



Johanna Baruch
cosmos: selected paintings

commentary by

John Beebe
Jon Morse
George Lawson

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JOHANNA BARUCH

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Johanna Baruch, *Spiratio*, 2014 (detail)

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Conceiving the Whole

John Beebe

It is often presumed that our challenge as humans is to withdraw projections from the world around us, so that we see its reality as objectively as possible. But people also rise to the occasion of being human by making projections, by allowing the empathy they have found for themselves to wend its way back into the universe and manifest as a greater caring for the world we inhabit. The alchemical principle, as above, so below, was founded on the insight that patterns and transformations working on a grand scale in the heavens are mirrored in small ways here on earth. Johanna Baruch's *Cosmos* paintings seem to live out the reverse corollary: as we discover how to accept



Illustration by Athanasius Kircher from his 1664 book *Mundus Subterraneus*.

and even to love the shared unconscious that underlies our individual egos, that hard-earned empathy for the Self can renew our vision of the universe. The cosmos that Baruch lets us see is one in which it is possible, with a certain strength of spirit, to feel at home.

Baruch's universe is bound by color, by enduring form, and an integrative capacity, yet dark matter is alive all through it. We see a world that is empty of knowable destiny, but one that appears to take pleasure in its endless unfolding. To watch her paintings is to dance along with her own wise eyes, which do not simply imagine, but manage to divine the colors and forms not just of the stars but of the raw matter that binds them. Through a direct and intimate knowing, Baruch allows us to see the universe in a more essential and organic way than scientific instruments can disclose. Her cosmos is sympathetically lovely rather than beautifully lonely.

What remains unknowable is not erased by the confidence of her brush. Her universe continues to tantalize with void, an emptiness our imaginations are invited to try to fill. The constructions that give us art, from alchemical renderings of the earth's interior (see Kircher's copperplate engraving) to the historical discoveries that make archeology cutting-edge, have always depended upon catapulting what we think we know into a strange and distant place. That we can imagine ourselves into the complexly volatile wholeness of her paintings validates the power of Johanna Baruch's work beyond its immediate appeal. These paintings push us to join her in completing a vision of our constantly changing world.

John Beebe is a Jungian analyst in practice in San Francisco. A former president of the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, he is the author of *Integrity in Depth and Energies* and *Patterns in Psychological Type* among other works.

Visioning the Cosmos: The Paintings of Johanna Baruch

Images from the cameras aboard the Hubble Space Telescope have for nearly three decades dazzled, educated and even surprised a broad audience, from meticulous researchers straining to glean minute details and insights into how the universe works to space enthusiasts enthralled by the beauty and scale of the cosmos.

Hubble itself is a triumph of the magnificent audacity of humanity to know our universe and our place in it. I've been privileged to be part of research teams observing with Hubble for the past 25 years. Over that span of time Hubble's instruments – its eyes on the universe – have been augmented and upgraded in daring astronaut servicing missions, expanding the range of colors it can access and the diagnostic information it can record from its orbital perch above the distorting effects of Earth's atmosphere. These upgrades have kept Hubble on the cutting edge of astrophysical research, so that even now when we download the latest data we continue to be treated to something new with every observation.

To me the most powerful aspect of Hubble's imagery is the novel clarity that the universe we inhabit is not static but alive and dynamic. Capturing titanic galactic collisions, exploding stars, swirling planetary weather systems, and the nonintuitive pangs of stellar birth, the sharp details revealed in these resplendent digital portraits deepens our appreciation of the chaotic processes comprising our cosmic origins. We further our understanding across a broad swath of astrophysical topics and address quantitatively the great mystery of whether life is abundant in the universe.

The paintings of Johanna Baruch capture this dynamic movement and range across some of the most profound questions that humanity can contemplate. Her 'Cosmos Series' engulfs the viewer in an adventurous journey of extreme physics and emotional extension capable of transporting even the most stoic stargazer through the vast structures, voids, turbulence, explosions, accretions, outflows and tidal tails with invigorating curiosity and inspired passion. As she has described, she doesn't just recreate what appears in a Hubble image, but goes beyond to translate astrophysical concepts into brilliant renderings that connect to our senses and tap into our sense of awe and wonder.

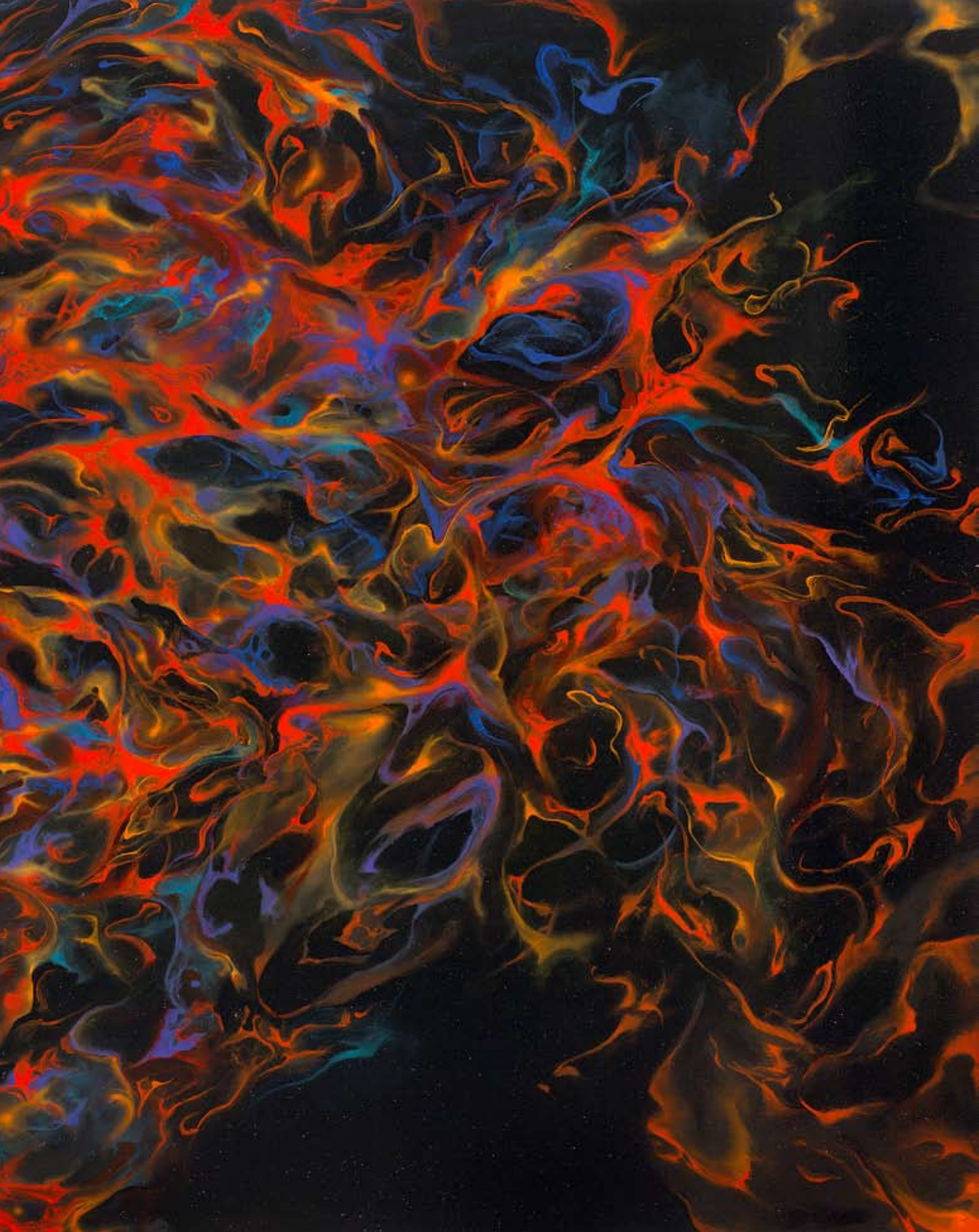
I'm an unabashed admirer of her intuitive genius, her ability to capture vastness and complexity but also transmit an organic sense of life throughout her artistic creations. They appear both cosmic and terrestrial, expressly nebulous but also familiar, grandiose yet floral, structured but with the unpredictability of fire, reflecting vast scales that challenge our intellect while also projecting more speculative themes such as a universe teeming with ubiquitous life. It also rewards the viewer to dive into the minute details in the paintings; these add a layer of dessert-like complexity that garners extra meaning when you realize that such specks may represent entire solar systems or galaxies. It compels you to look for long periods to make sure you haven't missed anything – just like when looking at a glorious Hubble image!

—Jon Morse, PH. D.

Dr. Jon Morse is CEO and Chair of BoldlyGo Institute, and was formerly Director of Astrophysics in the Science Mission Directorate at NASA Headquarters, Senior Policy Analyst in the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy, and Project Scientist for the Cosmic Origins Spectrograph aboard the Hubble Space Telescope.



