



ALEXANDRA PAPERNO

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National Centre for Contemporary Arts · Moscow

Alexandra Paperno

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PETRUS SCHAESBERG

We feel so familiar with the view of the stars that we are baffled by the impoverished iconography of those nightly epiphanies in modern times. If a star still lit the way to Bethlehem in the *Adoration of the Magi*, the night sky has grown dimmer in the era of secularization. Our perception of a picture is shaped by its technical reproduction in photography and film—photography as a scientific vehicle, film as a projection of everything we associate with the conquest of the universe. It is no surprise, then, that the logo of a major Hollywood studio, Universal, offers a reverse view from space onto our world.

Looking at the constellations in Alexandra Paperno's mixed media painting series, we don't know whether to focus on the intricate composition of the images or to be tempted by titles like *Centaurus* and *Pictor* to read a mythical, philosophical, and literary depth into them. The artistic technique is complex, elaborate, even though the overall impression is strangely tender and moving. Barriers of colour are built up, only to be torn to pieces. Powerful strokes form masses, resting somewhere in an undefined limbo. Opaque hues, leaden and earthy, are countered by deep blue areas.

1 In addition to the three constellations dedicated to the arts—Caelum, Pictor and Sculptor—Lacaille named his discoveries after scientific inventions like *circinus* (compass) and *horologium* (clock).

And the expressive brushstrokes and colour fields are hidden behind a mysterious veil, a misty uncertainty. Colours cover each other, still radiating through thin layers of rice paper. These layers—as many as six in some pictures—are there to question the immediacy of the physical application of paint, obscuring it, and paradoxically serving as a protective shield. We feel that this subjective expression of temperament, manner, and atmosphere should somehow withdraw. Yet perhaps there are more subtle distinctions to be made, as if one were to say, “Look at the blue sky!” and then, after a thoughtful pause, “It’s growing turquoise at the horizon, like the blueness of a mountain lake.” The paper overlays make the picture surface appear worn. Time seems to pile up on it in an elusive and graceful manner, revealing the picture’s long process of generation. Not an eruption of artistic energy, but careful creation.

Generous brushwork consciously recalls the non-figurative stances of such New York School artists as Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, and Joan Mitchell. If it were not for the titles Paperno uses for her work, like *Horologium* and *Camelopardalis*, great care would be required not to read in these pictures representations burdened with romantic clichés. The names are exotic, hermetic, and yet conventional Latin designations. It is likely that the system of constellations and their related myths arose in the cultural area of the Euphrates and were passed on by the Phoenicians to the Greeks. About half the names of today’s eighty-eight constellations go back to Ptolemy, most of the rest being added by European astronomers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The names *Sculptor* and *Pictor*, for example—naturally piquing the curiosity of any art historian—were coined by the French astronomer Abbé Nicholas Louis de Lacaille. He named fifteen of the internationally accepted constellations during his stay at the Cape of Good Hope between 1750 and 1754. The name *Pictor* is an abbreviation of *Equuleus Pictoris*, or the Painter’s Easel, *equuleus* (literally “little horse”) describing the wooden base of the easel used in Lacaille’s day.¹

Despite the historically charged subject—or perhaps for just this reason—Paperno, using the painterly idiom of abstraction for a lofty theme, lures the viewer into an unresolved tension of vague suggestions. Habits of seeing, trained in the perception of modern art, are consciously subverted. The comfortable bases of such art historical terms as abstraction, figuration, and representation are eroded. We are moving on an uncertain ground of subtle contradictions, as is confirmed visually through the elaborate artistic technique.

Reflective moods inevitably set in when one contemplates the constellations, but Paperno's overall concept of this series—including single stars, star maps, and constellations, not to mention still lifes with globes—conjures up the Thracian maid's laughter when Thales of Miletus fell into the well—the epitome of disdain for astronomy's endeavours—and hints at today's amazed awareness that we human beings, in a remote corner of the boundless universe, are terribly alone.²

Although European philosophy has its origins in the systematic observation of the sky's mysterious movement at night, progressively usurping areas otherwise reserved to the gods, Western painters have not often shown an interest in the firmament. All the more interesting, then, are those examples that break the rule by featuring a starry sky.

* * *

In 1816 the Prussian court architect and painter Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed the set for Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* on the occasion of a coronation centennial. In the palace of the Queen of the Night, the artist depicted the sovereign standing on a silver sickle moon beneath a dark blue sky. Starry lines run in orderly tracks above the moonlit clouds, suggesting a cupola, which in its turn recalls the Pantheon. A stage design is not comparable to a painting, but Schinkel's work had such success

² See Dennis Overbye, "Hunting for Life in Specks of Cosmic Dust," *New York Times*, July 19, 2005.

3 *Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Architektur, Malerei, Kunstgewerbe*, exhibition catalogue, Berlin: Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten, Schloss Charlottenburg, 1981, p. 274 [translated by the author].

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, § 29, p. 127.

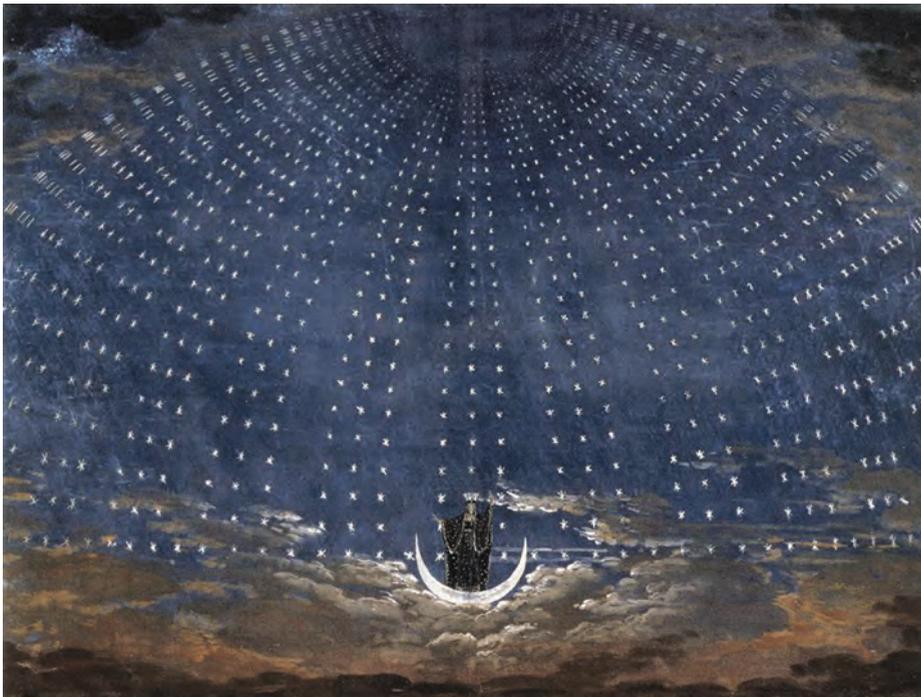
and impact that it can be thought of as belonging to a common artistic heritage. The spectator cannot help but detect a romantic longing, all the while sensing the classical spirit of Schinkel's architectural rigour. The space of the sky is delimited, the stars strictly ordered. Landscape and architecture intertwine. The harmoniously arranged, deep blue vault of the sky towers above fractal cloud formations.

