



# SKY WELL

Molly Kaderka



# Sky Well

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Title: *Sky Well*

by:

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Special thanks to my mom, who has a name.

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## Abstract

Since the era of Romanticism, landscape painting has fallen into three aesthetic forms of representation: the Pastoral, the Picturesque, and the Sublime. This last form celebrates the awe and fear that arises through human encounters with nature. Many contemporary critics dismiss the Natural Sublime, claiming either that technology has replaced nature as a source of the sublime, or that humankind's present-day destruction of nature prevents our also standing in awe of it. I disagree with both arguments. To me, humanity's disruption of Earth's ecosystems does not impede an individual's experience of exhilaration witnessing, say, a volcanic eruption. And modern technology has deepened our knowledge of nature—from the tiniest subatomic particles to the vast recesses of outer space—giving us countless new occasions for reverence. My work is a reinterpretation of the genre of landscape and the Natural Sublime. Though they appear representational, the works are actually highly abstracted spaces, devoid of spatial perspective. They also move away from the traditional picture plane as a framing device, and embrace ephemerality in both material and method.

My newest works navigate between two spaces—the near and the far—and between two scales—the micro and the macro. They invite the viewer to move between a sense of visual stillness and one of motion. And by compressing disparate images (the night sky and the stony ground) into a single visual space, they offer a simultaneous experience of the temporal and the infinite.

My work has a strong sense of tactility and has obviously been touched by hand many times. These works embody ideas about the ephemeral nature of existence, and the presence of the artist's hand is meant to make these abstractions more accessible. The works are also highly detailed and evidence considerable labor, suggesting by analogy the time it has taken for the objects depicted—these stars and stones—to come into being. Meticulous hand work is complemented by the use of printmaking to create, through an indirect process, the highly varied texture and detail one sees in natural surfaces. My use of printmaking mimics nature in another way: each plate is printed just once; like a leaf, each print is a unique mark.

My imagery explores objects we regard as permanent but are not, and this temporal quality is reflected in how my drawings are made. My work strives for the presence and visual weight of an object: I create an enveloping dark density in my drawings, which on a large scale, creates a kind of monument to nature. Along with this stately presence is a fragility and temporality embodied in the materials, in particular my use of paper. I am also experimenting with work that is ephemeral in that it is site-determined but not permanent, changing as it is installed in other sites.

Through its immense scale, ephemerality, and lack of visual spatial perspective, my work separates itself from the aesthetics of pastoral and picturesque categories of landscape painting to participate in the contemporary conversation about representation, abstraction, and materiality, and to reinterpret the subject of the Natural Sublime in painting.

## In Defense of the Natural Sublime

Landscape has a longstanding presence in the history of western painting. In the Renaissance, landscapes played a subordinate role, as a backdrop or setting for mythological or historical scenes. Over the centuries, and with help from painters like Nicolas Poussin, Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, landscape painting became a respected genre in its own right. During the era of Romanticism and into Modernity, landscape has functioned as a repository of different human emotions, generally falling into one of three aesthetic forms of representation: the Pastoral, the Picturesque, and the Sublime.

In her essay “19th Century Landscape - The Pastoral, The Picturesque and The Sublime,” curator Lauren Rabb delineates the differences between each category.

The first two [The Pastoral and The Picturesque] represent Nature as a comforting source of physical and spiritual sustenance. The last, as articulated by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), refers to the thrill and danger of confronting untamed Nature and its overwhelming forces, such as thunderstorms and deep chasms. Whereas the Pastoral and Picturesque reference mankind’s ability to control the natural world, the Sublime is a humbling reminder that humanity is not all-powerful.<sup>1</sup>

Pastoral landscapes revel in the human ability to tame and control the landscape, while the Picturesque delights in finding an untouched or “pure” landscape, uncontaminated by human presence. On the other hand, the Natural Sublime refers to the exhilarating fear of confronting natural forces bigger than oneself. To witness the power and indifference of nature, which threaten our very existence, is spectacular. Edmund Burke’s idea of the Sublime has been represented in paintings like Joseph Mallord William Turner’s *Snow Storm* (1842) and, more famously, Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea Fog* (1818).

Contemporary writers and philosophers like Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Ann Townsend, and Bruno Latour have called into question the validity and relevance of the Natural Sublime, or declared it altogether dead. Their arguments vary. Rolfe argues that the Natural Sublime has been replaced by modern technology — essentially by the Technological Sublime.<sup>2</sup> Taking a different position, philosopher Bruno Latour, in his writing for the exhibition *Globale: Reset Modernity*, writes: “Our epoch is that of the “Anthropocene” — humans have become a geological force in their own right. Within this new relationship between humans and nature, there is no place for being spectators. How can you sense the sublime if you feel responsible for what’s happening “out there?”<sup>3</sup>

I take issue with both arguments. While I do acknowledge the existence and experience of the Technological Sublime, I do not think it has replaced the Natural Sublime. Instead, technology has deepened both our understanding of nature and our feelings of powerlessness in the face of it. The Kepler Mission, which NASA launched in 2009, has confirmed the existence of more than 2,300 exoplanets orbiting around stars, of which 260 are within a habitable zone for life<sup>4</sup>. The Kepler Mission has shown us just how