Hubble Telescope image courtesy NASA/ STSsl



Johanna Baruch: Cosmos

George Lawson

For almost ten years, San Francisco-based painter Johanna Baruch (originally from New York) has been occupied with a series of meticulously crafted, jewel-surfaced paintings inspired by images of the deep reaches of outer space: stylized renderings of star clusters, bursting novae, floating giants and celestial dust. The series has grown into quite a substantial body of work, and although until recently limited in exposure to the San Francisco Bay Area, these paintings are starting to enjoy a wider audience.

At first glance, the Cosmos paintings might appear more simply beautiful than the art world would likely tolerate, given that forum's propensity for self-reference and its skepticism of any work that is overly accessible. But with consideration, Baruch's lush handling seems to echo the undeniable wonder one feels at the discovery of new worlds, the newly charted realm she has chosen as her motif, one that might strike the viewer as more eccentric than it really is. The canon of Western art has historically categorized subject matter in painting as broadly falling into four primary modes: portrait, landscape, still-life, and genre, the latter dealing with groups of figures as in allegorical or religious narratives. With a little stretch of the imagination these four hold as well even for abstract painting. Although the first thing early ponderers gazed at with any intent must have been the deep heavens, somehow this most fundamental of motifs didn't make it in amongst the canonical defaults. The impulse is there. I think of the Venetians. Elisabetta Marchioni's still-lives are like cosmologies, but even Venetian skies remain by association, earthbound. This constraint may simply have been for lack of telescopes. Galileo was an accomplished draftsman, as evidenced by his renderings of the phases of the moon. Had he been a painter, we might have inherited "extraterrestrial-scape" or "celeste" as our fifth primary painting category.

Given the technology at hand, the study of the heavens should be common subject matter, the archetype being a natural, and long overdue as a motif. Baruch seems to be doing her best to take up the slack, even if she is one of the art world's best kept secrets. She uses the images of deep space as a catalyst, with the same license enjoyed by artists working in the other four modes, and like many painters from Vermeer forward, she often works from photographic sources, specifically the groundbreaking (literally) images taken by the Hubble Space Telescope.

Baruch paints in translucent oil and alkyd glazes on the smooth grounds of wood or aluminum panels, building up images of luminescent gloss, saturated color, and surprising depth. She exploits the undertones of the oil medium to the same effect that Van Eyck did when oils were a technical breakthrough, that is, to intimate through their transparency the overlap of the visual and the envisioned worlds, the place where spirit and matter meet.

The German mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, *"The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which he sees me."* The implications of this pronouncement are at the core of Baruch's painting, in the way she mirrors the forms of microscopic and macroscopic scales, and to the extent that any searching outer gaze turns the eye inevitably inward. She not only paints cosmos; she paints cosmology. In her own words:

"When I first saw the photographs taken by the Hubble Space Telescope, something profound shifted inside of me, as if I had suddenly found something I knew intimately, yet didn't know I had lost. The pictures of deep space beckoned to me, or rather, its gravity pulled me inexorably into it. The beauty, color and movement, the astonishing science and ultimate mystery of the cosmos were like songs that called to be sung. And so I did, through paint."

Above she describes her inspiration with the original source material. Next she goes on to hint at the filter of her own sensibility, through which these fantastic but nonetheless photorealistic images are transformed, and achieve their second life:

"I do not paint the cosmos literally, but study the science and look at the photographs until something hits me viscerally, whether these are the spectacular images of what the telescope captures, such as swirling nebulae, stars being born, galaxies colliding or supernovae exploding; or more theoretical concepts such as black holes, dark energy, the big bang or the cosmic web. These all live as a moving force inside me that guides my paintbrush, directs my choices and brings itself to life on my panels. I begin with a sense of vast emptiness inside me, and the act of painting creates a universe itself."

Part of the transformation from the original photograph in Baruch's painted treatment is graphic: what is captured by the camera as finely distributed clusters tends to coalesce in her handling, becoming globular and elastic. The original colors become more intentional, more saturated and pronounced, with keyed juxtapositions of complimentary hues and monochromes. The photographed shapes and light traces get stretched in her hands, becoming more referential and associative, perhaps reminding us of primordial or nautical life, and so on. Then, another part of the transformation has to do with her framing of the image, such that it is more indicative of the whole than would be a mere swatch cut out of a larger fabric. Her result is a pictorial rendering that is decidedly iconic, memorable, and with a binding internal structure. In spite of dealing with imagery that is inherently dispersed, Baruch achieves a singularity that is almost totemic. However, it is the very nature of her focus itself, rather than any bending, compositional anticipation of the panel's edge, that imbues her fields with the centrifugal fix of a still point at the middle of a rallying orbit.

There's a short poem by Wallace Stevens, *Anecdote of the Jar*, which aptly illuminates this power of a focal point to transform an environment, directly relevant to Baruch's enterprise:

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.*

*It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

Like nothing else on earth, one might say. Baruch's real subject matter, and the reason that her images are painstakingly rendered rather than given over to gestural abandon, her real motif, is genesis, the moment things start. The Creation. Perhaps this impetus is lying in wait behind all painting modes—the portrait, the still life, the landscape—but in Johanna Baruch's case, her subject matter, her methodology, and her motive are all of a piece, the eye that sees indistinguishable from the eye that is seen, and the vista painted inseparable from the vista to which the finished painting opens access.



plates



Prima Materia, 2009
oil on wood (diptych)
2 panels, overall 34 x 80 in. (86.36 x 203.2 cm)
cat. no. JOB033

Metaxy, 2015
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 48 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB001



Parousia, 2015
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 48 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB002



Apeiron, 2018
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 48 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB003



Illud Tempus, 2016
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 48 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB004



Ex Nihilo, 2018
oil, alkyd on aluminum
46 x 46 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB005



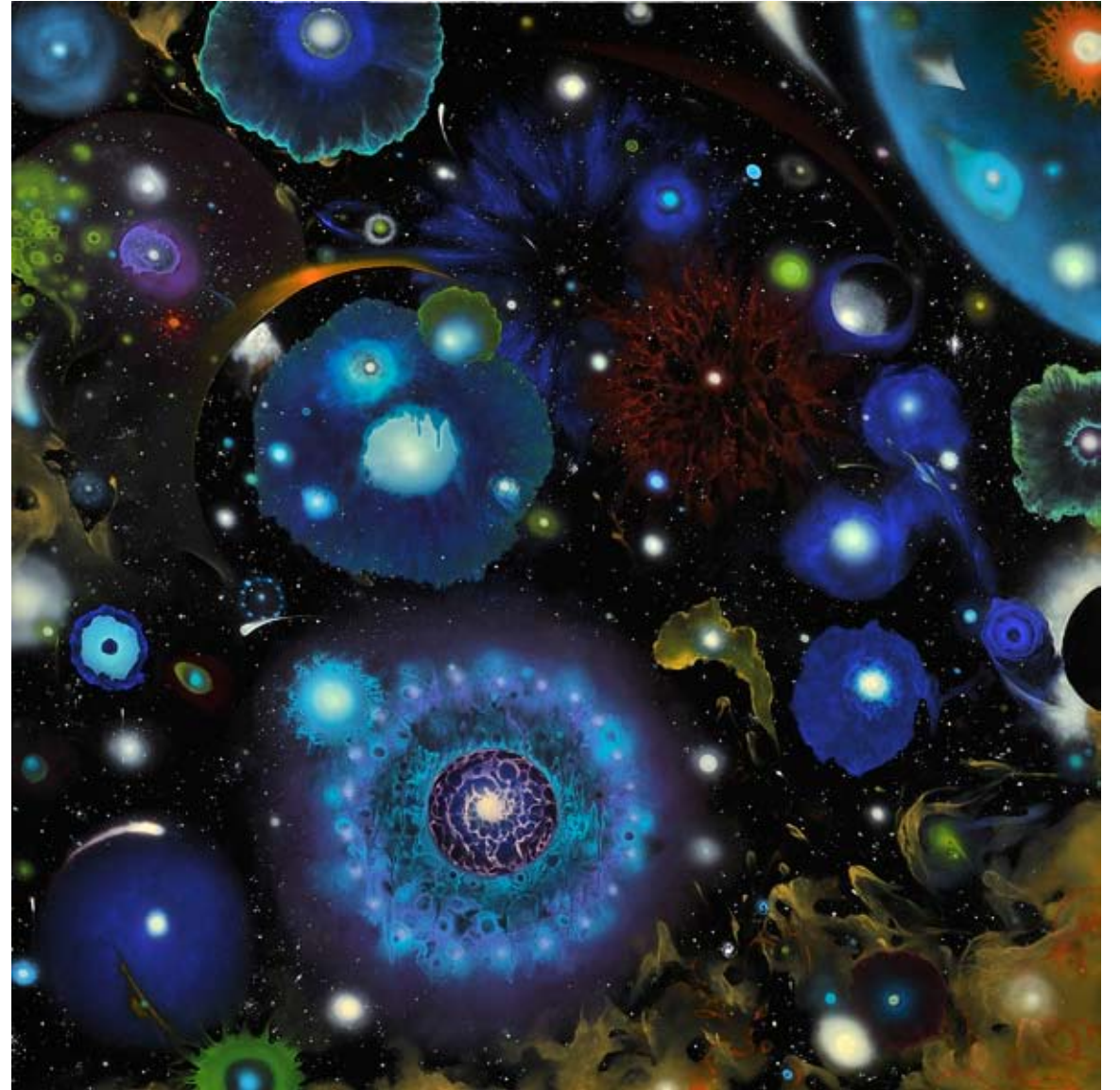
Adytum, 2017
oil, alkyd on aluminum
36 x 36 in. (91.44 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB006