Two completely different ideas were integrated in the picture, helping to explain its popularity even today, and prompting novelist E.T.A. Hoffmann's rhapsodic comment that "the idea of the scene is the most sublime, an idea of genius."³ Symbols signifying night – stars and the sickle moon – were treated in a strictly symmetrical way, adjusting to the cupola's form. The Pantheon reflects a strictly logical use of classical architectural elements. Beginning in 1764, when the Enlightenment was at its height, the Pantheon was built in Paris after the Roman model. Today, we see a particularly tense use of symbols and forms in the painting, yet it reflected the current discourse on the view of the cosmos.

Until modern times, the observer of the sky considered himself to be in an unquestioned, immediate relation with the totality of the universe. This was still possible in antiquity and the Middle Ages. The Copernican shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview introduced a new human perspective, which ultimately limited the range of experience itself. From then on, any experience had to be based on the assumption of inaccessibility. The fissure between the objective scientific accumulation of knowledge and the subjective need for insight and totality was felt ever more acutely. Kant tried to justify this tension between theory and subjective view. His idea of the sublime can be seen in this context. In the post-Copernican universe, rational man does not find his relation to nature confirmed. With Kant, this lack turns into an aesthetic quality insofar as "Sublime is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses, we like directly."⁴

The universe compels the spectator's recognition, even as it challenges his absurd need to be the centre and focal point of the cosmos. As Kant sees it: "When we call the sight of the starry sky sublime, we must not base our judgment upon any concepts of worlds that are inhabited by rational beings, and then [conceive of] the bright dots that we see occupying the space above us as being these worlds' suns, moved in orbits prescribed for them with great purposiveness; but we must base our judgment regarding it merely on how we see it, as a vast vault encompassing everything, and merely under this presentation may we posit the sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment attributes to this object."⁵ The Copernican revolution compels the *contemplator coeli*—if he wishes to remain such—to reject Copernicus himself as well as the latest theories of possible parallel universes (a variation of so-called string theory). Kant proposes a more tangible example, suggesting that an observer

5 Idem, p. 130.



Karl Friedrich Schinkel
The Queen of the Night
(Set design for Mozart's
opera *The Magic Flute*),
1815
gouache on paper,
46.3 × 61.6 cm
Staatliche Museen, Berlin

6 Heinrich Heine,
"From the Memoirs of
Herr von Schnabelewopski,"
in *The Sword and the Flame*,
translated by C.G. Leland,
New York and London:
T. Yoseloff, 1960, p. 162.

7 Idem, pp. 164–65.

8 Hans Blumenberg,
*Die Genesis der kopernikanischen
Welt*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp
Verlag, 1981, p. 85.

of the ocean not regard it as a medium of international traffic. The philosopher emphasizes that only poets look at the sky to see merely what is to be seen.

Kant, a man of his time, was obviously still living within the aesthetic traditions of mimetic theory. He would never have dreamt that a hundred and fifty years later, by way of Barnett Newman – the most eloquent and sensitive mentor of Abstract Expressionism – his aesthetic idea of the sublime would lay the conceptual foundation for the rise of abstract painting. Yet even poets were not to delight in pure contemplation for long and were soon to feel the impact of the latest scientific insights. The night sky above Hamburg inspired Heinrich Heine's famous hymn: "... till the heaven grew dark and the golden stars came forth yearning, hope-giving, wondrously and beautifully tender and transformed. The stars! Are they golden flowers on the bridal bosom of heaven? Are they the eyes of enamoured angels, who with yearning mirror themselves in the blue streams of earth below and vie with the swans?"⁶ Nearly twelve years later the same view becomes more prosaic, almost pessimistic, making us wonder how much the world around Heine – and with it the meaning of the sky – must have changed in the meantime. What made the poet – irrespective of his own superficial explanation of having aged – rephrase his eulogy as an elegy: the same stars that once with such love wooed the swans on fair summer nights, but now looked down on them with frosty brilliance, almost scornfully. "Ah! I now perceive that the stars are no living, sympathetic beings, but only gleaming phantasms of night, eternal delusions in a dreamt heaven – mere golden lies in a dark blue Nothingness...."⁷ A deeper reason for this change of mind may be found in his encounter with Hegel, which – as philosopher Hans Blumenberg points out – was a turning point in Heine's intellectual career.⁸ Heine reports a telling conversation with the philosopher: One night he was standing next to Hegel at the window, raving about the stars, calling them the abode of the blessed. "The master,

though, only mumbled: ‘The stars, hm! hm! The stars are nothing but a beaming leprosy in the sky.’”⁹ Hegel’s derogatory comment on this boundless enthusiasm already prefigures Nietzsche’s criticism of the anthropocentric worldview. In the end, facing appearances, man only creates references to himself. Man’s ideas and claims are mirrored in his theoretical and aesthetic attitude toward the sky. Looking at the sky at night, marvelling at its magnificence, the spectator is most of all moved by himself: “The scientific order of the stars’ tracks and the chemical processes by which we are so impressed coincide in the end with those qualities we attribute to the things by ourselves in order to impress ourselves. [...] The individual man even regards the solar system as being at his service or in some other personal relation to him.”¹⁰

9 Heinrich Heine, “Geständnisse,” in idem, p. 345.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Vorarbeiten zu einer Schrift über den Philosophen,” *Gesammelte Werke*, VI, München: Musarion Verlag, 1920–1929, p. 87 [translated by the author].