1 Lauren Rabb, “19th Century Landscape - The Pastoral, The Picturesque and the Sublime”, October 9, 2009-March 2010, The University of Arizona Museum of Art, <http://artmuseum.arizona.edu/events/event/19th-century-landscape-the-pastoral-the-picturesque-and-the-sublime>

2 Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, (Allworth Press, 1999), page 126

3 Bruno Latour, “Reset Modernity - The Field Book,” Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, 2016, page 28. <https://eu.spb.ru/images/rector/FIELD-BOOK-RESET-MODERNITY-GB.pdf>

4 “NASA Exoplanet Archive,” NASA Exoplanet Science Institute, accessed April 25, 2018, [https://exoplanetarchive.ipac.caltech.edu/docs/counts\\_detail.html](https://exoplanetarchive.ipac.caltech.edu/docs/counts_detail.html)

common even our planet is. Similarly, the Large Hadron Collider, which is the largest machine ever constructed, was built to probe nature on the smallest scale. In 2013, teams at the LHC discovered the existence of the Higgs Field and the mass of the Higgs Boson particle, both crucial factors in the Standard Model of Particle Physics.

Over time our conception of nature has changed. Nature is no longer just the cinematic view of a wild storm or volcanic eruption. It is also that which is beyond the Earth itself, and includes the infinitely small and invisible particles that make up the world around us. There are unseen forces acting upon us in every moment of our lives. This is nature. And our awareness of these forces is only made possible by modern inventions. Modern technology has provided a lens through which we can see and understand the natural world more intimately than ever before. And with this complexity comes a staggering amazement about and fear of all that we cannot see.

At the same time, Latour is right to be concerned about how human beings are affecting the global ecosystem. However his conclusion, that this has ruined the sublime experience, is wrong in my view. Even as human beings exert great force upon the Earth’s ecosystems, there is a difference between the individual experience of the sublime and the experience of being a part of a destructive species. Witnessing a storm or volcano can still be powerfully exhilarating because the forces generating those events can still end an individual’s life.

My work is a reinterpretation of the genre of landscape and the Natural Sublime. While my works may give the impression of being pictorial and representational, they depart from spatial perspective—a hallmark of landscape painting—and present a textural field equally present at any point. Similarly, my series *Sky Well*, implies distance through the juxtaposition of two different visual textures (rock and the night sky). But in actuality there is neither modulation of form nor depiction of a horizon. Both sky and earth are equally present.

The work also separates itself from the history of painting by moving away from the traditional substrate and frame of a painting: the picture plane. In works by Poussin and Corot the edges of the canvas act like a window into the world of the painting. The pieces in *Sky Well* determine their own picture plane and become self-contained. The outer rim of the drawing becomes a self-framing edge. This separates the piece from the wall, giving it autonomy. In this way, the work becomes both an object and an image.

My work is also ephemeral and temporary. For works of this size, they are rendered on a very delicate material, paper, and are thus fragile monuments to the world. The works on the wall are likewise temporary. They consist of many layers of prints affixed to the wall in a circular form, surrounding a night sky painted directly onto the wall. The eventual destruction of these pieces is built into their creation.

Through its immense scale, ephemerality, and lack of visual spatial perspective, my work separates itself from the aesthetics of pastoral and picturesque categories of landscape painting to participate in the contemporary conversation about representation, abstraction, and materiality. In doing so, I seek to reinterpret the subject of the Natural Sublime in painting.

Like Painting, the Natural Sublime cannot die.



## Looking Down / Looking Up

Observing and experiencing the world around us is key to evoking the Natural Sublime. I frequently draw from museum objects, study textures from the landscape, and observe the stars and planets through a telescope or binoculars. I pay particular attention to the *feeling* that attends my observation of these objects, landscapes, and night skies, and synthesize that impression into my work and compositions.

My newest works navigate between two spaces—the near and the far—and between two scales—the microscopic and the macroscopic. This combining of opposites first began in my series of large-scale drawings of the ground, which included works like *Dark Ground* and *To and From the Ground*. In these works I flip the spatial plane of the ground up from its mundane location beneath our feet and present the viewer with a distorted perspective of the earth: a landscape without perspective or form.

This reorientation of the ground plane from floor to wall, along with the built up visual texture of the drawings, opens new viewing possibilities. Due to its large size, *Dark Ground* can only be seen as a whole image from several paces away. From this distance, one can discern a ghostly abstracted figure in the field of dense texture, which suggests a sense of mass and of visual stillness. Yet the density of the texture invites the eye to view the drawing more closely. As distance shrinks, stillness is broken by the stormy activity of endless marks, mimicking the highly varied texture of the dry, cracked ground. This movement of walking close to peer in and then stepping back to see the whole allows the viewer to be the navigator, moving between the near and the far, experiencing the drawing from two different perspectives. In doing so, the viewer alternates between the illusion of stillness and stability and the sometimes disturbing reality of constant movement that characterizes all matter. As the poet John O'Donohue describes it in *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*:

One of the great illusions of human vision is that there is stillness, yet what seems still to our eye, is in fact never still. The whole physical world is in a state of permanent vibration and change.<sup>5</sup>

Drawings like *Swan Stone* offer different possibilities for reception. As earthbound creatures we live our lives within the bounds of the sky and the ground, constantly beneath the one and above the other. The experience of existing between two vast realms involves a perpetually distorted perspective of both: we experience the ground as flat and solid beneath us, and the sky as a giant, domed ceiling above, yet neither realm actually has those characteristics. The earth, in fact, is curved beneath us and in a constant state of change (as the geological record shows) and sky is simply our window into the vast universe.

