

LET'S GET MINIMAL

A little light magic

Olafur Eliasson's first SA solo exhibition fails to fire up **Sean O'Toole**



SHINE ON: A Little Sun, Olafur Eliasson's solar-powered LED lamp which is sold in 10 sub-Saharan African countries, including South Africa

OLAFUR Eliasson's ingenuity with lights, mirrors and mist awed visitors to London's Tate Modern in 2003. The Danish-Icelandic artist's elaborate confidence trick with light, which he made to resemble a sun, even had some visitors lying down inside the Turbine Hall, sunbathing, fully clothed.

More than a decade after he produced this gripping piece of experiential art, Eliasson is still occupied with light and colour. Sadly, for his first solo exhibition in South Africa, Eliasson has conjured only modest magic.

This modesty is underscored, at least for me, by a passage in author Rebecca Solnit's wandering book of ideas, *The Faraway Nearby* (2013).

Recalling Eliasson's 2007 survey exhibition in San Francisco, Solnit catalogues its parts as comprising "prisms and crystals and tunnels and lights and shades and images of Iceland".

For his Cape Town gig — entitled "Space Minding" — Eliasson offers only two works: a beam of white light and an abstract wash of colour.

Made in 2004 and originally shown in Oslo, *Mono Scanner* is a kind of bare-bones lighthouse

composed of a cylindrical lens mounted horizontally on a rotating pedestal. The work emits a bright white light along a fixed axis that bisects the host space while simultaneously scanning its volume.

Imagine taking up residency in the scanner at your local retail outlet.

"It is very minimal and actually not very exciting," conceded Eliasson of the work during a Skype interview from his studio in Berlin. "It is just a white light on a white wall."

Of course, it is that and more. The work is centrally about the experience of space and time. It is only incidentally about lighthouses.

But let's go there. Eliasson's light-emitting sculpture includes parts used in actual lighthouses, notably a concentric Fresnel-type lens.

As a lighthouse it is very disciplined. While it audibly whirrs, it emits none of the aching melancholy one associates with "Moaning Minnie", as some have dubbed the Green Point lighthouse in Cape Town.

"I am interested in lighthouses as a phenomenon because they were laid out to

present us with an alternative navigational skill," said Eliasson. "They represent an alternative model of moving."

The other work on show is titled *Polar Fall Fade*. It is composed of three series of overlapping panes of glass in variations of dark orange and light green, or light green, grey and dark orange, presented at eye height. A series of overlapping ellipses cut into each pane modulates the colour feedback. It is like looking at a rumble of those outdated drawing aids once used in high school geometry classes.

"I love the ambiguity of colour and the fact that science has not fully mapped the *raison d'être* around colour," said Eliasson. "Colour seems to sustain a successful argument that something can be both pragmatic and spiritual at the same time."

Eliasson was scheduled to speak at Design Indaba at the end of this month. He has postponed his appearance to next year to focus on the roll-out of *Little Sun*, a solar-powered LED lamp he developed with engineer Frederik Ottesen.

Light is not singularly an esoteric object of wonder for Eliasson. His light, which forms the backbone of a bona fide social business, is sold in 10 sub-Saharan African countries, including South Africa.

● *The Little Sun lamp costs R200.*

