

ELISE WAGNER-

A Decade in Painting



Elise Wagner - A Decade in Painting

March 28 – May 22, 2011

Exhibition Curated by Brittany Kramer DeBalko

Catalogue Essay by Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.

2010-2011 Dr. Roy E. Morgan Exhibition

Sordoni Art Gallery

Wilkes University

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Cover: *Counter Collision II*, 2009 encaustic & oil on birch 48" x 48" *Courtesy of Chase Young Gallery, Boston, MA*



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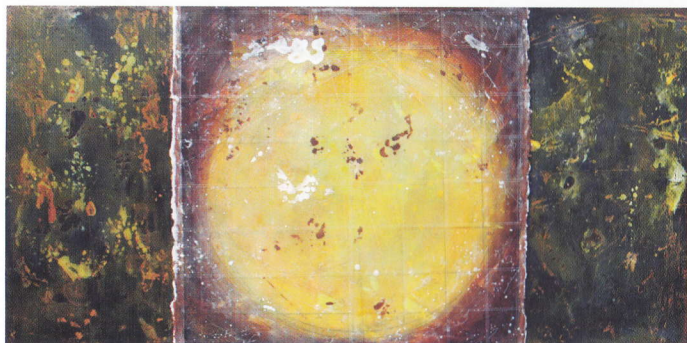
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*Hadron Loop II*, 2008 encaustic, monotype & oil on panel 24" x 48"  
 Courtesy of the Artist

**Discover** – to make known or visible; scientifically, to observe and reveal; in the archaic sense, to disclose, to bring to light something forgotten or hidden. That is what Elise Wagner's painting is all about, emerging awareness – of the infinitesimal and the vast – both on the part of the artist and the beholder.

Amidst the increasing velocity of our contemporary visual culture, Wagner's paintings compel the viewer to stop and pay attention. That is to say, they speak to the unfolding of time. As each canvas sustains the appearance of lengthy and calculated efforts of repainting – which itself suggests the dense complexity of our perception – there is a curious paradox at work, a dialectic of motion and stillness, of seen and unseen, of the certain and the unknown; and it is this tension that evokes the slow and extended dimension to our, the beholder's, experience, well beyond the temporally – and spatially – confined "instant" of seeing.

The process of Wagner's work is slow, as the viewer's experience of it must be. She begins with a thin birch plywood panel onto which she layers her chromatic mixture of pigmented wax, fused to the surface with heat gun, blowtorch or iron. We can sense her patient, persistent layering of paint; and

the result is arresting, with surfaces so vast (even on small scale), we enter, lose ourselves, and succumb to a pull powerful enough to command our attention. She applies her color concoction and scrapes it off, rubs it down, then applies it again, and still again – working and reworking each panel numerous times, so that layers build one atop the other. Look closely and you'll see that each image retains traces of its prior configurations – vague and elusive memories of earlier states, but none the less perceptible, still present to our awareness. And all this painting, abrading, burnishing, effacing is repeated and multiplied both across the surface and into depth, resulting in a simultaneous nearness and farness conveyed in the very texture of the paint itself. Within these highly charged fields of color, successive and interpenetrative states of awareness merge into one another, each retaining something of what has just passed and each giving intimation of what is to come – a blurring of the boundaries of past, present and anticipated future. And these palimpsests of paint encourage us to linger, to note the marks of presence and absence as they emerge and fade.



*Particle Longitude*, 2008 encaustic & oil on birch 10" x 10"  
 Courtesy of the Artist

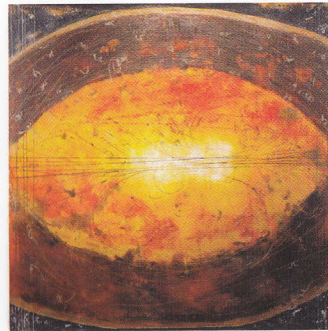
Embedded within the layers are marks or glyphs – signifiers not yet signifieds – allusions to the promises and claims of scientific truth. There are star-chart grids and ganglionic webs, astronomical spirals and celestial nebulae, the scraffito of the artist's journal drawings incised and embedded into the layered waxy surface; all of this eliciting from the beholder a continuous shifting in the perception of forms, a buildup and overlap of stages which demands that our attention continually adjust in order to accommodate the various perceptual possibilities within the subject. It is all about perception,

and perception here is a matter of adjusting, shifting attention, losing and then calling back into focus. The painted surface, however, remains remarkably smooth; from first geological layer to last, translucence is sustained, light continues to pass through the waxy membrane. In other words, it is the process of painting itself that conjures this gradual disclosure of elements and features at first left unnoticed, and so in one sense absent from our view – absent in the sense that their temporary non-occurrence lay outside but always included in the background of the present of our momentary view. And this state of being momentarily unnoticed – and then recalled – is part of the viewer's rich experience of the ineffable and the unknown. In short, Wagner catches the temporal flow of perception itself.