As we look out and away from ourselves, the ground and sky recede in our vision, never coming together except at an illusory horizon. Meanwhile, the physical movements we make to observe both can intensify feelings of distance, as we tilt or bow our heads away from one and towards the other. When we see the ground we are reminded that we belong to the terrestrial world. By contrast, the vastness of the sky, its intangibility as a boundless non-site, inspires feelings of foreignness and mystery. For thousands of years, the night sky, with its blanket of stars, has driven people to attempt to capture it in their sights, ascribing animal and human shapes to unrelated groupings of stars and linking these constellations to the myths that give our human existence meaning.

A piece like *Swan Stone* brings these two familiar yet separate realms of sky and ground together. Framed by a tactile, printed rock surface, the circular composition of *Swan Stone* acts as a portal to the distant and intangible stars. The drawing depicts the constellation Cygnus as it extends across the Milky Way in the autumn sky. Season holds particular significance, as Earth's orbit turns us away from the center of the Milky Way galaxy in autumn, and toward the periphery of the galaxy. During this time of the year,

astronomers can begin to see deeper into galactic space and view both neighboring and distant galaxies.

This drawing compresses two images into a bifocal view of the night sky through the lens of a stone. Both the near and far share the same visual space, thereby offering a simultaneous experience of the temporal and the infinite.<sup>5</sup>

I find it meaningful to link these two distinct realms and spaces, which appear to us so separate. As the astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan says in the series *Cosmos*,

The lives and deaths of the stars seem impossibly remote from human experience, and yet we are related in the most intimate way to their life cycles: the very matter that makes us up was generated long ago and far away in red giant stars.<sup>6</sup>

The very atoms that make up our molecules, which in turn make up our cells and every other object and living creature on earth, were produced in cosmic explosions. The stars, in fact, are our origin.

To me, the story of matter tells us how serendipitous it is to be alive and conscious. It is both humbling and awe inspiring that the material that makes up our world ever coalesced at all. To reflect deeply on the life cycle and transient nature of matter is to reconsider our ideas of solidity and permanence.

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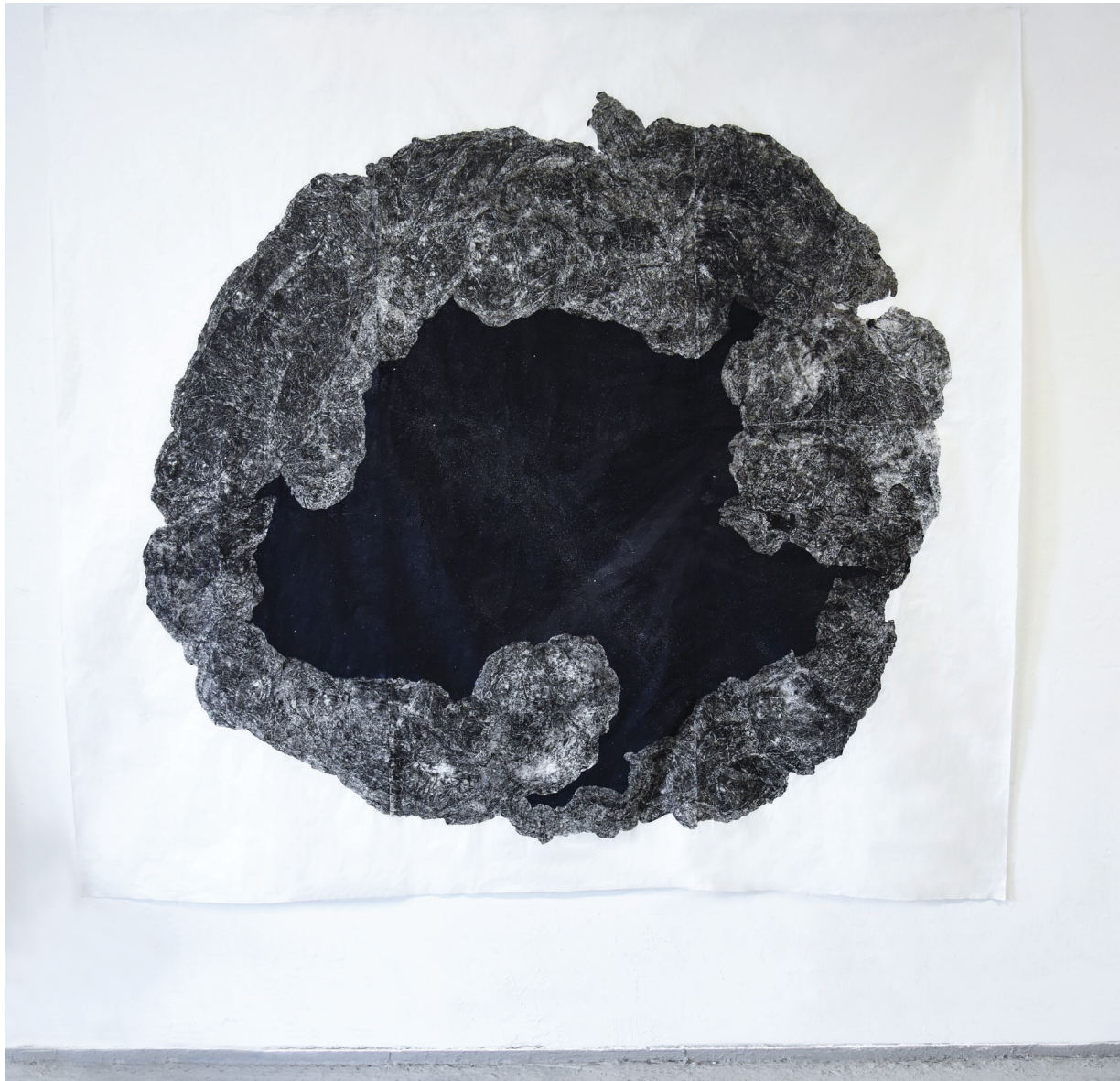
<sup>5</sup> John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, (HarperCollins, 2005), page 86