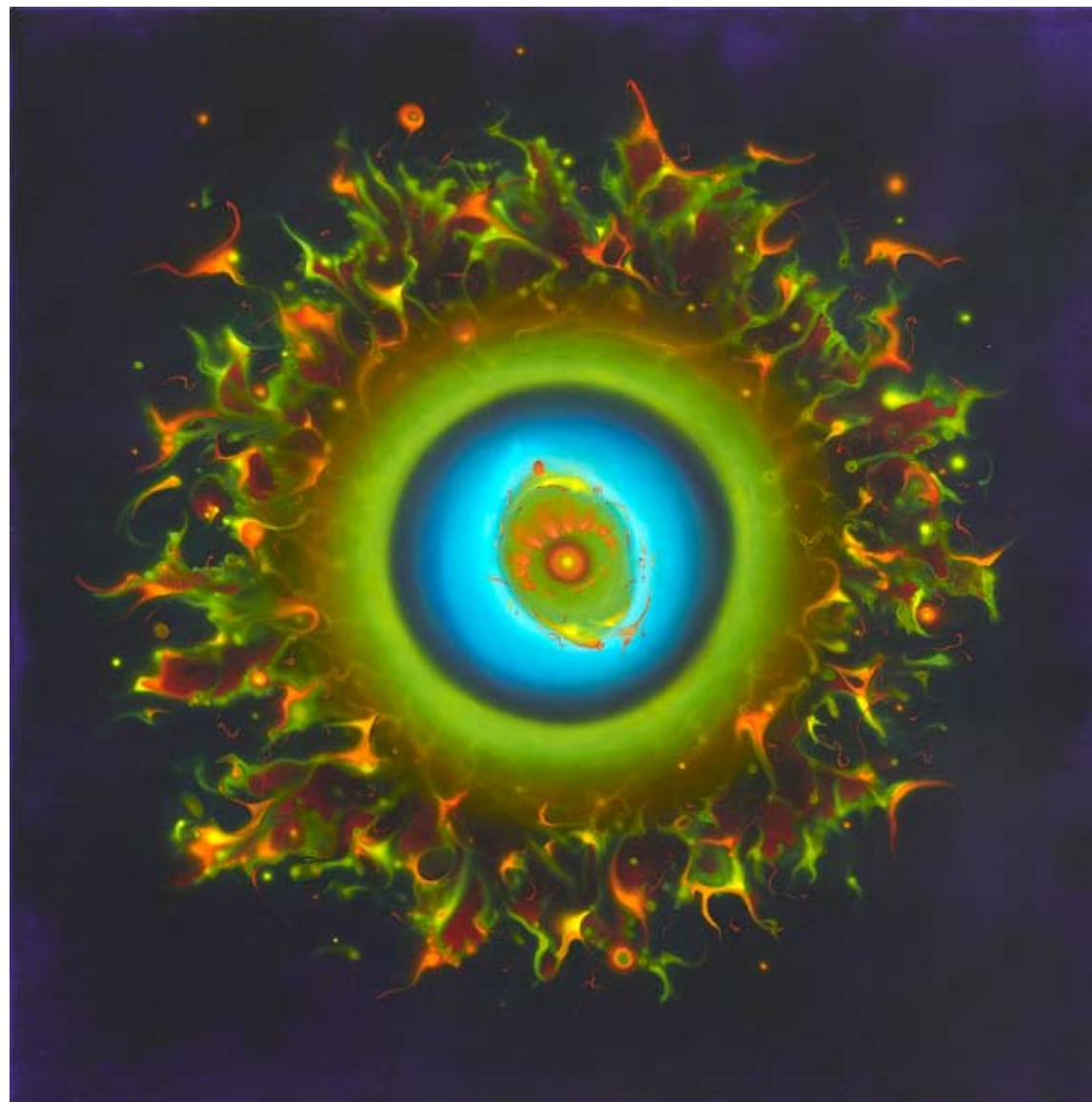
Correspondentia II, 2018
oil, alkyd on aluminum
36 x 36 in. (91.44 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB007



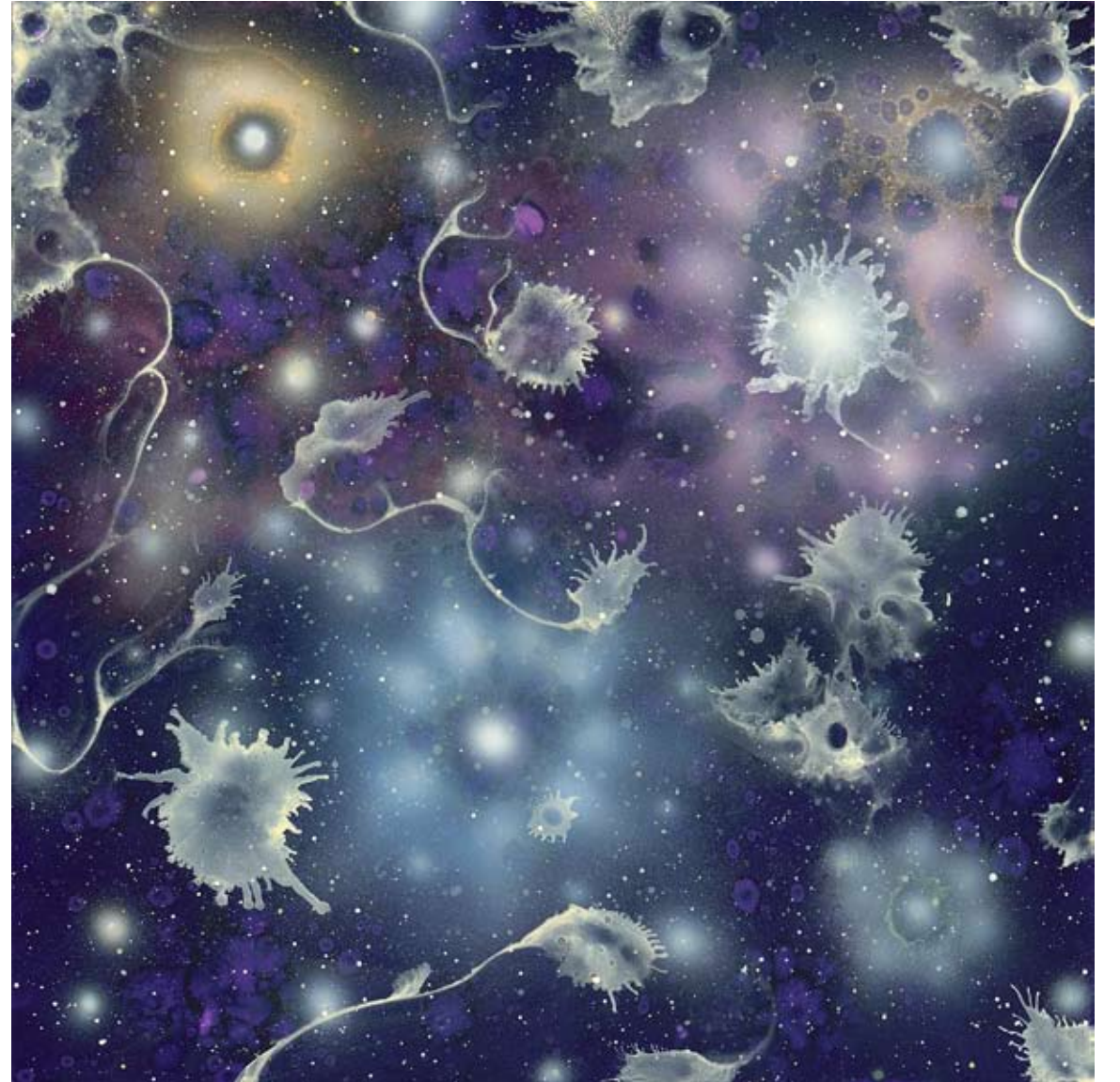
Conjunctions, 2012
oil, alkyd on wood
36 x 36 in. (91.44 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB008