*Meteor Shower*, 2007 encaustic & oil on panel 16" x 16"  
Courtesy of the Artist

And while there is certainly much about the images that urges us to reflect on the certainties of science – consider, for instance, the specificity of titles: Hadron Loop, Particle Longitude, Magnetic Parallel, Meteor Shower – this sense of gradual apprehension is precisely what good poetry does too; it engages the realm of “suggestion” or “mystery,” wherein its listener is called upon by the very opacity of language to engage with the object of description in such a way that, unlike with ordinary prose, its content is less immediately and concretely available to perception and only more slowly and evocatively suggested. The analogy with language is further appropriate, I think, in pondering the calligraphic quality of Wagner's work; drawn, incised and gestured marks of some sort of ancient writing or scientific symbology, floating up to the surface, then receding, embryonically reaching the point of meaning before fading away.



*Magnetic Parallel*, 2009 encaustic & oil on birch 48" x 48"  
Courtesy of Chase Young Gallery, Boston, MA

The sensuously layered, successively painted and reworked surfaces of Wagner's painting sustain the visual effect of duration, both temporal and spatial. Early stages of configuration are just as present to our awareness as the final surface appearance. At the same time, the viewer is made to take a disengaging and vertiginous look down into/onto the surface of representation, which pushes beyond the conventional limits of the picture frame and subverts it for a new paradigm, an all-over expanse of visual attention, disallowing any reassuring sense of a single, unified and momentary view. The beholder feels himself released from gravity, as it were; we both hover over the surfaces and peer into their depths, our disengaged viewing steered by a medium at once fluid and solid. In terms of distance and scale, we wonder, are we microscopically close or galactically far away?

The entire pictorial surface of Wagner's painting is the embodied gathering of these discontinuous and multiple perceptions through an extended encounter with time and space. What these paintings do, and do brilliantly, is register our sense of the world, not as a single and coherent thought, feeling, or perception about it, but rather its very relation to us as precarious, as multiple and unfixed, and so continually subject to re-vision.

Ronald R. Bernier, PhD

### Acknowledgements

Since first encountering the work of Elise Wagner nearly two years ago, I have had the good fortune of working with people who have given generously of their time, expertise and enthusiasm. Foremost among them, of course, is the artist herself who has liberally shared both her talent and insight and has made working on this project both a pleasure and a privilege. A great debt of thanks also goes to Jane S. Young, Director of Chase Young Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts for her tireless support, patience and good humor. To our guest essayist we also extend heartfelt thanks. Dr. Bernier's contribution lends a particularly thoughtful dimension to the project.

We are especially grateful to the individuals who have graciously loaned crucial works to the exhibition. They have shown enormous generosity of spirit by sharing their valuable and valued works of art. The richness of this exhibition would not have been achieved without their support.

This exhibition is dedicated to the late Dr. Roy E. Morgan, former arts and drama critic for *The Times Leader*, and longtime friend and supporter of the Sordoni Art Gallery.

Brittany Kramer DeBalko

Interim Director

Staff

Brittany Kramer DeBalko, Interim Director

Bruce Lanning, Preparator



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*Initializing Barcode I*, 2008 toner transfer, encaustic & ink on panel 16" x 16"  
Courtesy of the Artist