* * *

Vincent van Gogh spent the year 1889 almost exclusively in the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence where he had committed himself because of his deteriorating mental health. In the month of June he painted one of his most famous paintings, *Starry Night*, today in the Museum



Vincent van Gogh
Starry Night, 1889
oil on canvas, 72 × 92 cm
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York

11 *Nuit étoilée sur le Rhône*
(*Starry Night over the Rhone*),
1888. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

12 Vincent van Gogh,
Brief Nr. 527 in *van Gogh Briefe*,
edited by Johanna Gesina
van Gogh-Bongers, Frankfurt:
Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 342.
The first star picture by
van Gogh is no less famous:
The Cafe Terrace on the Place du
Forum, Arles, at Night, 1888.
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterloo.

13 *Idem*, p. 512.

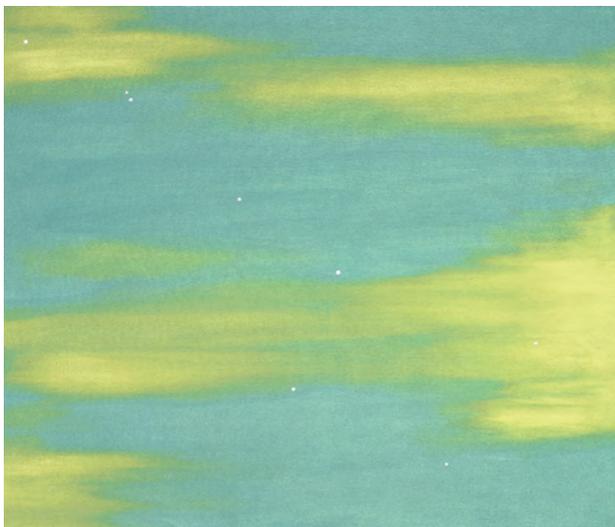
of Modern Art in New York. A year before, he had already made the stars beam above the river Rhone.¹¹ At the riverside, the light of lanterns is reflected in the water in shiny tones that “change from red-gold into greenish bronze,” as the painter wrote to his brother Theo. In the same letter he mentions the vault of the sky, “the Big Dipper glimmering green and pink, a pale and discreet shine contrasting with the brutal gold of the gaslight.”¹² It is difficult to find another artist whose life and work were in such emotional unison. On that starry night in the fateful year of 1889, the flaming, vibrating light of the stars turned the sky into waves of colour behind the blazing form of a cypress, its strong, emphatic outlines only highlighting the effect of the glistening colours. Van Gogh renders the elementary forms much more dynamic through broken brushstrokes, the sky becoming a moving, torrential stream. An individual vision makes its way spontaneously, instinctively – all the more stirring, as it seems to parallel the personal fate of the artist. Pursued by recurring attacks and alternating periods of despair and composed calm, he was also fighting in Saint-Rémy against his limited possibilities to paint: “this is no return to romanticism, and it has nothing to do with religious ideas, nothing.”¹³ One should not forget that van Gogh’s fiery stars shone above cities at the beginning of the industrial era, when contemplation was in danger of losing its object. The cities’ flood of lights, those reflections on the Rhone, seem to loot the event, as it were, thus dimming the starry sky. The abundance of scientific knowledge on the cosmos actually hinders our vision of its totality – not to mention the fact that no insight is completely ignorant of science. Van Gogh’s aesthetic premise – putting aside whether reality looks that way or not – is rather telling. Indeed, it does not matter any more which reality, if any, corresponds to those dots of light moving in strict celestial orbits. The measurement and analysis of light, its intensity and colour, remain the only content of a possible theory. Max Planck asks: “What is, for example, the reality of a star we see shining

in the sky? Is it the glowing material of which it consists? Or is it the sensation of light present in front of our eyes? The realist claims the first, the positivist the latter. Each statement is valuable in its own right and can be plausibly supported. And yet neither can claim sole validity. While both stances are admissible, the notion 'real' has ceased to make sense."¹⁴

14 Max Planck,
*Wege zur physikalischen
Erkenntnis II*,
Leipzig, 1943, p. 107
[translated by the author].

* * *

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Los Angeles-based artist Edward Ruscha painted several versions of the Big Dipper in a temperate, laconic manner. Ruscha is famous for paintings featuring words and concise phrases. Here, the most familiar constellation, the easiest to detect, is presented as a further cultural feature and indexical sign of human modes of perception. Presented on the canvas in a seemingly succinct way, the starry sky is part of a sequence of the painter's subjects dealing with semiotic variety and visual metaphors. The particular order of stars in the dotted chaos of the sky which we identify as Ursa Major has a minimum of resemblance to a real



Edward Ruscha
Big Dip, 1980
oil on canvas, 51 × 61 cm
Private Collection

15 Hans Blumenberg,
The Genesis of the Copernican World,
translated by Robert M. Wallace,
Cambridge, Mass., and London:
MIT Press, 1987, p. 685.
Original: Hans Blumenberg,
*Die Genesis der kopernikanischen
Welt*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp
Verlag, 1981, p. 794.

View
of Alexandra Paperno's
exhibition "Paintings,"
National Centre
for Contemporary Arts,
Moscow, 2004

object and can only be the fruit of a fertile imagination. The identification of constellations may well have been one of mankind's first visual abstractions. We humans saw the sky as a foil long before we had the idea of drawing our environment on a cave's wall or communicating with graphic signs. Despite all their fascination with the cosmos, Ruscha's distant, almost detached painterly *factum* and Paperno's slightly ironic representation, reducing our planet to a handy globe, offer some comfort against the sobering realization of the fathomless depth of the universe: "The cosmic oasis on which man lives – this miracle of an exception, our own blue planet in the midst of the disappointing celestial desert – is no longer 'also a star,' but rather the only one that seems to deserve this name."¹⁵

Alexandra Paperno's series presents the motif of constellations in such painterly terms that we are confronted with paradoxes and antinomies. This is not unlike the obsessive repetitions in Jasper Johns' paintings of the American flag, which evoke in the beholder similar impressions of a tension between motif and artistic technique (in this case, encaustic and collage). The changing history of our understanding of the universe continues to grip the popular imagination, and the painterly finesse of Paperno's paintings visually develops these issues. Free associations are given full range and yet always reconnect to the structure of the pictures. These paintings oscillate between the subjective touch of physical strokes, non-mimetic expression, and a figuration which verges on abstraction.