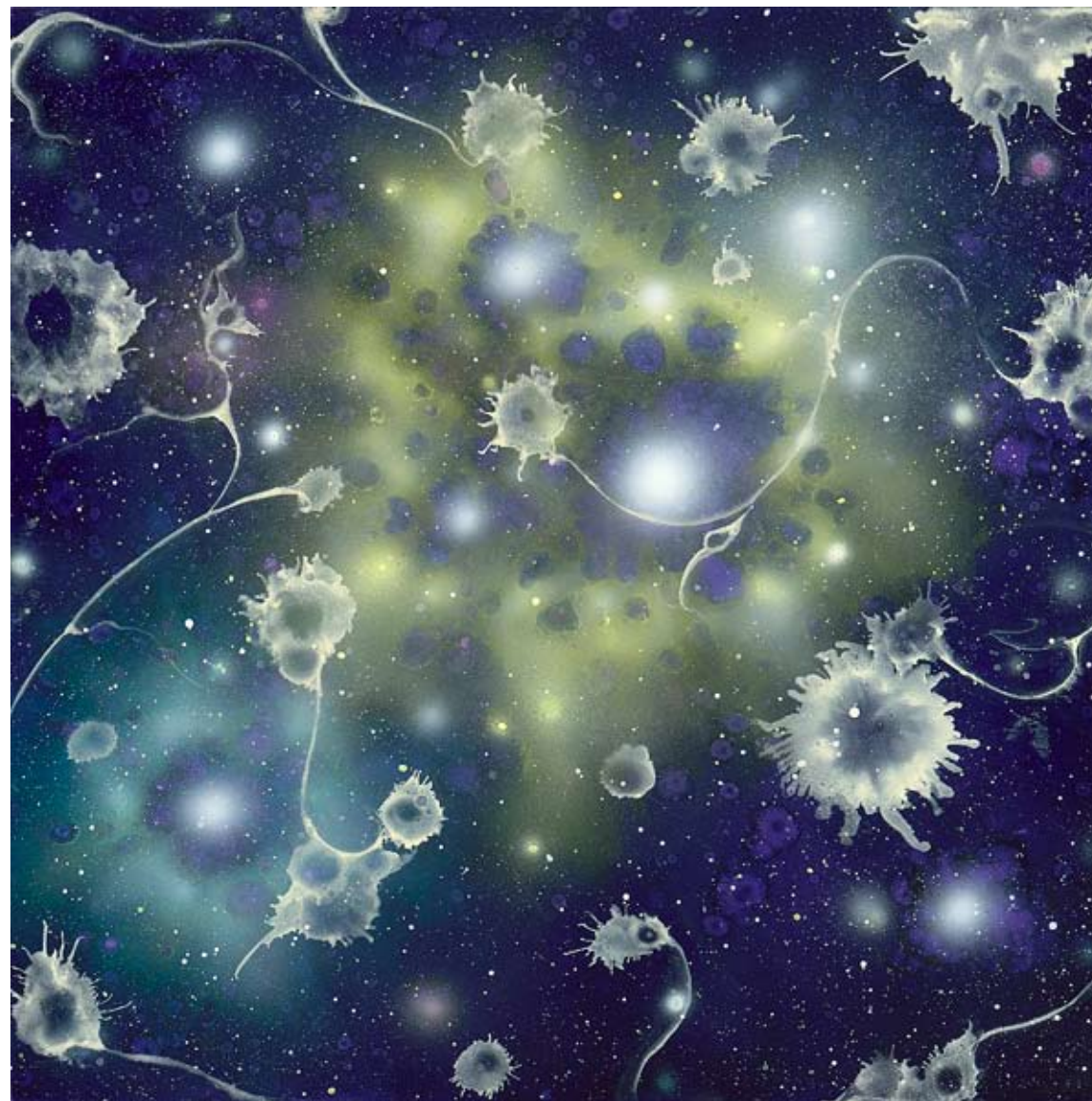
Ortus, 2012
oil, alkyd on wood
48 x 48 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB009



Solve et Coagula I, 2018
oil, alkyd on wood
16 x 16 in. (40.64 x 40.64 cm)
cat. no. JOB010



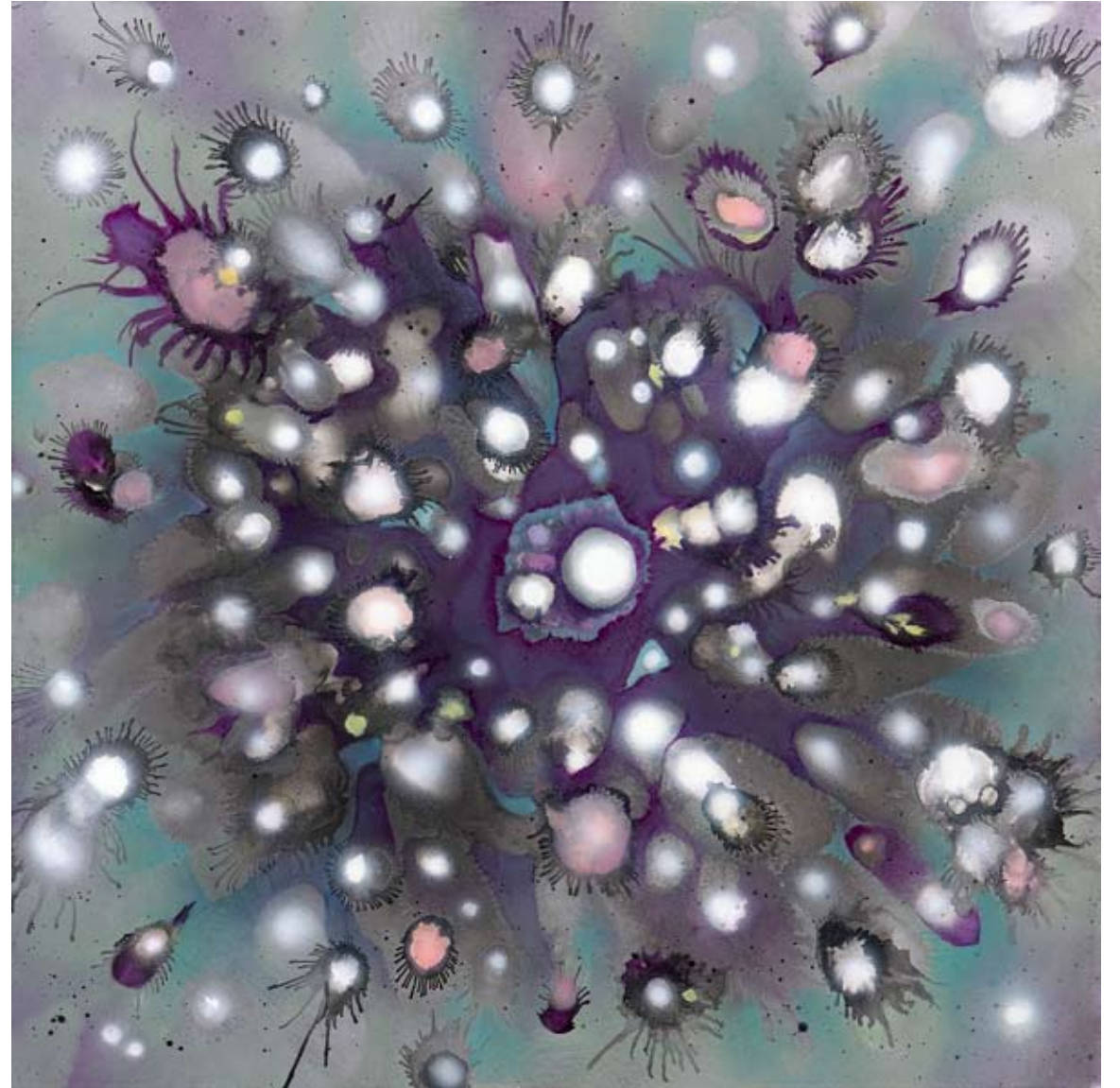
Solve et Coagula II, 2018
oil, alkyd on wood
16 x 16 in. (40.64 x 40.64 cm)
cat. no. JOB011



Kenosis I, 2018
oil, alkyd on wood
16 x 16 in. (40.64 x 40.64 cm)
cat. no. JOB012



