebohm has been invited to attend many launches since then, including the space shuttle's first night launch, the launch of a rocket from Kazakhstan — in what was then the Soviet Union — and the first shuttle launch after the destruction of the Space Shuttle Challenger. And while belief in the power and promise of the space program may have faded from public consciousness since the heady days of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, Nottebohm has never stopped being spellbound. "The courage of the people who do that (travel into space) is absolutely amazing," Nottebohm said. "They're basically riding a bomb that's releasing its energy in a controlled way, 200 million pounds of explosives. The power of that thing going up is mind-boggling, like a volcanic eruption — so primal, so surprising."

That a 66-year-old artist from the East German city of Eisenach would become one of the premier chroniclers of the American space program is surprising, to say the least — particularly to Nottebohm himself. But Nottebohm's work, like the space program, has a unique appeal to the imagination that seems to inspire scientists and other artists in equal measure. In his art, Nottebohm strives for nothing less than a deeper understanding of the cosmos — and in his drive to pursue that goal by adapting new technologies to his vision, he has more than a little in common with the astronauts he admires.

"The underlying basis for his work is not about showmanship, but about the universe and the interconnectedness of everything and everyone, from the molecular level to deepest space," said Lauren Rabb, curator of the University Of Arizona Museum Of Art, which is exhibiting two collections of Nottebohm's work through Sept. 11. "His work truly appeals to both sides of the brain. He can talk about space exploration and string theory, and at the same time there's an emotional side to his work, a feeling that conveys the greatness of the universe and your smallness in it. "That's not an easy thing to draw out of a viewer," Rabb said. "But his work really does that."

Nottebohm isn't a painter or an etcher, although his work has been compared to both. Using an orbital sander, the artist carves long scratches into sheets of metal — copper, aluminum or titanium. The art he creates comes not from the scratches themselves, but from the patterns of light they create. "A painting is completely flat," Nottebohm said. "The method I've found, which moves when you move, becomes almost completely three-dimensional. You'd swear you could put your hand in it."

Nottebohm says he stumbled across his signature medium while working with an offset printing company in Munich. He noted that the company was continually throwing away long, thin sheets of aluminum used in the printing process. "I saw these beautiful metal pieces, and I said, 'I've got to do something with this,'" Nottebohm recalled. "Because the sheets are very slick, you can't paint them. So I took a piece of sandpaper and roughed it up! And when I saw the streaks from the sandpaper reflecting light all around me, I had this 'oh my God' moment."

Nottebohm's first visit to the United States came as a result of his one-man show at Washington D.C.'s Gallery Hilger in 1978. That trip, he said, "ended Europe for me." "I don't think people in America know what they have. It's a fantastic country," Nottebohm said. "I was completely blown away by how nice and friendly, how patient people are, even in New York. And I consider Marin County to be one of the most beautiful places on Earth."

Returning to Washington D.C. a year later, Nottebohm visited the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum. On a whim, he left information about his gallery show at the front desk. "If this had been Europe, it would have gone straight into the trash," Nottebohm said. "But half a year later, I was in Fairfax, California when a friend called and told me that the Air and Space Museum wanted one of my pieces for their permanent collection."

The artist drew on that connection two years later, as NASA planned the first launch of its new, reusable space vehicle. "A friend said to me, 'Why don't you call NASA and say you want to be at the shuttle launch?'" Nottebohm said. "That would be similar to a Catholic priest in the Andes calling the Vatican and saying he wanted to be at the pope's inauguration. But I called ... and before I knew it, I was standing at the launch." Not only did NASA invite Nottebohm to watch the first shuttle flight, but the agency and the Smithsonian Institution teamed up to provide the German artist with the thing he most desired: a green card. "They gave me a P-3, the Rolls-Royce of visas," Nottebohm said. "They said I would be beneficial to the culture and the economy of the U.S. If you'd known me at 18, you would have thought I might possibly be beneficial to the culture of, say, Liechtenstein someday, but the U.S.? No way."

For the next dozen years, Nottebohm attended launch after launch, creating ever more ambitious works inspired by what he saw. In 1983, his painting became the official poster for NASA's 25th anniversary celebration. In 1989, he was chosen to document the Voyager II spacecraft's encounter with the planet Neptune. In 1991, he observed NASA's research into virtual reality at the Ames Research Center in Moffett Field, and visited launch facilities within the Soviet Union. "I've always been fascinated by astronomy and astrophysics," Nottebohm said. "In general, I think scientific thinking and discovery is very much the same as the artistic imagination. And for me, (the space program) is the pinnacle of human endeavors. That (outer space) is where we've got to go."

Nottebohm jumped at the chance to return to Florida this week for one last encounter with his rocket-powered muse. He's deeply disappointed with the Obama administration's decision to discontinue the shuttle program, and hopes that the artistic legacy he has created will inspire others to take up humanity's journey to the stars.

"One of the big reasons I paint is to inspire people to think, and to have a positive relationship with the universe," Nottebohm said. "Most people are scared to look up at the skies. They have problems looking into the universe, not knowing where we are coming from or where we are going. But every bit of us — our hair, our skin, the teeth in our body — every particle of us is as old as the universe itself."

"We are made from the stuff of the universe," Nottebohm said.