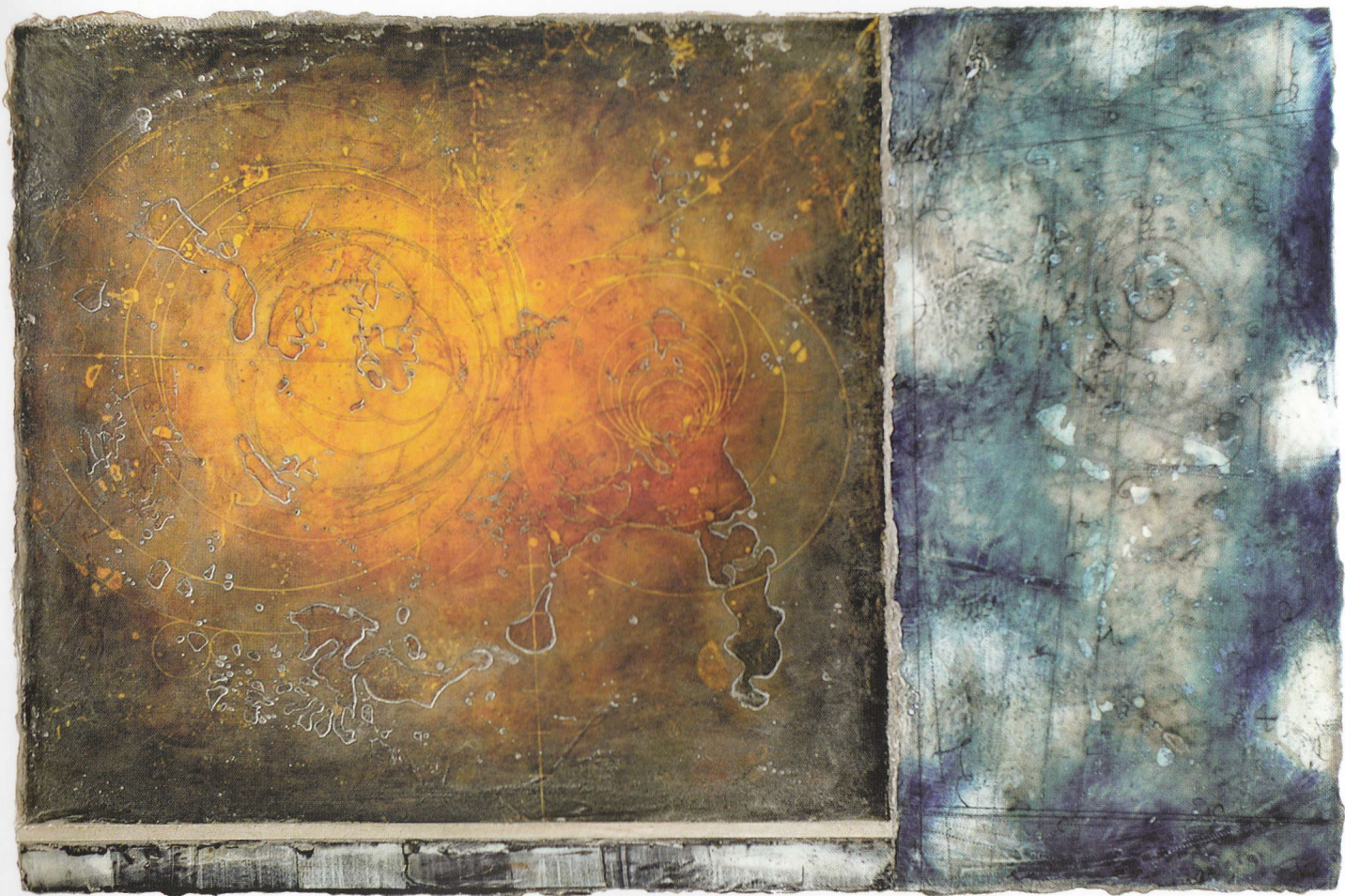


*Initializing Barcode II*, 2008 toner transfer, encaustic & ink on panel 16" x 16"  
Courtesy of the Artist