Ubrei, 2018
oil, alkyd on wood
16 x 16 in. (40.64 x 40.64 cm)
cat. no. JOB013



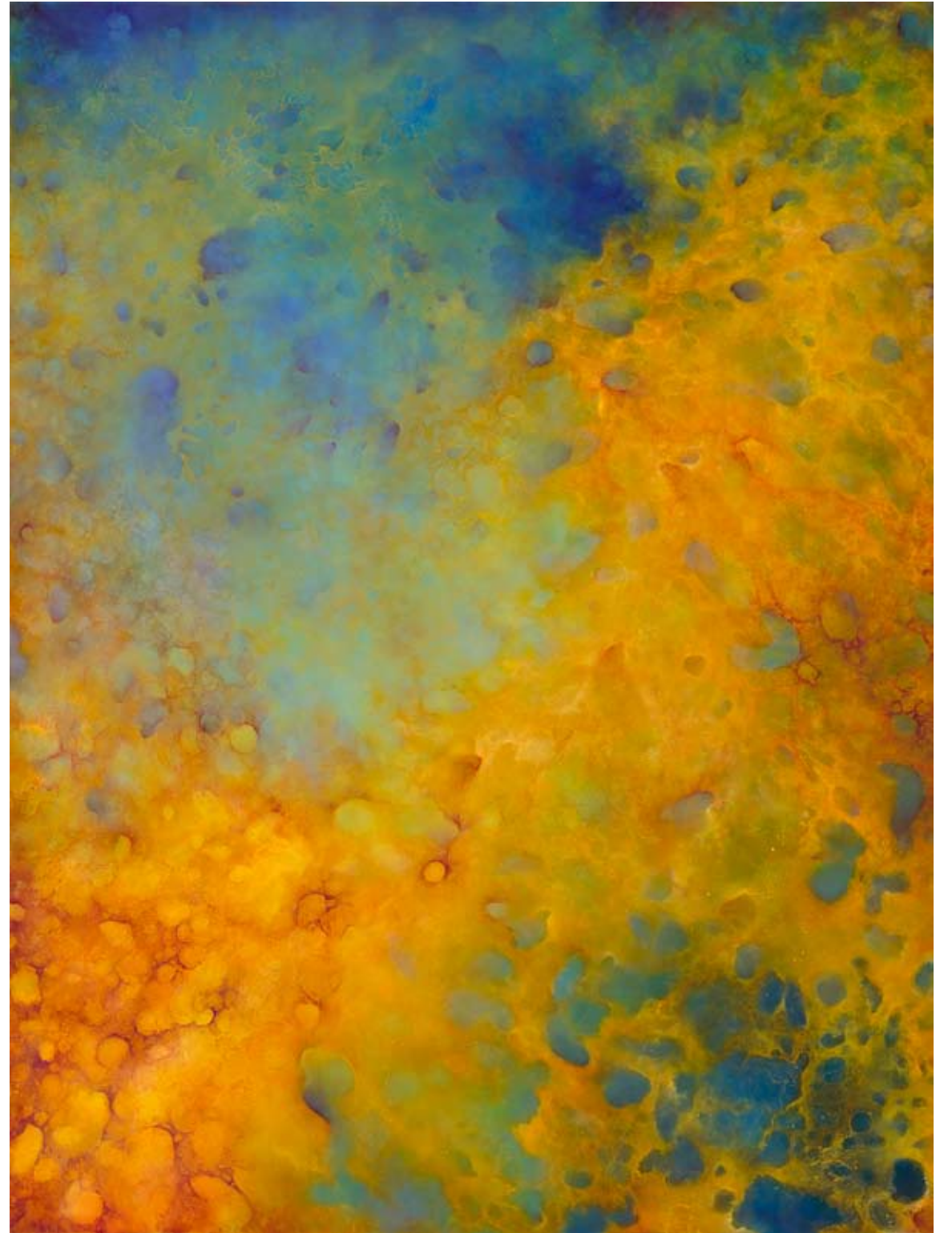


Nostro Mari, 2010
oil, alkyd on wood (diptych)
2 panels, overall 40 x 86 in. (101.6 x 213.36 cm)
cat. no. JOB014

Amorphia, 2012
oil, alkyd on wood
48 x 48 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB015



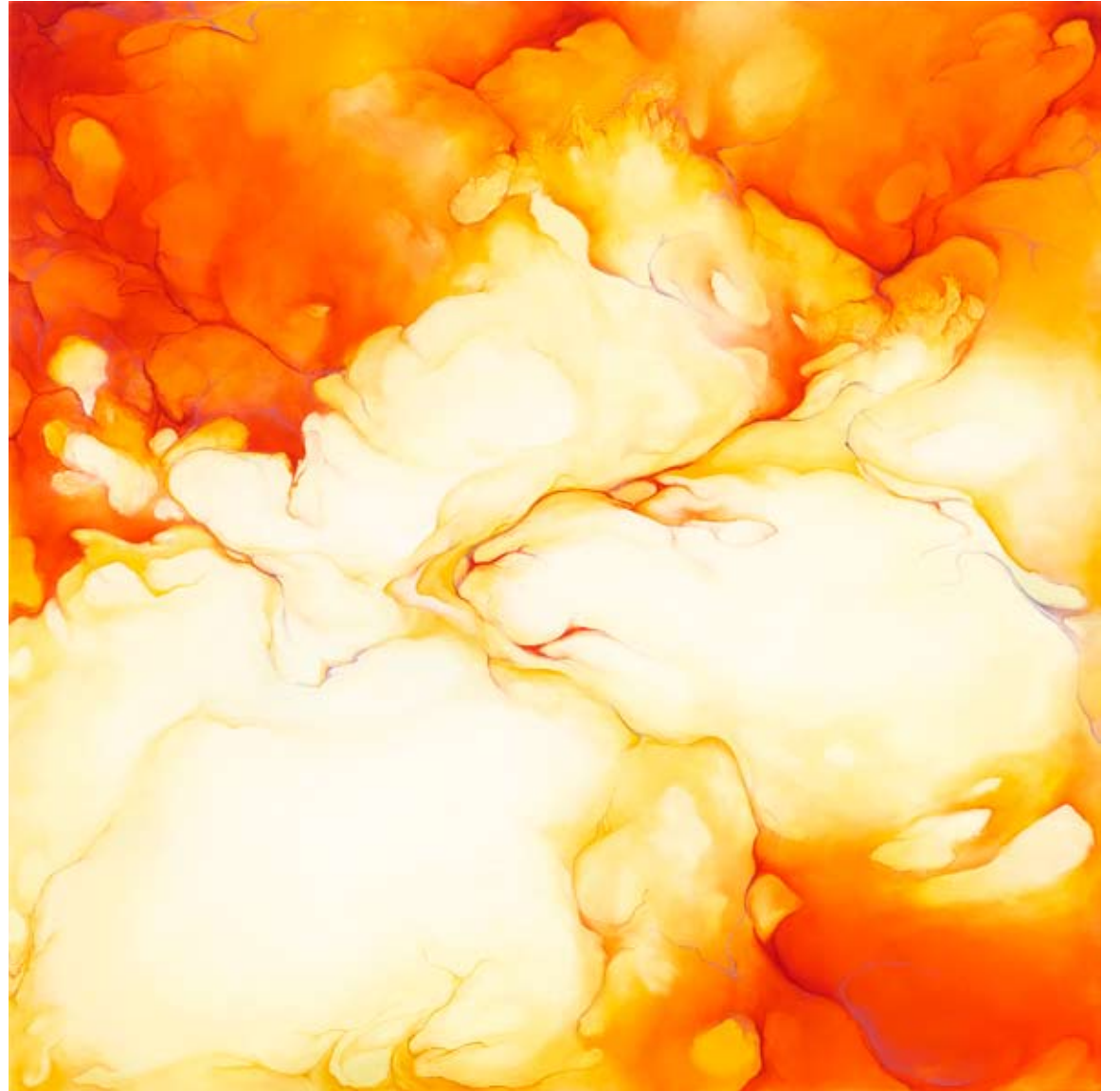
Entheos, 2018
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 36 in. (121.92 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB017



Initiare, 2015
oil, alkyd on wood
40 x 40 in. (101.6 x 101.6 cm)
cat. no. JOB018



Eudaimonia, 2015
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 48 in. (121.92 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB019



Exstasis, 2015
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 36 in. (121.92 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB020