It was our careful and systematic observation of the night sky that generated signs, which were interpreted and later set down in writing – so rigidly and firmly that their placement in the skies could serve as a guide to seafarers. The representational in the paintings is grounded deeply in our imagination, since those constellations are merely images which we were able to break away from the chaos of the universe.



Plates

I PICTOR

2005

Mixed media on canvas

200 × 160 cm



II SCULPTOR

2005

Mixed media on canvas

200 × 160 cm



III GREY SUN

2003

Acrylic on canvas

Diameter: 140 cm

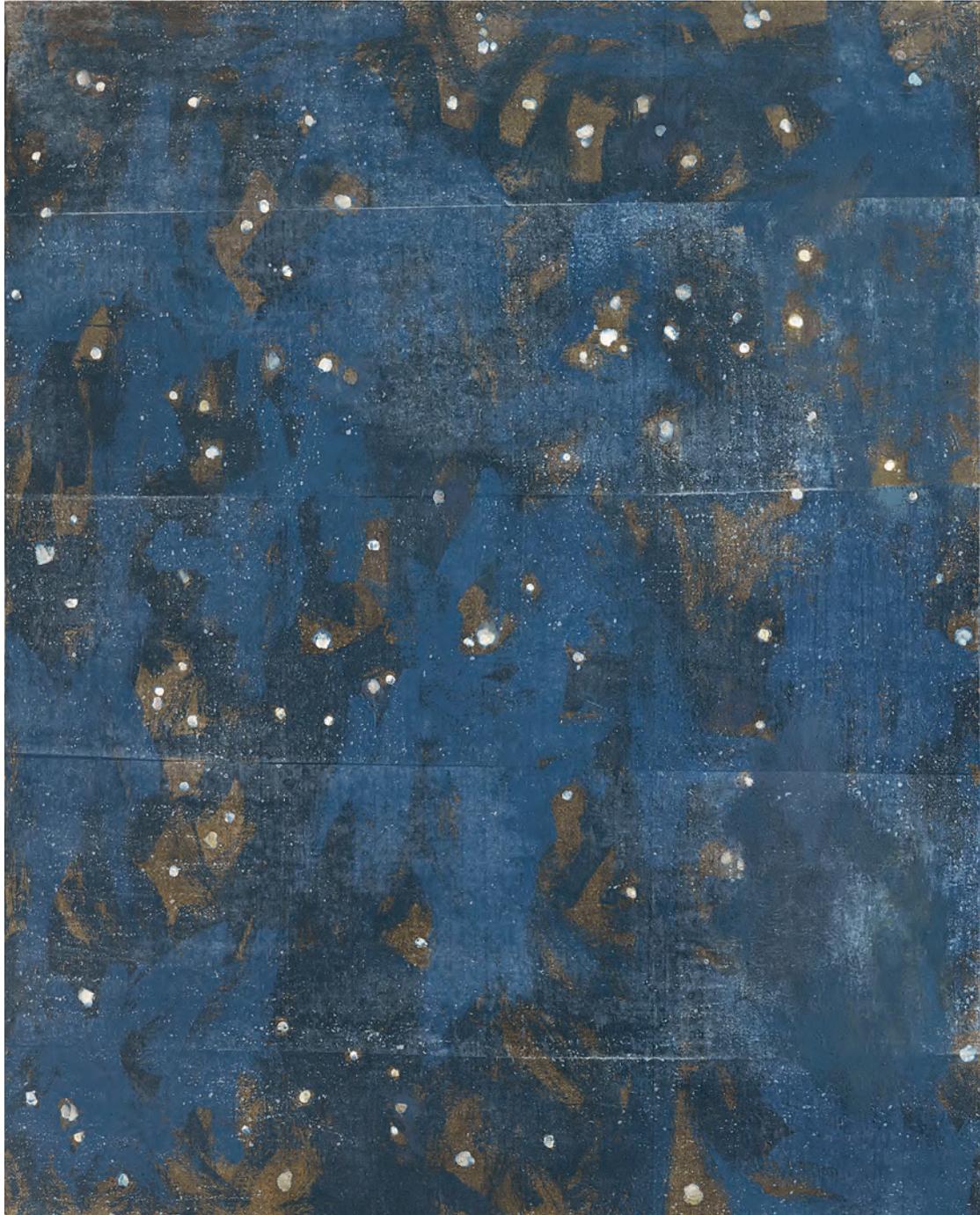


IV LEPUS

2003

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm



V HOROLOGIUM

2003

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm

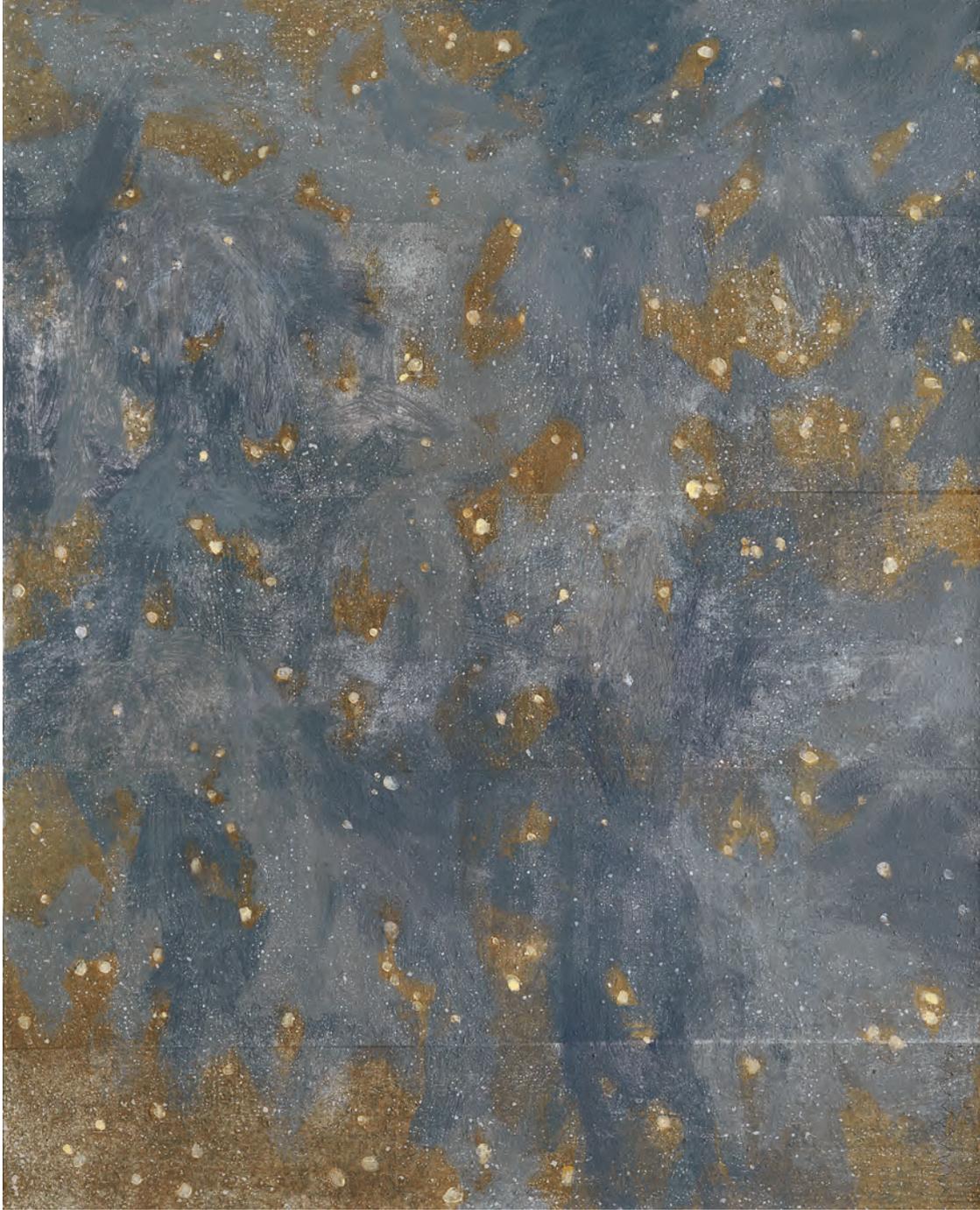