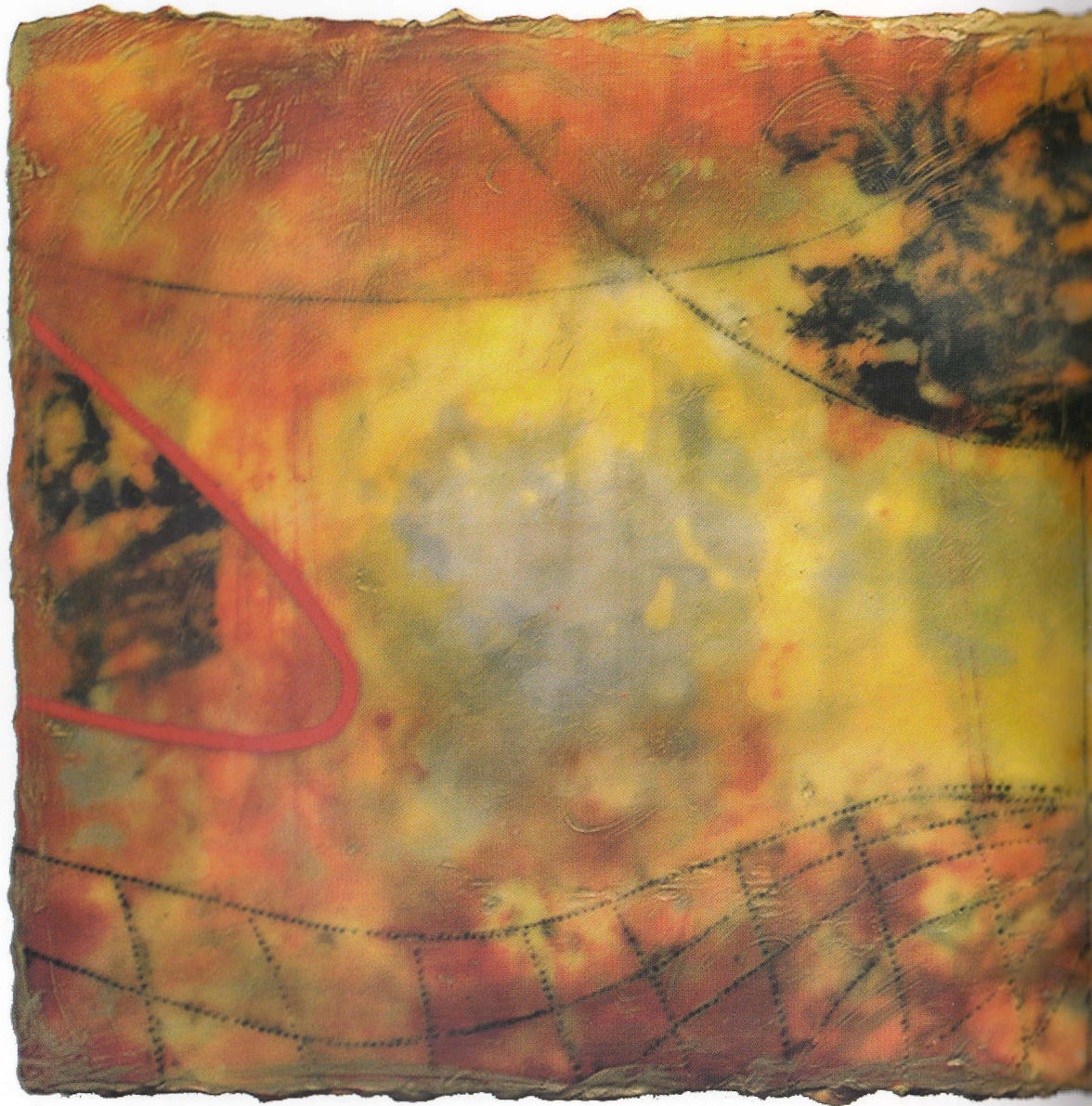


*Collision Pass*, 2006 encaustic & oil on birch 40" x 40"  
Courtesy of Chase Young Gallery, Boston, MA





*Event Horizon II*, 2009 encaustic, monotype & oil on birch 24" x 36"  
Courtesy of Private Collection, Boston, MA



*Sun Riddle, 2009 encaustic & oil on panel 12" x 24"*  
*Courtesy of Chase Young Gallery, Boston, MA*





*Hadron Loop III*, 2008 encaustic, monotype & oil on panel 24" x 48"  
Courtesy of the Artist