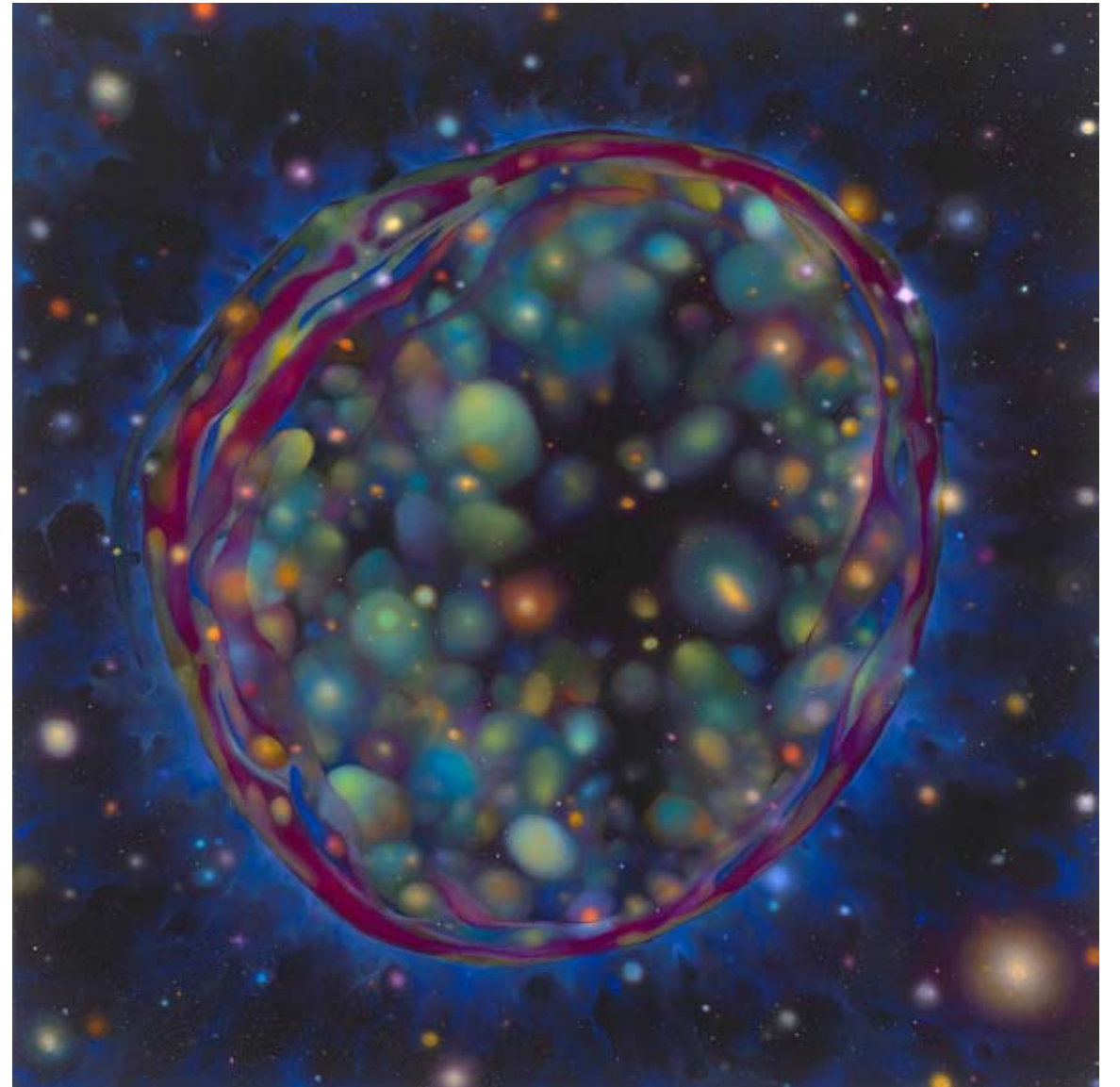


Kairos, 2015
oil, alkyd on aluminum (diptych)
2 panels, overall 36 x 84 in. (101.6 x 213.36 cm)
cat. no. JOB021

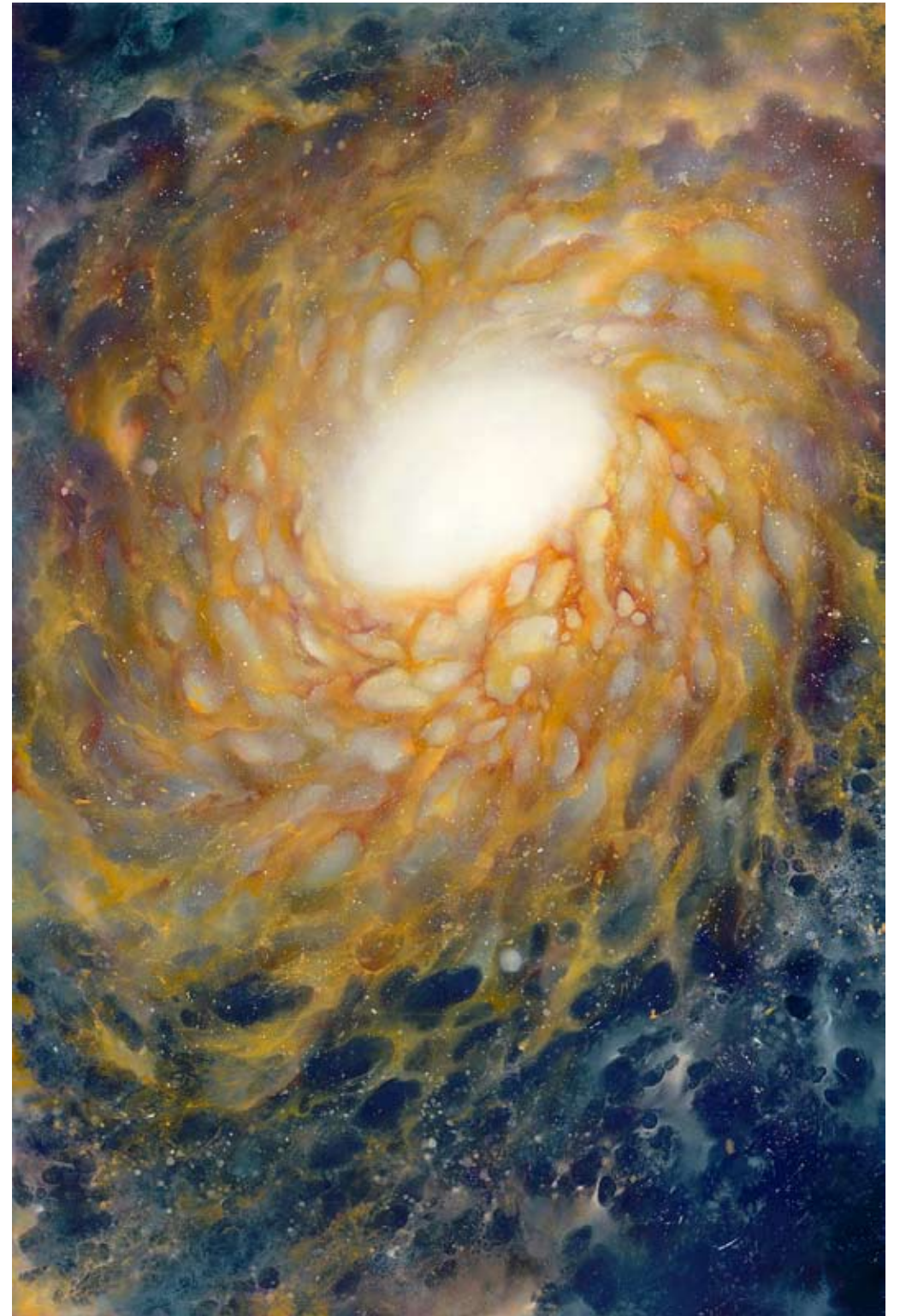
Da'at, 2017
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 36 in. (121.92 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB022



Gravida, 2014
oil, alkyd on aluminum
36 x 36 in. (91.44 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB023



Panta Rhei, 2018
oil, alkyd on aluminum
36 x 24 in. (91.44 x 60.96 cm)
cat. no. JOB024

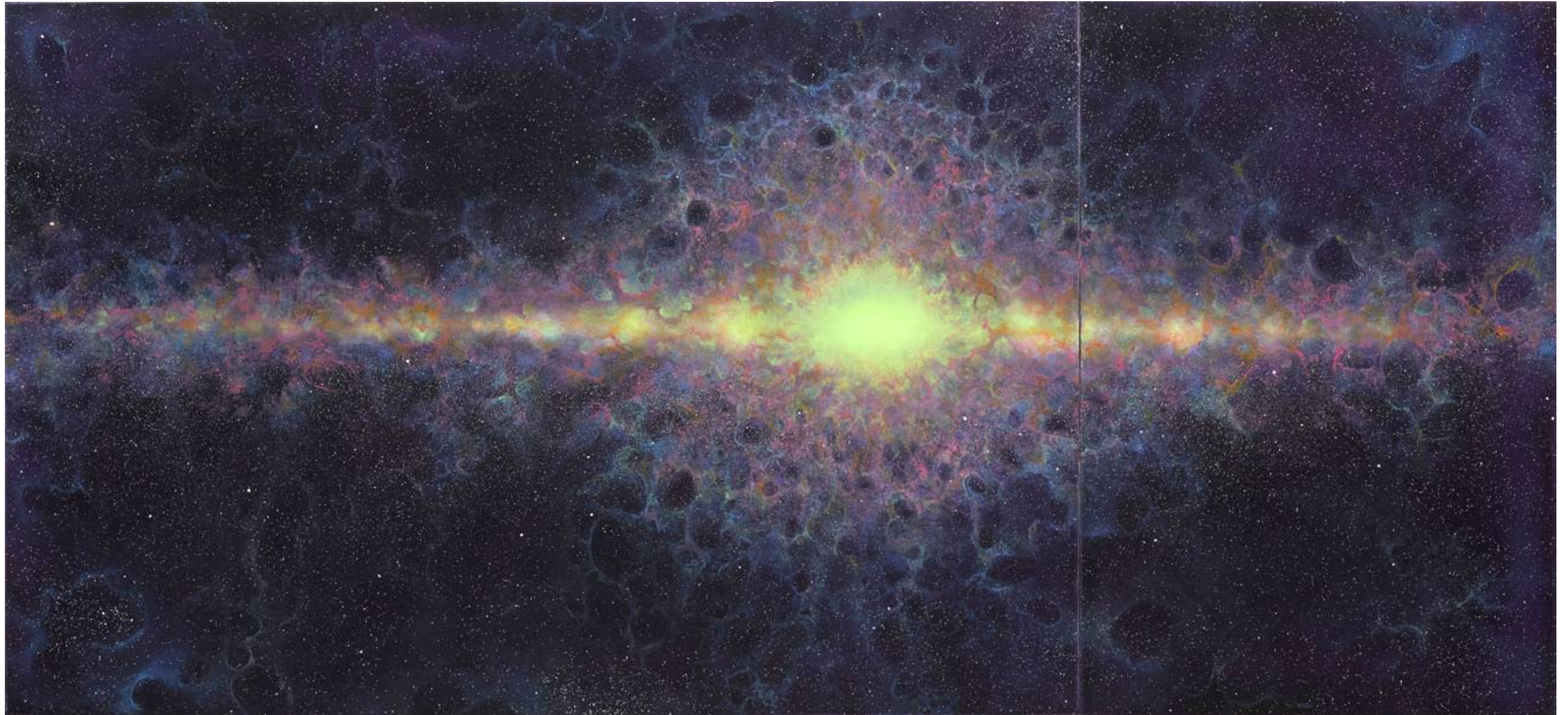


Typoi, 2016
oil, alkyd on aluminum
46 x 46 in. (116.84 x 116.84 cm)
cat. no. JOB025



