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JITISH KALLAT

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The US Air Force Nearly Nuked the Moon. Amid a New Space Race, Artist Jitish Kallat Revisits the Secret Cold War Scheme



BY BRIAN BOUCHER  September 17, 2026 3:33pm

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Jitish Kallat creating *Wall Drawing / Redux: A119* (2026), at the Menil Drawing Institute, Houston.
CHRIS DUNN

In a secret 1958 project, the Air Force considered detonating a nuclear bomb on the Moon.

Scientists believed then they would learn a lot from the exercise, code named Project A119, and the US might gain ground in the Cold War space race with the Soviets. What's more, the blast would perhaps be visible on Earth, boosting morale at home and cowing our enemies abroad. The risks (including the blast affecting humankind's home) were deemed to outweigh the benefits, though, and the US government turned its attention instead to putting a man on the Moon, which it predicted would be more popular, and which NASA would be first to accomplish, a decade later. The Air Force's report on the potential bombing, titled "A Study of Lunar Research Flights," remained secret until the project's leader disclosed it in 2000.

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The same heavenly body has lately been on the government's mind again; US president Donald Trump, who announced the formation of the Space Force in 2019, declared in a recent Truth Social post that "The Moon is ours"; about a week later, with echoes of the Cold War, the Air Force Secretary revealed that the US has stationed weapons in Earth's orbit.

Artist **Jitish Kallat** has been fascinated for years with the meanings of space exploration. Now, at the **Menil Drawing Institute**, in Houston, Texas, the artist has created a huge wall drawing, *Wall Drawing / Redux: A119* (on view through August 8, 2027), that explores the abortive plan to nuke the moon.

He's calling it site-specific, and in fact the Menil is only about 30 miles from the mission control facility

at NASA's Johnson Space Center (which Apollo 13 pilot Jack Swigert famously addressed with his oft-misquoted line, "Okay, Houston, we've had a problem here"). Kallat's is the eighth in a series of projects hosted at the Drawing Institute; past participants have included Mel Bochner, Roni Horn, and Gladys Nilsson.



Jitish Kallat, *Wall Drawing / Redux: A119* (2026).

He has printed declassified pages from the (partly redacted) plan, also called "A Study of Lunar Research Flights," on a wall. Inspired by the glass walls of the building, that wall has then been fronted with glass fitted with a film that changes levels of clarity and opacity with electrical signals, so that as an electrical pulse travels through the glass, images dissolve and reappear, serving nicely as a metaphor for secrecy and revelation, as well as the Moon's limited and fugitive visibility from Earth.

"There was the question of what constituted a drawing," the artist said in a video call, "but also what constitutes a wall. What could that wall be? Could a wall have a window, and could they go together?" He then was driven to explore the notion of "a window that can become opaque."

Kallat also looked at Project A119 in this piece *Lunar Redux* (2024–26), a photo-based installation that shows lenticular prints of the report's pages; the artist described that treatment of the document as introducing "a field of visual instability verging on hallucination."



Jitish Kallat at work at the Menil Drawing Institute.

Born in Mumbai and still living there, Kallat has shown at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Gallery of New South Wales, and has been included in the Venice and Gwangju biennials, among others. He's in the collections of museums including the Pompidou Center, M+ Museum, and the AIC.

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Is Kallat obsessed with the Moon, and, by extension, with space? Maybe. A sculptural installation, *Moon Treaty* (2025), is named for a 1979 United Nations declaration that the Moon and other celestial bodies are the "common heritage of mankind," outlawing national ownership or military use. In a large sculpture, aluminum facsimile pages are crumpled on the floor, reflecting the way spacefaring nations have more or less ignored it.

What's more, a recent project shown recently at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, "Covering Letter (Terranum Nuncius)," employs sounds and images launched into space in 1977 in the legendary Voyager 1 and 2 craft, which contained "golden records" encoded with representations of humanity and life on Earth, possibly to be retrieved by aliens.

"At some point A119 ceased to be purely a document of interest; it's a political, militaristic, and scientific document, all entangled, the artist said, recalling his research. "It set out to do something completely outlandish, projecting anxiety, hubris, and diabolical intent. But in the course of the scientific exploration came reflection."

Neatly drawing the line back to the themes of changing visibility in his own new project, he concluded, "It was essentially about optics."