VI CENTAURUS

2003

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm

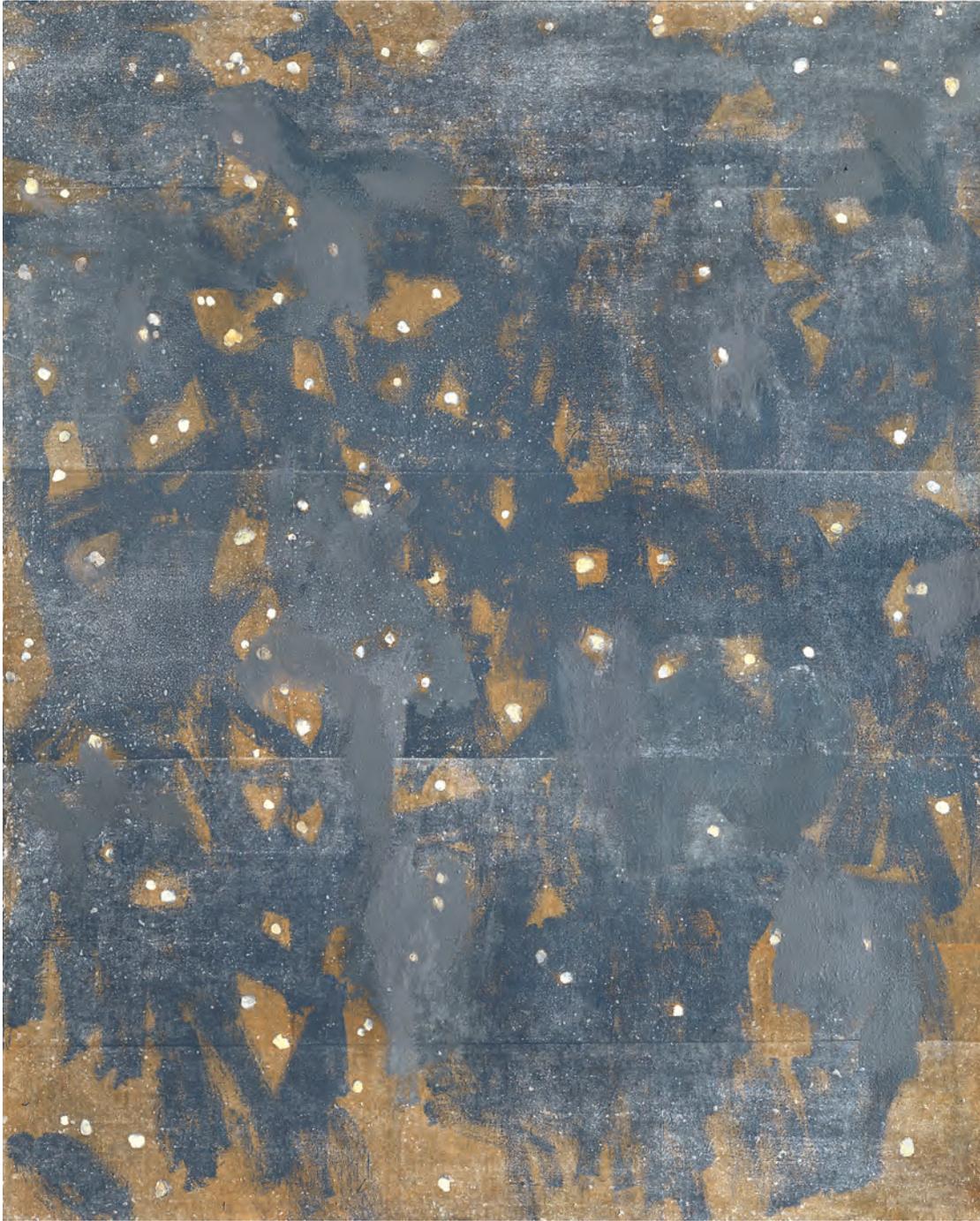


VII VOLANS

2003

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm

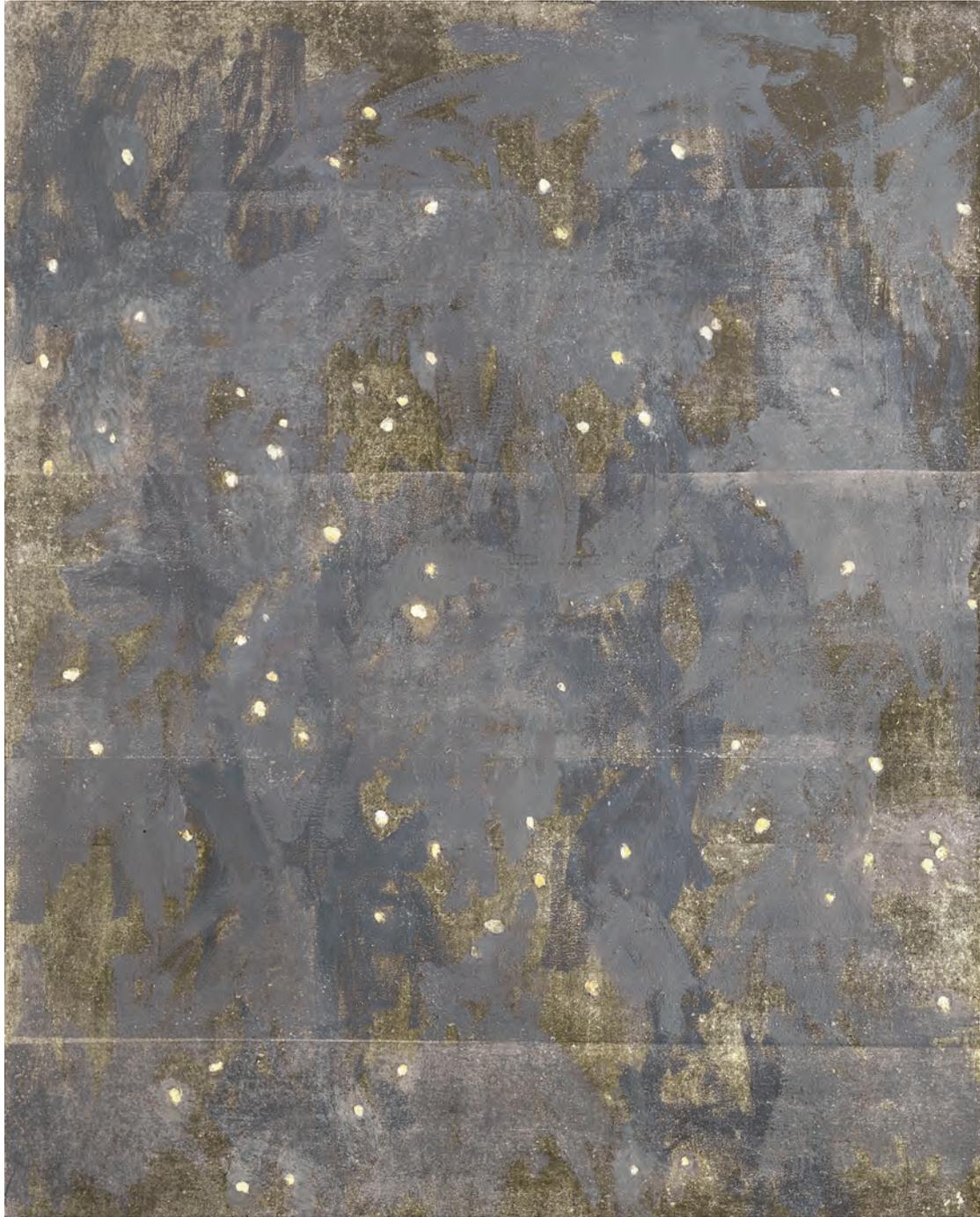


VIII PICTOR

2003

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm



IX LUPUS

2005

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm



X MONOCEROS

2005

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm

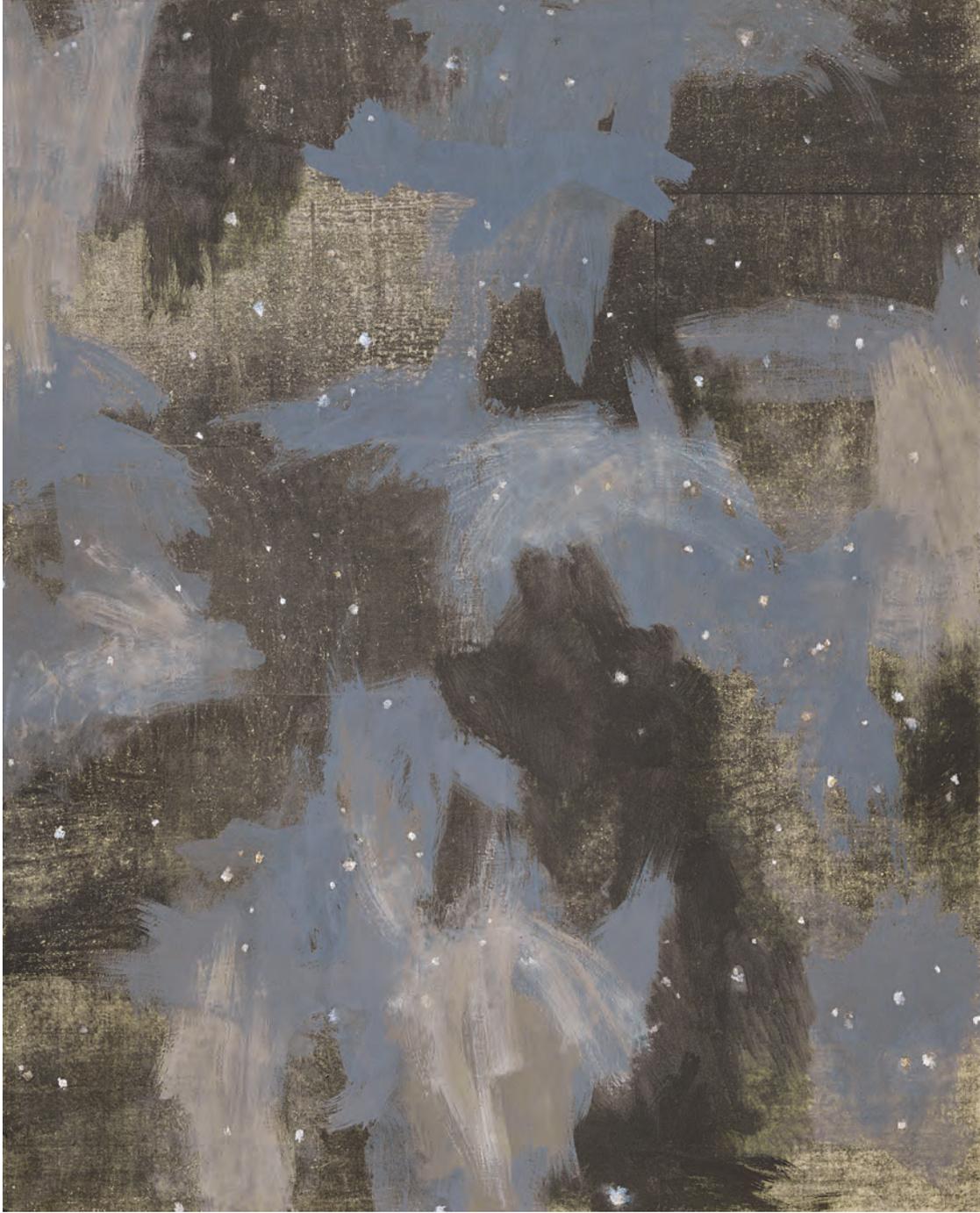


XI CAMELOPARDALIS

2005

Mixed media on canvas

150 × 120 cm

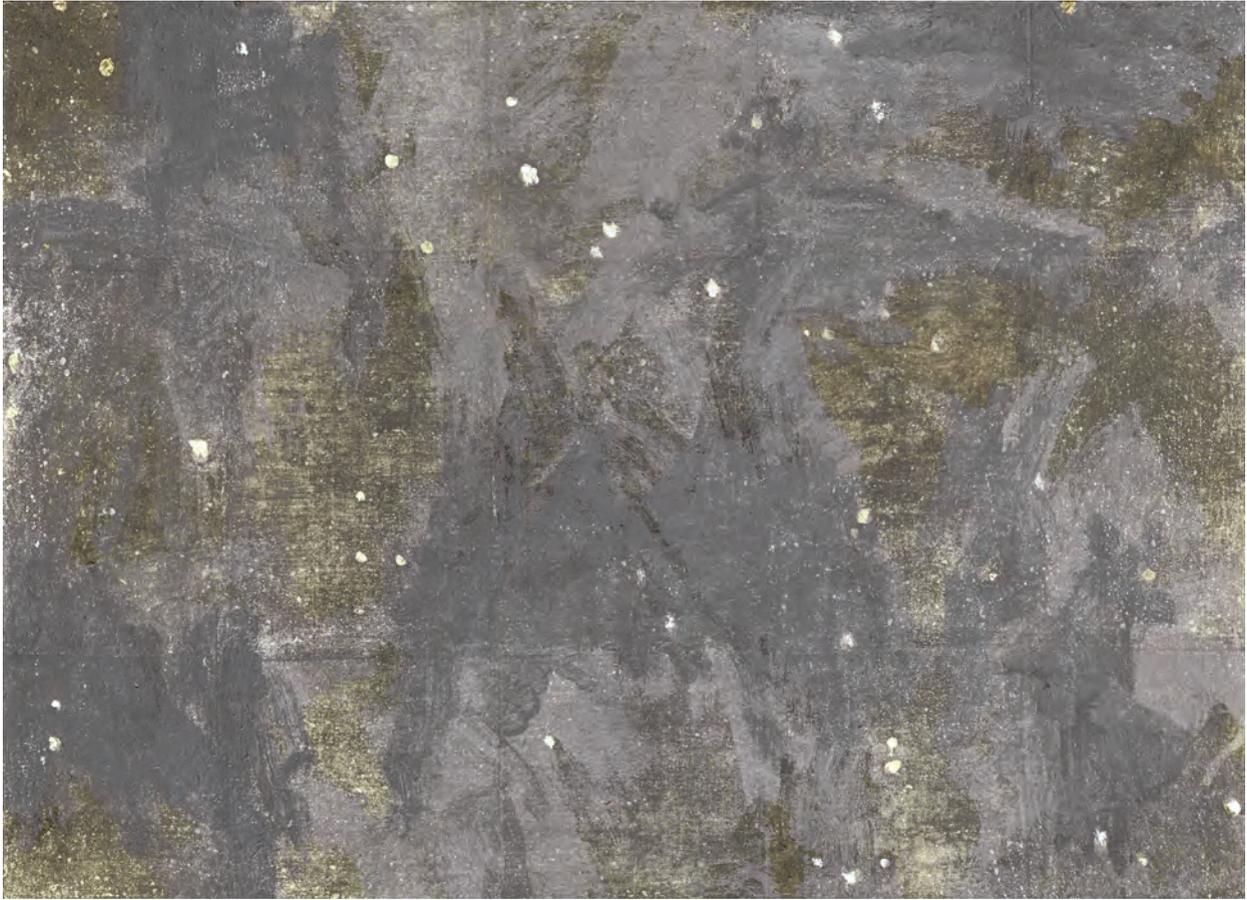


XII APUS

2005

Mixed media on canvas

80 × 120 cm



XIII RETICULUM

2005

Mixed media on canvas

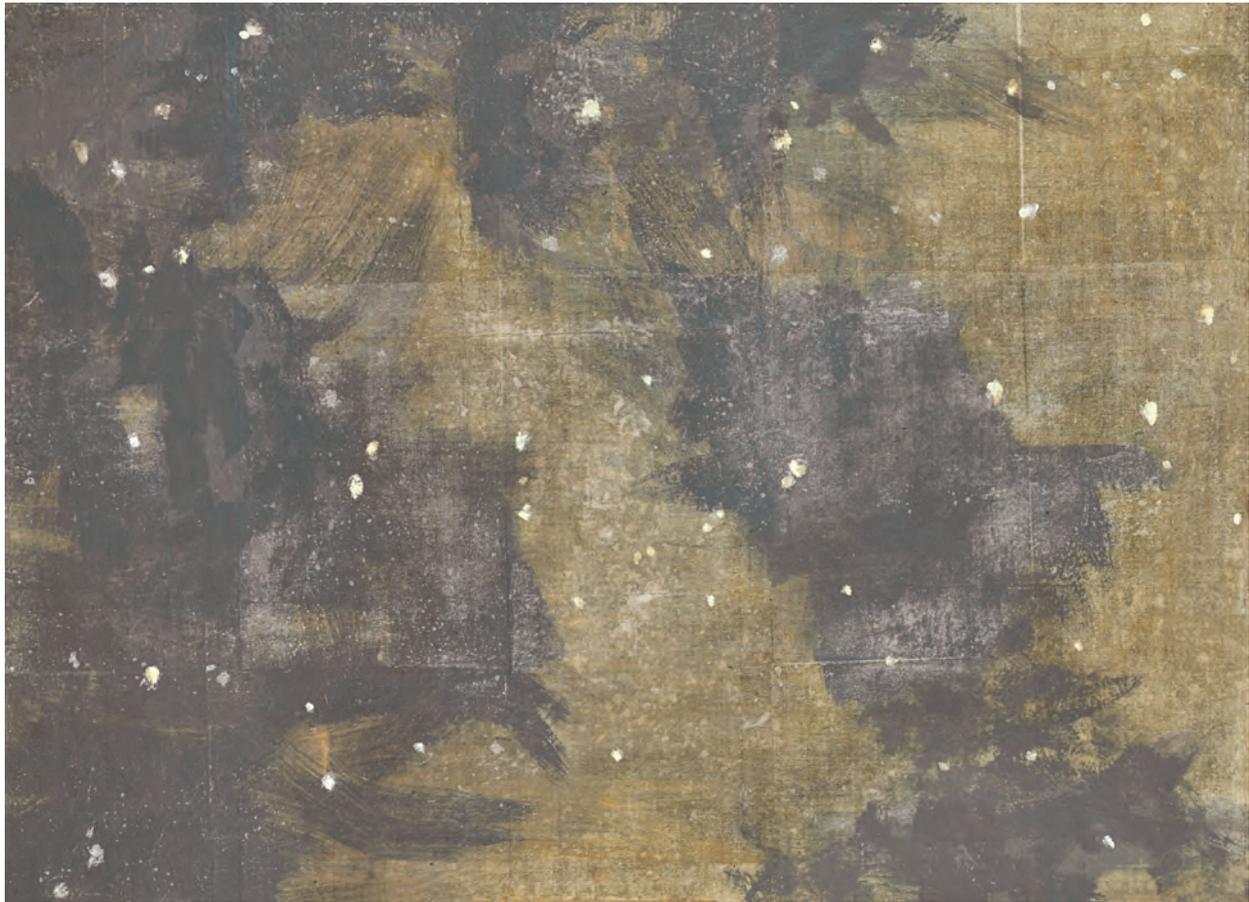
80 × 120 cm



XIV MUSCA
2005
Mixed media on canvas
