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Author: Mr. Jerry Skinner
Australian Government, Australia, Jerry.Skinner@industry.gov.au

"SEEING STARS" - CREATING EXCITEMENT ABOUT RADIO ASTRONOMY THROUGH ART

Abstract

The Square Kilometre Array (SKA) is a giant radio telescope that will be built here in Australia and in South Africa over the next decade. It is intended to explore some of the fundamental scientific questions about the nature of the universe. With high aspirations the success of the project relies heavily upon public support and engagement.

Generating excitement about large scientific projects presents an interesting challenge. The public's general understanding of the contribution projects such as the SKA can make to scientific knowledge and society in general, is limited. A creative approach can sometimes help engage people and broaden their understanding of big science. Art was used to draw on the creative skills of the general public and help them to think about big science in a meaningful way. This engagement through art became the "Seeing Stars" national art prize.

Seeing Stars Art Prize was a celebration of art and astronomy inspired by the world's largest telescope—the SKA. Using the inspiration of the SKA, artists were invited to create original pieces of artwork expressing the excitement and mystery of the SKA and its potential for discovery. It was anticipated that there would be between 200 and 300 submissions, not the 2300 entries received. The competition comprised of two categories for entrants: 'Ages 12 and under' and 'Open'. By dividing the completion into two categories it was possible to target public outreach at members of the general public as well as inspire future adults to pursue careers in STEM using their creativity to drive innovation.

The overwhelmingly positive reception of the "Seeing Stars" art prize demonstrates that there is public support for radio astronomy if the general public is engaged in a meaningful way. It is anticipated that this will inspire a creative approach to generating public interest for large projects in the future.