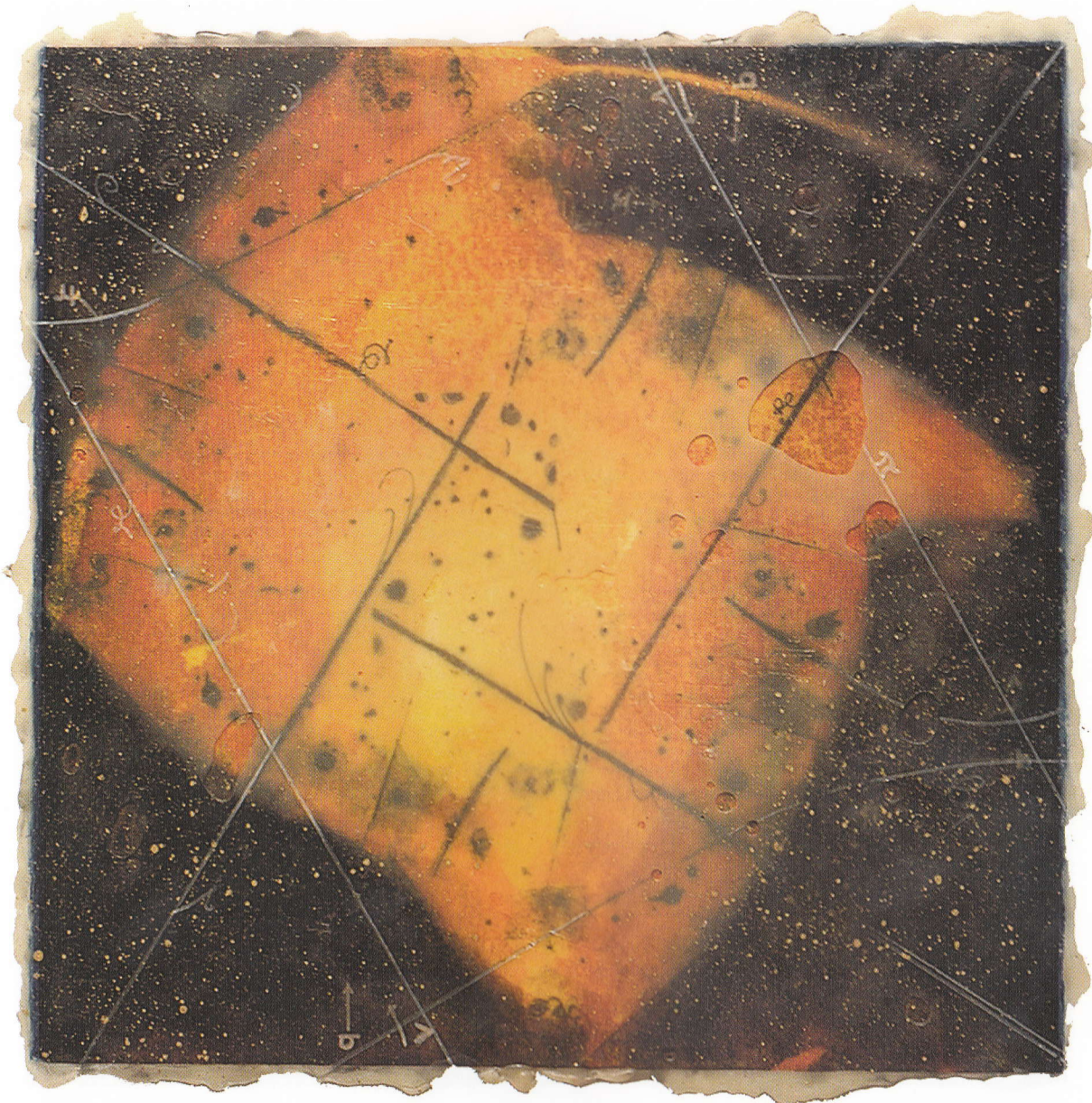
*Cloudburst Plate*, 2008 encaustic & shellac ink on birch 10" x 10"  
Courtesy of the Artist



*Confluence*, 2009 encaustic & oil on panel 16" x 16"  
Courtesy of the Artist



*Cloud Pressure*, 2007 encaustic & shellac ink on birch 10" x 10"  
Courtesy of the Artist



*Riddle Sphere*, 2008 toner transfer, encaustic & ink on panel 12" x 12"  
Courtesy of the Chase Young Gallery, Boston, MA





*Terra Reverse Plate*, 2008 encaustic & shellac ink on birch 10" x 10"  
Courtesy of the Artist

## Exhibition Checklist

*Dimensions are given in inches, height precedes width*

*Counter Collision II*, 2009 encaustic & oil on birch 48" x 48" *Courtesy of Chase Young Gallery, Boston, MA*

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*Cloud Pressure*, 2007 encaustic & shellac ink on birch 10" x 10" *Courtesy of the Artist*

*Meteor Shower*, 2007 encaustic & oil on panel 16" x 16" *Courtesy of the Artist*

*Terra Infinity*, 2007 encaustic, monotype & water-based ink on paper 10" x 10" *Courtesy of the Artist*

*Collision Pass*, 2006 encaustic & oil on birch 40" x 40" *Courtesy of Chase Young Gallery, Boston, MA*

*Seared Memory 90901*, 2001 encaustic & oil on birch 37.5" x 37.5" *Courtesy of the Artist*

*Remote Reference I*, 1999 encaustic & oil on wood 37.5" x 40.5" *Courtesy of the Artist*