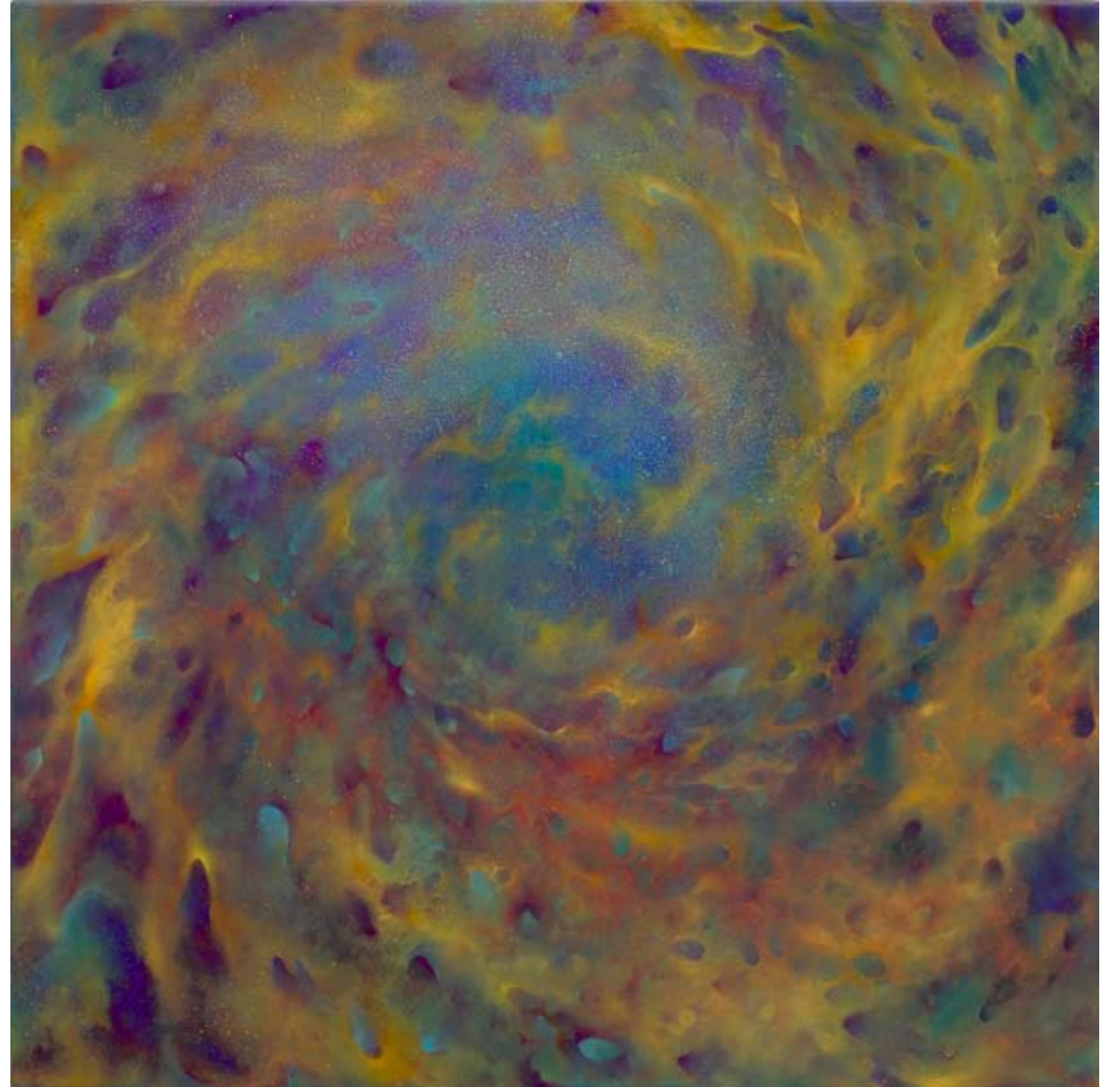


Enthymesis, 2013
oil, alkyd on wood
36 x 48 in. (91.44 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB026

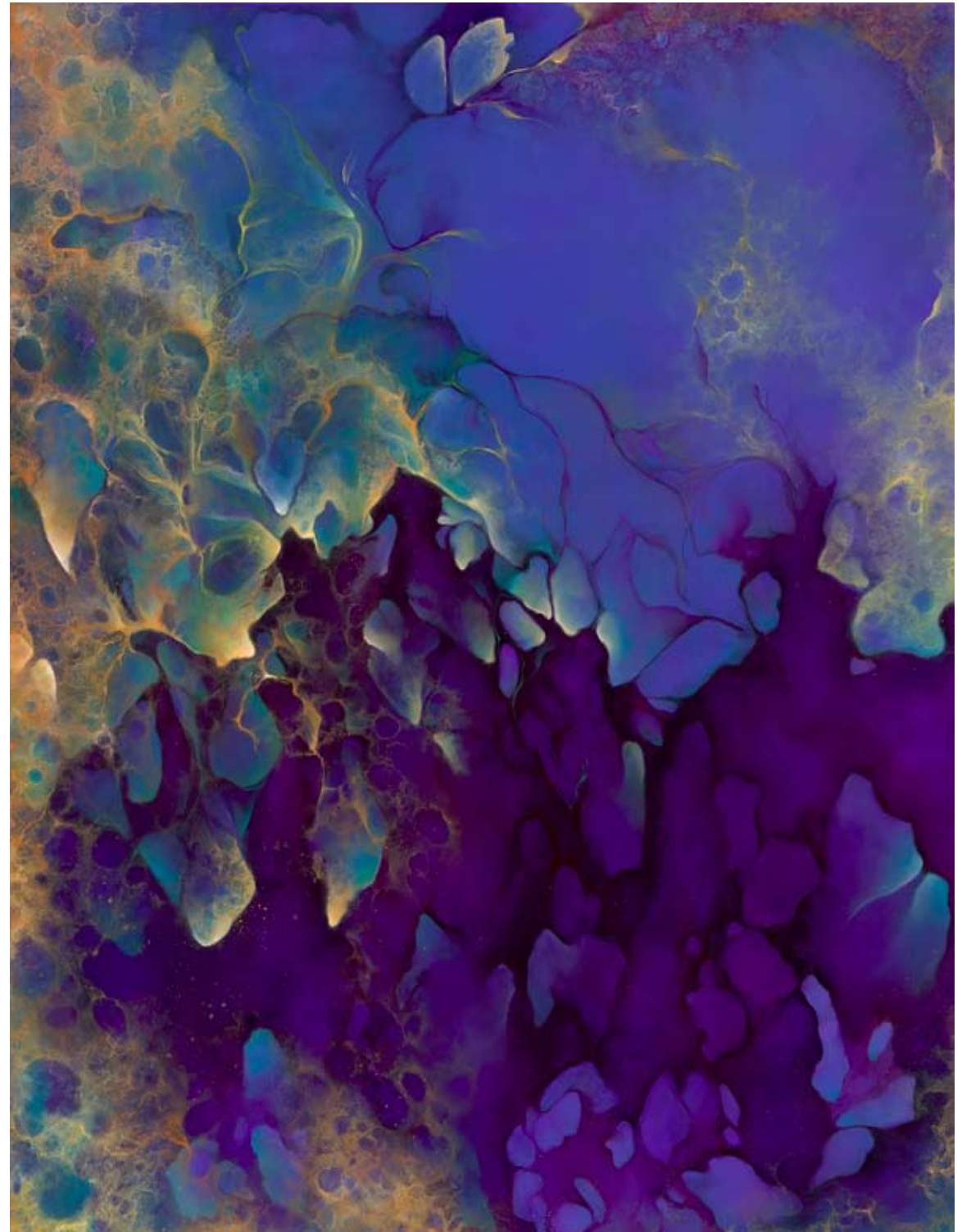


Lumen Naturae, 2015
oil, alkyd on aluminum (diptych)
2 panels, overall 24 x 52 in. (60.96 x 132.08 cm)
cat. no. JOB027