80 × 120 cm



XV CHAMAELEON
2005
Mixed media on canvas
80 × 120 cm



XVI CIRCINUS

2005

Mixed media on canvas

80 × 120 cm

Next spread:

XVII NORTH AND SOUTH

2003

Acrylic on canvas

Diptych, diameter: 140 cm







XVIII STILL LIFE WITH GLOBE

2005

Acrylic on canvas

130 × 110 cm



XIX STILL LIFE WITH GLOBE

2005

Acrylic on canvas

130 × 110 cm



XX STAR

2005

Acrylic on canvas

76 × 70 cm



XXI STAR

2005

Acrylic on canvas

76 × 70 cm



XXII STAR

2005

Acrylic on canvas

76 × 70 cm



VIEW OF THE "STAR MAPS" EXHIBITION
Stella Art Gallery, Moscow, 2006



VIEW OF THE "STAR MAPS" EXHIBITION



VIEW OF THE "STAR MAPS" EXHIBITION

Easel designed by Alexei Dushkin



ALEXANDRA PAPERNO was born in Moscow and studied art in New York at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, where she received her degree in fine arts in 2000. In 2004 her first solo exhibition was held at the National Centre for Contemporary Arts (NCCA), Moscow. Her exhibition "Star Maps" was presented at Stella Art Gallery, Moscow, in 2006. Alexandra Paperno has participated in a number of group exhibitions, including the Prague Biennale of Contemporary Art ("Expanded Painting," 2005) and the Moscow International Forum of Art Initiatives: "Paradise" (2004), "We" (2005), and "Choice" (2006). Her work is in various public and private collections, such as the National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow; the Contemporary City Foundation, Moscow; Outset Contemporary Art Fund, London; and the Luziah Hennessy Collection, France.

PETRUS SCHAESBERG is a founding member of the International Center for Curatorial Studies (Iccarus) at Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich, where he earned his Ph.D. (summa cum laude) in 2004 with the dissertation "The Concept of Collage: Shifts of Paradigm in Its History from Pablo Picasso to Edward Ruscha." He has taught at Munich University (1996–2001) and Columbia University in New York (2005–2006). Petrus Schaesberg is the editor of the catalogue raisonné of works on paper by Edward Ruscha. He is the coauthor, with Rainer Crone, of *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells* and other works and has published numerous essays on contemporary art. His book on the concept of collage from Pablo Picasso to Richard Prince is forthcoming from Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich.



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