<sup>6</sup> Carl Sagan, "The Lives of Stars", Episode 9, *Cosmos*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLPkpBN6bEI>



above and right  
*Dark Ground, Dark Ground* detail  
ink on paper  
each panel 125" x 60"  
2016





above and right  
*Swan Stone*, *Swan Stone* detail  
monoprint, pastels and charcoal on mulberry paper  
105" x 120"  
2018

In *Swan Stone*, the constellation Cygnus extends across the Milky Way as it would be seen in the autumn sky.



## The Look of Labor

In my artistic practice I use a wide variety of techniques to represent the objects and places around me. My methods are various: they range from rendering the intricate detail of lava rocks in colored pencil to assembling large-scale monoprint-drawing hybrids using crushed aluminum foil as a collagraph plate. Common to these different processes is the presence of the hand in the work of art.

This evidence of the hand is essential to the representation of my subject matter. Though the sublimity of the natural world can be awe inspiring, it can also produce a sense of loneliness, even alienation: we are a part of the natural world, but “nature” as an entity does not care for us individually. Faced with the serendipitous circumstance of our existence, and our anonymity in the face of the natural world, we humans have a distinct desire to understand our place in the universe and to leave a record of our presence. Art itself is one such record.

My work has a strong sense of tactility; it has obviously been touched by the hand many times. The drawings, which are meant to embody ideas about the ephemeral nature of human existence, need this evidence of the hand to make these abstract ideas more accessible. This record of artistic labor, of the time and attention it takes to make the work, also suggests by analogy the time it has taken for these objects—these stars and stones—to come into being.

To me, the labor of the hand conveys the fundamental human desire to work, and through that work, to find understanding and create meaning. As the artist Ann Hamilton has said, “Labor helps you know a thing.”<sup>7</sup> As I work, the labor involved helps me know my subjects better. The longer I work, the better I understand why I am representing a particular stone or a given constellation in the Milky Way. My work is dense and meticulous. Whether I am tapping the 9,000<sup>th</sup> star into a night sky drawing, or layering a silkscreen texture of the ground, I am involved in a highly repetitive and conscious process. Even as my pieces grow in scale, the mark-making does not scale up. Through the intentionality of each mark I make, I hope to connect the viewer to the subject matter being represented.

I think working by hand and revealing the hand’s presence in the artistic process helps to create an intimacy between the viewer and the drawing, and between the viewer and the maker of the drawing.

## Method: Printmaking and Drawing

While labor in my work has been most evident through marks drawn directly by hand, printmaking has become an important way for me to create the visual texture of stone and rock through an indirect process. Natural textures like sedimentary rock walls are created over long periods of time through geological forces that are largely imperceptible to humans. They are the result of intense compression, violent tectonic shifts, and persistent erosion. When representing the ground or stone, I find I am disposed to employ artistic processes that mimic these geological forces in some way. Printmaking is well suited for this mimicry; it involves using many unseen processes to alter the plate (the object being printed) to make marks: the process of crumpling and compressing aluminum to make the plates, saturating the plate with ink, wiping and removing the surface of the plate, and rolling and compressing the plate through the press to register marks onto paper.

There is a sense of infinite detail when one looks at the ground or the side of a cliff. There are so many pebbles, protrusions, indentations, and scratches. Nature is an endless space. To try and represent this highly varied texture by hand is nearly impossible. To draw the ground by hand, one has to observe this chaotic surface and then interpret the texture through drawing techniques. My attempts to do this can be seen in the drawing *To and From the Ground*.

However, the collagraphic printmaking techniques I use allow me to actually create a new texture, not just interpret a texture I see. Through printmaking I give up the deep and strict control my hand has over drawing. Instead I guide the process of mark-making through the placement of each collagraph plate.

My use of printmaking mimics nature in another way: every plate is unique. Printmaking is a system of repeated mark making, but in the process I use, every plate is printed just once. In order to print these works, the plate is put under so much pressure that it is destroyed in the process of registering the print. So, like a leaf or a shell, the print itself becomes an unrepeatable, individual mark.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Hamilton, “Making, and the Spaces We Share,” interview by Krista Tippet, *On Being*, November 19, 2015, <https://onbeing.org/programs/ann-hamilton-making-and-the-spaces-we-share/>.

pages 13, 14  
*To and From the Ground*, *To and From the Ground* detail  
ink on paper  
98” x 62”  
2016



## Monuments and Ephemera

The idea of impermanence is implicit in the way I make my work and in the materials I use. Much of the imagery in my work explores objects we think of as permanent, but are not, and this temporal quality is reflected in how my drawings are made.

