

## COSMOLOGICAL PAINTINGS: "Cosmos '05"



[ "Cosmos '05", oil on circular wood panel, 19.5" diameter. ]

This is one of a series of astronomy based paintings I began on new year's eve of 2000, and continued to produce an average of one annually for the decade. They would invariably start as representations of real nebulas from my strong interest in astronomy. Not long into the painting process I would ditch the direct representation of existing astronomical visions, in favor of improvised creativity. It is a painting after all, not astrophotography — but the astronomy is an inspiring starting point!

As we've all seen over the past couple of decades, the images captured by the Hubble telescope have been revolutionary to our understanding of the universe, and awe-inspiring in fantastic beauty. These celestial photos of dramatic forms, hues and tones have easily influenced the paintings. Combined with my regular involvement with observational astronomy — scanning the deep night skies to view these faraway nebulas, galaxies and star clusters through my handmade telescopes — results in endless sources of content to work from.



Looking through most of the average observational telescopes from here on Earth often does not show color to the naked eye. Long exposure photography is necessary for that. What we can detect is beautiful tonalities, with sometimes a whisper of color. Most of the deep sky objects are hundreds to thousands to millions of light years away; so it's a wonder to be able to see them at all, with homemade telescopes and in oftentimes less than perfect light pollution levels! [my best observing zones were up in the mountains, though could be relatively good from my old back yard in San Anselmo on still, clear night skies after midnight...or even when doing sidewalk astronomy for the public.] I was extremely fortunate to have had the legendary John Dobson as my telescope building and cosmology teacher during those years, truly expanding my horizons — in light years of time and space.

A huge, addictive thrill for me was in finding such cosmic phenomena, of Nebulas; stellar birth places, of various arrangements of form, and thousands of mind-boggling light years across (miniscule as seen from



here.) Galaxies; appearing as faint spirals and ovals if seen face-on, and as spindles if seen edge-on. Star clusters; Globular clusters where thousands of stars are held in a strong gravitational lock in a global formation. Or Open clusters, younger than Globular clusters and vary greatly in diverse arrangements. I also mention Planetary nebulae, which are deceitfully named since they have nothing to do with planets, but are supernova remnants that can resemble a planet in a few cases. One more class of observational phenomena worth listing are Asterisms; compact star formations that resemble mini-constellations, and are always fun to randomly come across while slowly scanning the sky with a good 'scope.

*Live pencil sketch of the Swan nebula in Sagittarius, 2011*



Finding all of these, in dim to bright magnitudes, is one of the most fascinating activities I've ever done. It is live and in person, compared to viewing a more vivid photo. It helps to read up on the best scientific



*Cosmos 03*  
*oil on canvas*

explanations of the cosmology involved, so we can, as Richard Feynman so aptly put it, to have fun imagining how things really are! [based on evidence, of course, ...but evidence not necessarily visible to our optics. i.e., black holes, electromagnetism, nuclear energy, etc.,. Read Hawking, Feynman, Dobson, Levin, Krauss, etc, for more. ]

Back to the artwork. So I'm inspired by the vast cosmos and the fantastic stuff that we can see. That is the start to my sources and the remaining theme. Ah, but I also love what is explored with paint! Improvised and discovered in psychedelic abstractions woven into the cosmic vision. As I



*The Orion Nebula as photographed through a 200 mm amateur telescope.*  
*Credit Robin Scagell, found online*

mentioned previously, these are not photos but paintings — so the sky is the limit. ...or at least the canvas surface is!

In the particular composition of this painting [Cosmos '05], it began as an attempt to paint the great Orion Nebula. A major favorite nebula to view through a telescope every winter. At an early point in the painting, I again decided to sod the Orion Nebula illustration and let it become something unto itself, as I had been doing with my ongoing series. Listening to several exemplary versions of Dark Star, by the Grateful Dead, certainly influenced my nebulous explorations, along with plenty of King Crimson recordings. [actually all kinds of variety are always playing, for everyone who knows me this is obvious. ]

It's easy to see that there is still a central remnant of the Orion Nebula in the middle of the painting, where the dark, dense foreground cloud obscures the bright stars behind with strong contrast. Otherwise this was pushed into a psychedelic direction, in waves of forms that work in a motion with the circular panel. I enjoyed refining the details, having fun with organic and cosmic shapes that harmonize experimentally as a whole.

– Dean Gustafson, June 2020



*Cosmos 06*



Gravitortional Equanimetry  
oil, ink, autumn leaves on canvas  
42" x 57.5"