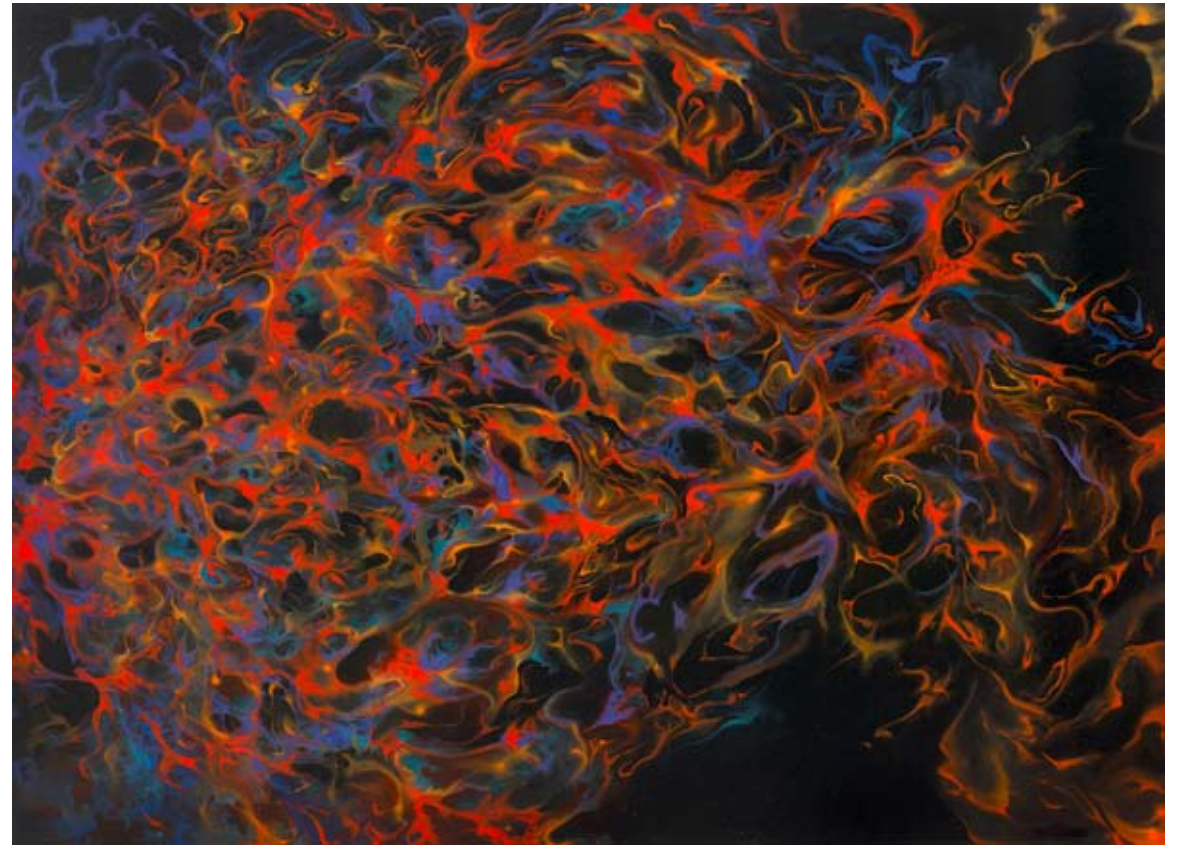
Kenoma, 2017
oil, alkyd on aluminum
46 x 46 in. (116.84 x 116.84 cm)
cat. no. JOB028



Nascendus, 2018
oil, alkyd on aluminum
48 x 36 in. (116.84 x 91.44 cm)
cat. no. JOB029



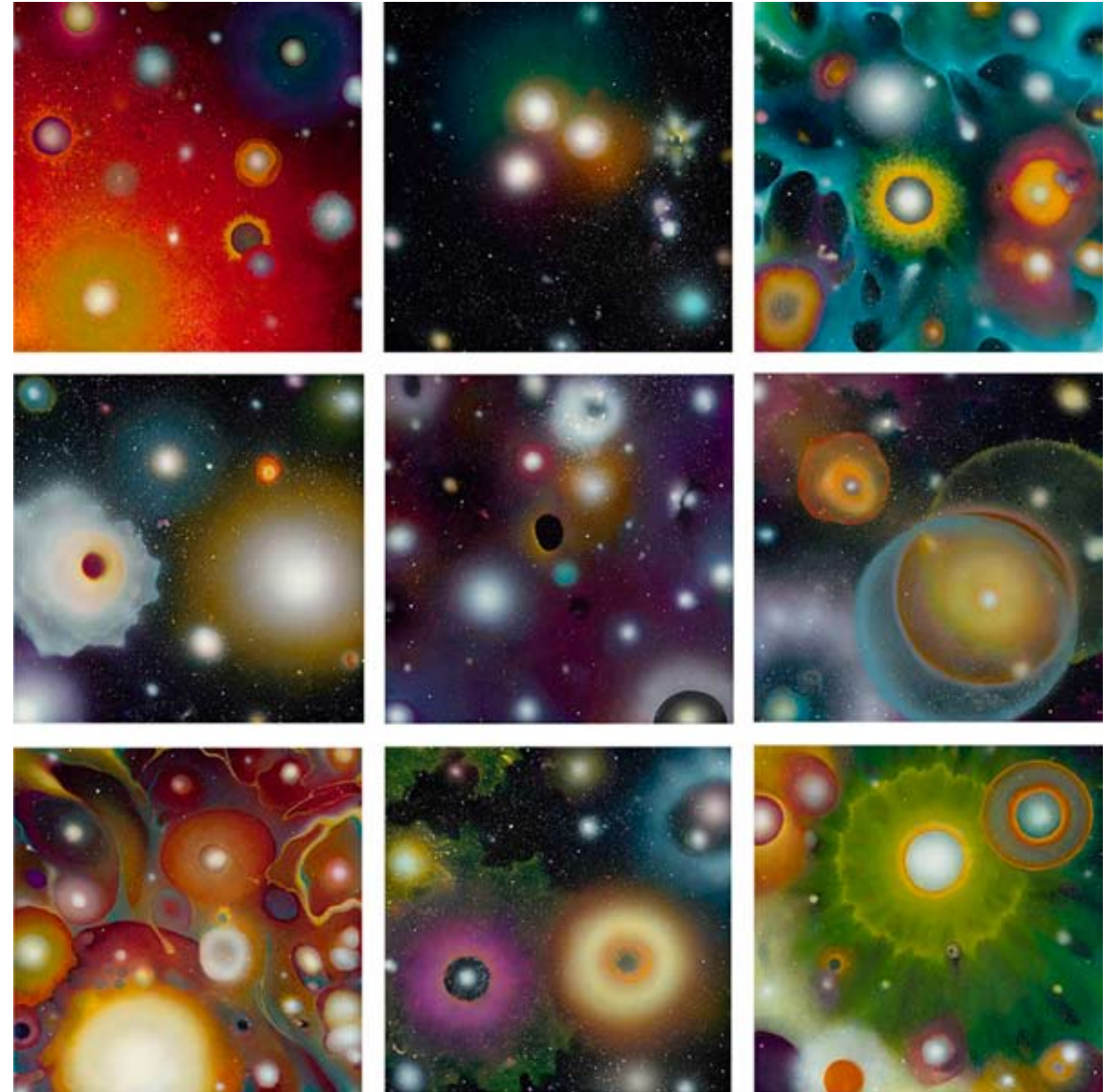
Spiratio, 2014
oi, alkyd on wood
44 x 60 in. (111.76 x 76.2 cm)
cat. no. JOB030



Nuntius, 2014
oil, alkyd on aluminum
36 x 48 in. (91.44 x 121.92 cm)
cat. no. JOB031



Polytropos I-IX, 2017
oil, alkyd on wood (polyptych)
9 panels, 12 x 12 in. each, overall: 38 x 38 in. (96.52 x 96.52 cm)
cat. no. JOB032





Johanna Baruch

Johanna Baruch was born in New York City, studying at the Art Students League and privately before moving to California, where, she continued her studies, earning her degree from New College of California. She has traveled extensively, across Morocco and throughout Europe. She painted en plein air in the south of France and studied the technique of the Old Masters, which she now incorporates into her painting style.

Johanna paints in oil and alkyd on aluminum or wood panel, building up layers of transparent glazes to create works of saturated color, luminescence and depth. Her Cosmos series is based on her fascination with deep space. Inspired by the breathtaking photos taken by the Hubble Space Telescope, her paintings delve into the ineffable and compelling beauty of the universe, where science, discovery and mystery meet. In addition, Baruch is a dedicated student of the work of Carl Jung. The importance of symbology, his privileging of the place of creativity in the human psyche, and his explorations of the mystical throughout history and cultures, inform her painting on many deep levels.

Johanna exhibits her work in galleries, institutions and museums, including the Marin Museum of Contemporary Art, the Art Museum of Los Gatos, the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, and the C. G. Jung Institute. Her work is in private and corporate collections around the country and has been reproduced in a number of books and journals. She serves on the Board of Governors of the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, and is a former trustee of the California College of the Arts, and the Djerassi Program.

GEORGE LAWSON GALLERY