My large-scale drawings are very much inspired by the heroic presence of minimalist sculpture, like Richard Serra's steel plate sculptures, Donald Judd's *100 untitled works in mill aluminum* (1982-86), and Michelle Stuart's early drawing series, like *Sayreville Strata Quartet* (1976). However, while the monumental scale and aesthetic form of these artists' works influence my practice, my own work is very much rooted in pictorial image and tactility.

My work attempts to achieve the presence and visual weight of an object. I focus on creating an enveloping dark density in my drawings, which on a large scale, creates a kind of monument to nature. Yet along with the stately presence of drawings like *Hubris of Orion* or *Sister Stone*, is a fragility and temporality embodied in the materials.

In *Hubris of Orion*, I use the myth of Orion the Hunter to represent the hubris of the artistic effort to seek permanence through the act of making and representing. In Greek mythology, the hunter Orion once boasted that he was so skillful that he would kill every animal on earth. His hubris angered Gaea, who sent a creature more powerful than he, a scorpion, which stung Orion and killed him. Artemis, goddess of the hunt, pleaded with Zeus to memorialize this peerless hunter among the stars. Instead, both hunter and nemesis were hung as constellations, one chasing the other from summer to winter, never to share the same sky.

My drawing uses the image of the constellation Orion to represent the hubris of humankind. The drawing itself embodies a sense of this hubris. It is made by meticulously rubbing vine charcoal into a large sheet of unstretched and unprimed canvas, then using pastel pencil to push white powder (representing stars) into the surface of the canvas. The drawing is intentionally not protected by fixative, so that as the drawing is moved, stored, and displayed, the light of the stars will quite literally fade. To me the fragility of the drawing itself is representative of human consciousness, which will inevitably dim over time.

Fragility in the material has been important and is one of the reasons I turned to working on paper, specifically mulberry paper, which is very thin, semi-translucent, and yet strong. I find paper to be a very playful material. It has the ability to transform into a new texture, to be both strong and fragile, and to have both opaque and translucent qualities. Even on a molecular level, paper will keep a memory of how it has been rolled, folded or pressed. This quality was key to my installation *Bark Skin*, which suspended long sheets of distressed paper to recall natural textures like bark, dry ground, or skin. The dramatic verticality of the drawings, their deep and dark color, and their imposing presence positions each panel like a monument. The visual weight of the work and the fragility of the material contradict one another.

Similarly, the *Sky Well* series uses paper to image a thing much greater and imposing than the material itself. The prints that make up the works are on the semi-translucent mulberry paper and are layered multiple times to create a sense of strata but still remain physically flat. These works take on large geometric forms like spheres or portals, which compress and reduce the landscape and star-scape into flat visual texture. Self-contained and centered, these images appear heavy and dense against the white of the wall.

The scale of the images is based on the proportions of the wall, and then each work is pasted and painted

directly onto the wall's surface. The constellations represented in the central night sky appear as they would in the sky. For instance, the wall that *Sister Stone* was made on is the Eastern wall. Therefore the constellation of the Pleiades is represented as we see it in the Eastern sky. Within the series, a viewer will be able to face each cardinal direction and see constellations characteristic of each season.

This orientation of the images, to the walls they are made on and to the direction of each wall, makes these works site-determined, though not site-specific in the way of Robert Barry's or Richard Serra's works. I am drawn to the idea of art creating its own site by way of being there, but not in any permanent way. In her essay "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," curator Miwon Kwon writes: "Rather than resisting mobilization, these artists are attempting to reinvent site specificity as a *nomadic* practice."<sup>8</sup> I find Kwon's idea of a "nomadic site," which evolves as it moves from place to place, to be appealing. For my own work, some materials, like the printed paper, could be torn off the wall and used again in new pieces. Although the paper would be forever changed, I like the idea of the material's being transient between different sites and locations. However other sections of the work, like the night sky painted onto the wall, will inevitably be painted over.

Much of my work is about what it means to be present. To be here and to exist. With that knowledge comes the knowledge that we will all die. To have knowledge of our own existence means we also have knowledge that we will cease to be. Our time is temporary, and artwork that explores topics like these should embody that sense of impermanence. The pieces will eventually be covered over without a trace.

<sup>8</sup> Miwon Kwon, "Once Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997), page 100, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778809>





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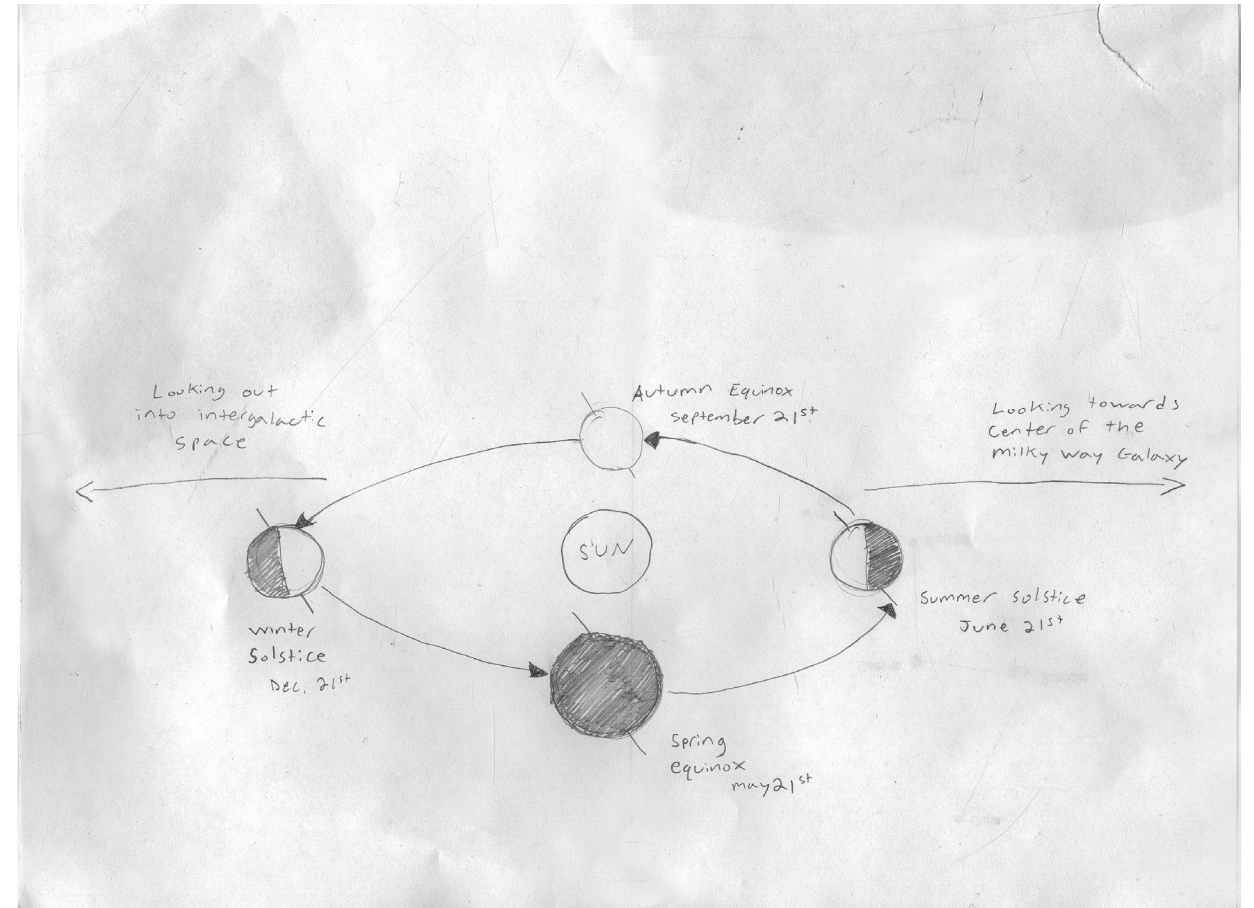
pages 17, 18  
*Hubris of Orion*  
 loose charcoal on untreated canvas  
 126" x 90"  
 2016

left  
*Bark Skin*  
 loose charcoal, gouache, distressed paper  
 each panel 125" x 60"  
 2017



# Sky Well

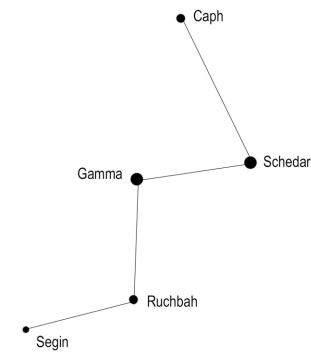
*Sky Well* is a series of four large-scale pieces that represent the orbit of the earth around the sun by way of the seasonal night sky. The constellations represented in the central night sky appear as they would during that season and are determined by the directionality of the wall they are installed on. For instance, *Sister Stone*, which depicts the Pleiades constellation as it would be seen in the Eastern sky, is situated on the East wall. Within the series, a viewer will be able to face each cardinal direction and see constellations characteristic of each season. Each work is accompanied by a star-map label, which names the constellation—and the stars within the constellation—and encourages the viewer to look for that constellation within the work.



above  
Orientation of the Earth toward the Sun and surrounding space through the seasons  
pencil on paper  
8.5" x 11"  
2018

pages 25, 26  
*Sky Well* Installation





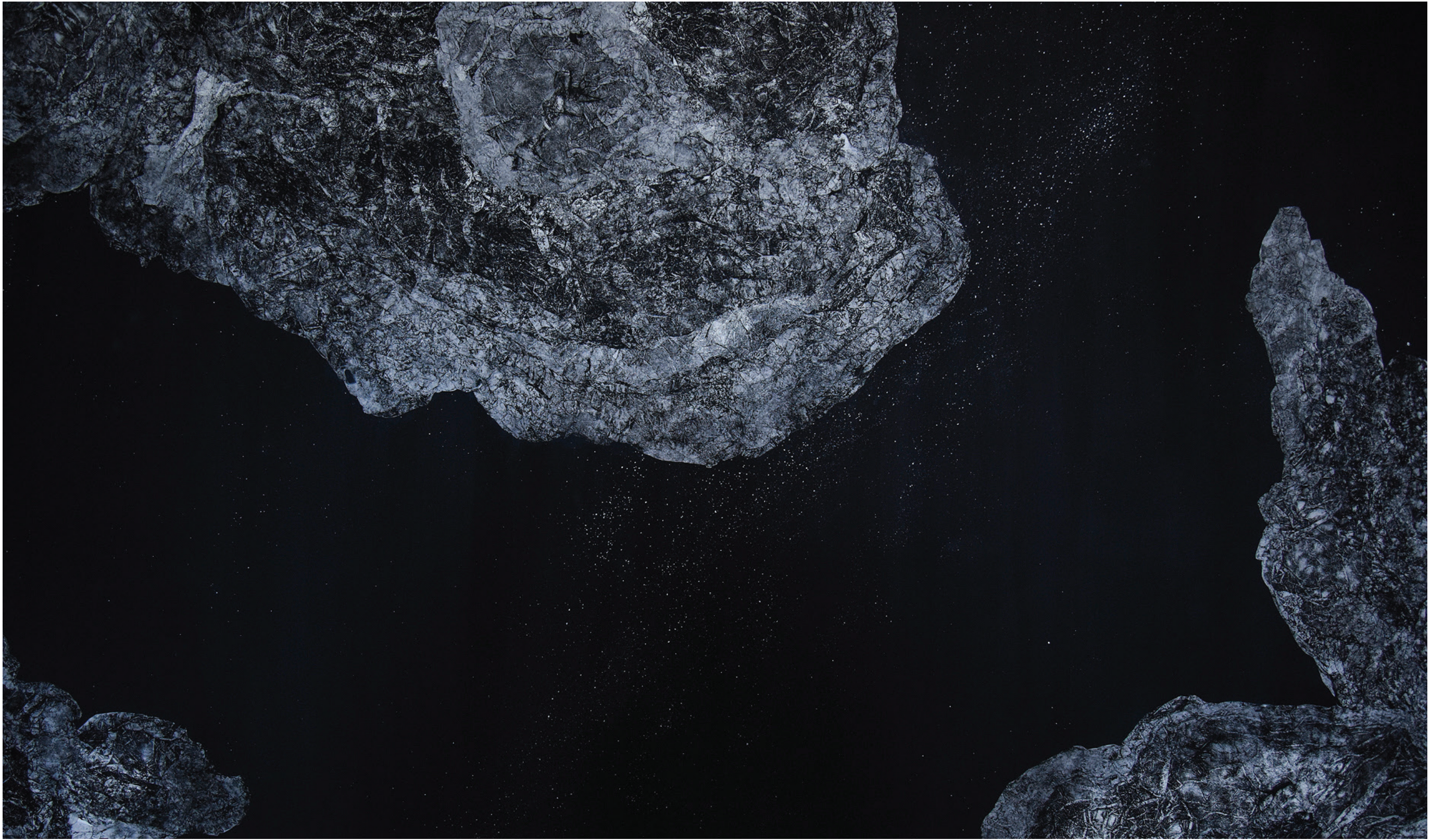
**Cassiopeia**

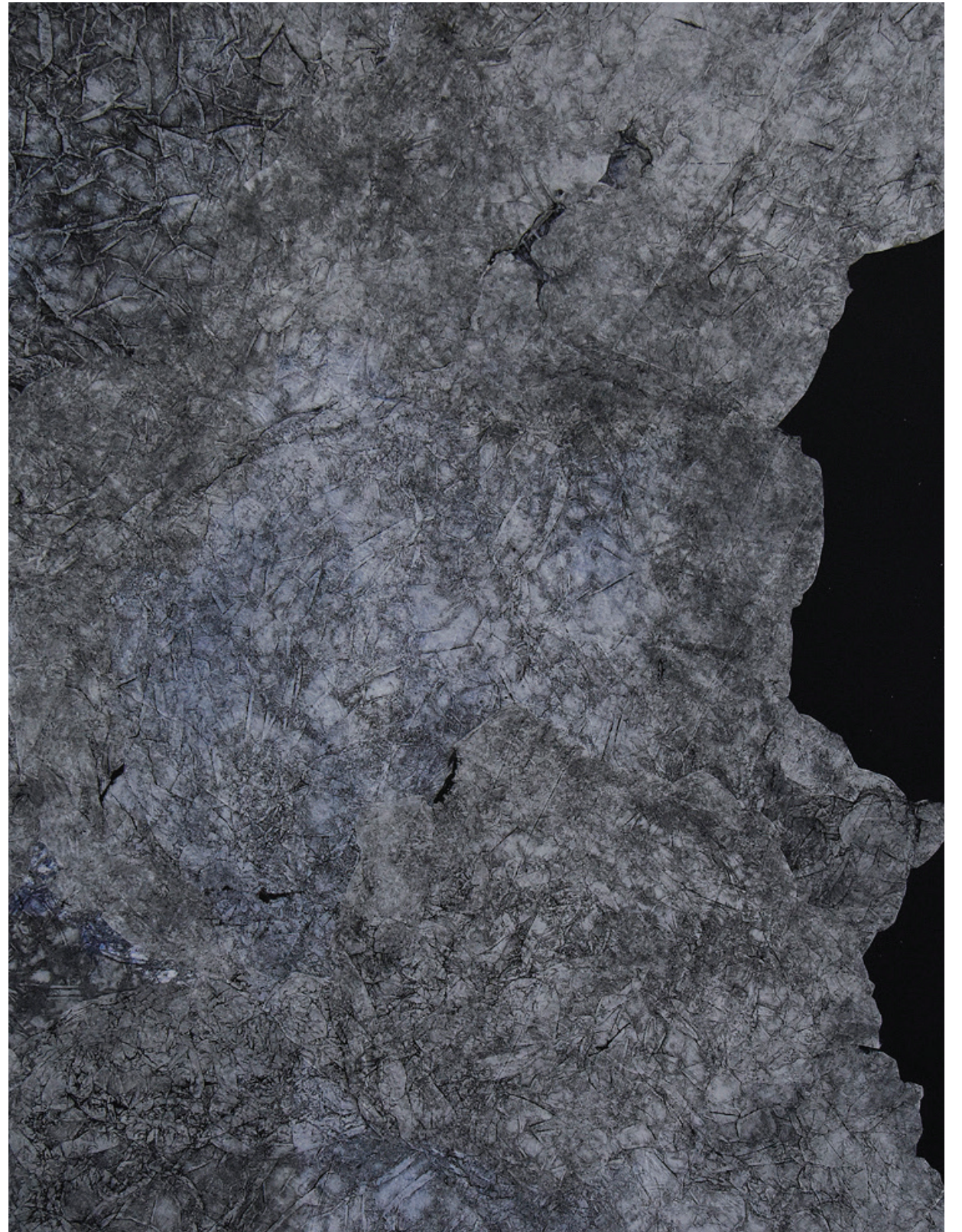
**Northeast  
Autumn**

above  
*Autumn Waters* star map label  
Star map of constellation Cassiopeia

left  
*Autumn Waters*  
monoprints on mulberry paper and acrylic paint applied  
directly onto the wall  
105" x 120"  
2018

Here, the constellation Cassiopeia extends across the Milky Way as it would be seen in the autumn sky. The season holds particular significance, as Earth's orbit begins to turn us toward the periphery of the galaxy in autumn (in summer, we face its center). This large-scale drawing invites the viewer to look into something both familiar and terrestrial - the stone - to see another realm, the celestial night sky.



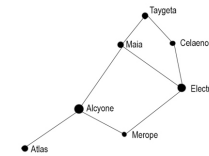


pages 29, 30  
*Autumn Waters* detail  
monoprints on mulberry paper and acrylic paint applied  
directly onto the wall  
105" x 120"  
2018

pages 31, 32  
*Sister Stone: Winter, Sister Stone: Winter* detail  
monoprints on mulberry paper and acrylic paint applied  
directly onto the wall  
84" x 84"  
2018

This piece represents the Pleiades constellation in  
the Eastern sky of the Northern hemisphere. The  
Pleiades (also known as the Seven Sisters) is a winter  
constellation and can be seen just ahead of the hunter  
Orion.

below  
*Sister Stone: Winter* star map label  
star map of Pleiades constellation

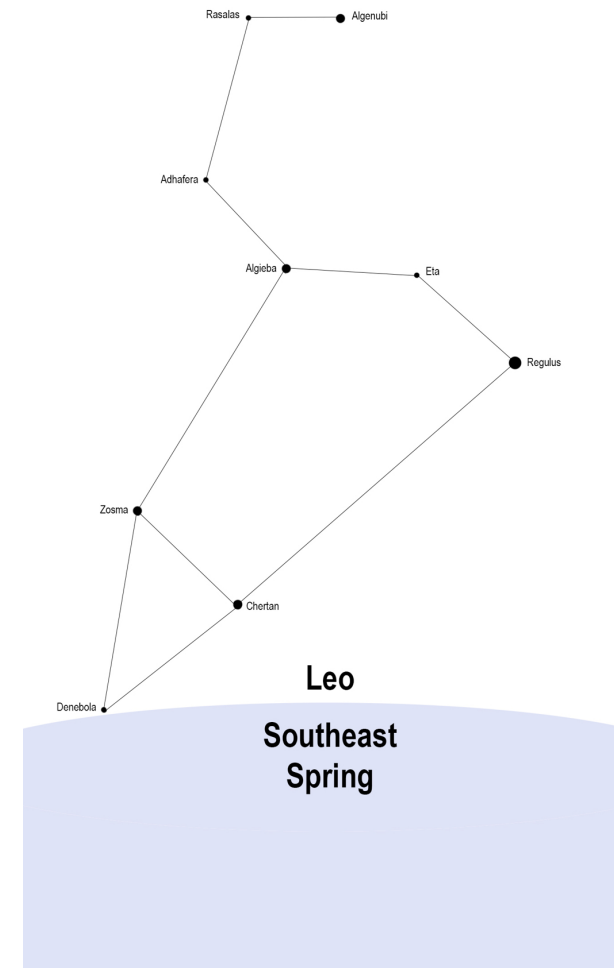


**The Pleiades**  
**Southeast**  
**Winter**



above  
*Lion Rise: Spring*  
 monoprints on mulberry paper and  
 acrylic paint applied directly onto the wall  
 168" x 120"  
 2018

This piece represents the constellation Leo in the Eastern sky of the Northern hemisphere. Leo is a spring constellation.



above  
*Lion Rise: Spring* star map label  
 map of Leo constellation

pages 37, 38  
*Lion Rise: Spring* details  
 monoprints on mulberry paper and  
 acrylic paint applied directly onto the wall  
 168" x 120"  
 2018



