

Chapter NINE - Astronomy

Cosmological Artwork

Showing the astronomy interest in my main forté as a visual artist, here offering a gallery of few select pieces, and a few words that accompany the images. [most of them will be to web page links for now, keeping this pdf from being huge.] My paintings are not that literally representational here — it's not astrophotography — there is plenty of that to find nearly everywhere else. Paintings have the freedom to be anything that the artist is inclined to make. I am not a space illustrator per se; astronomy elements have been integrated into several different works of my time as a visual artist. I'll select work here that is the most specifically dominated by the cosmos.

“PRE-ECLIPTIC PAINTING“

32 x 29

oil on canvas

early 1991

<http://dean-gustafson.com/pre-ecliptic.html>

I did this painting in the Mission flat I lived in during the winter of 1991, fresh after graduating from the Academy of Art, This is based on a stunningly cosmic dream I had, of larger-than-life astronomical spheres converging to create a dark opening to another dimension. Kind of an emerging black hole, whose massive gravitational pull causes extreme dilation of time and space occurring near the event horizon. The millennia sped by, with a circulating phase of moons changing as the centuries flew, as if riding a time machine in the sky!

It was epic. No doubt influenced by my astronomy studies at

CCSF that season, and thoughts of the upcoming total solar eclipse! This piece led to a wide ranging series that I explored for several years, featuring the recurring “vesica piscis” motif of converging geometry.

The archaeological norse ship was added later to give relative scale, and tie in with a motif I had been painting during that time. It's not necessary for the cosmic theme here, yet serves as a pivoting compositional anchor of sea to skies.

This has always been among my top favourite paintings for its atmospheric paintwork. [and I'm not that crazy for most of my paintings of that year, save a few] The subtleties are mostly lost in the photo — but that is a big aspect that make physical oil paintings special! Scale, texture, hues and tones. [and for a brief time after being finished — scent.]

“Cal-Cal-Coon - Total Eclipse of 1991”

oil with small map embedded, on canvas
[around 35” x 45”], 1991
<http://dean-gustafson.com/eclipse.html>

This painting goes with the eclipse story in Mexico, in chapter three.

Cosmos 2000-07.

This is the series of cosmos oriented paintings of the 21st century, linked here with little description necessary for each one, with the following essay about Cosmos '05 explanation giving the general idea of the series.

“Cosmos ’05”

oil on circular wood panel
19.5” diameter.

http://dean-gustafson.com/cosmos05_a.html

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 eyes. 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; either Globular clusters where thousands of stars are held in a strong gravitational lock in a globalized formation. Or an Open cluster, being younger than Globular clusters and vary greatly in diverse arrangements. I should also mention Planetary nebulae, which are deceitfully named since they have nothing to do with planets at all, but are supernova remnants that can resemble a planet in a few cases. One more class of observational phenomena worth listing here, are Asterisms; compact star formations that resembles mini-constellations, and are always fun to randomly come across while slowly scanning the sky with a good 'scope. 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 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 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.

“Cosmos ’00”

46” x 34”

<http://dean-gustafson.com/cosmos00.html>

“Cosmos ’03”

28” x 23”

<http://dean-gustafson.com/cosmic.html>

“UNTITLED ’06”

31” x 25”

<http://dean-gustafson.com/untitled06.html>

“Cosmos ’06”

<http://dean-gustafson.com/cosmos06.html>

“Parallax”

37” x 30”, 2005

<http://dean-gustafson.com/parallax.html>

“Falling into a Nebula”

oil on circular wood panel

19.5” diameter. 2005

<http://dean-gustafson.com/falling.html>

“Sidereal Desertscape”

[around 5 x 3 feet], 1994

<http://dean-gustafson.com/desertsc.html>

“Pathtowers”

31” x 25”, 2007

<http://dean-gustafson.com/path towers.html>

Sketching through the telescope

And I sketched deep sky objects live at the telescope! It's an age old practice by Astronomers — professional and amateur alike. It really forces us to look deeper into the subtleties of light and shade that are easy to miss with a quicker glance. Here are a few of the pencil sketches I made in darkness, with only a small red light to see it by, and sometimes I would just wing it without seeing what is being drawn, with mixed results!

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/126364600@N06/albums/72157668214824880>

“Gravitortional Equanimetry”

42" x 57.5"

oil, black ink and autumn leaves on canvas

2006

<http://dean-gustafson.com/gravitortion.html>

This one is the most Cosmological of my paintings. Dobson's class influences are involved here, weaved into its details, from working on this after and during my first classes taught by by him.

This is One of my works that developed as I went along — not premeditated in advance.

It does have the underlying structure based on a piece from 1989, "*Future Look at the Past*", a cosmic yet earthy experimental piece from art college years.

<http://dean-gustafson.com/futurepast.html>

I liked it, wanting to make a series ; just not for another 16 years later! This first painting started to feel like a prototype after pulling it out of the stacks of oldies.

The new piece has the same frame work of leaves as the first only neater. The 1989 work was cranked out under a week. The new one had a few months of attention, Working fresh ideas into details and textures that made it interesting way up close as well as from a distance.

I had a good, explorative time working and reworking and refining the surface and geometry, adding astronomical details (yes, that's supposed to be an eye reflected in a secondary mirror!) Plus I added various ink drawings for an unusual media mix coming from me. [I'll include a few zoomed in pics at the end.]

The third and final of the autumn leaves series is with an entirely different meaning, with the figure on the ledge ; its title and figure ripped off — or should I say genuinely inspired from — the ending scene of the movie Vertigo. It started as a more Cosmological painting, with the large depiction of the galaxy M33 to the right. Then personally shaking news in 2015 moved me to express loss, changing its direction as my final large scale painting, ever.

“Vertigo”

oil and autumn leaves on canvas

42" x 57.5", 2015

<http://dean-gustafson.com/vertigo.html>

I have more, to find in my online gallery.
<http://dean-gustafson.com>
Now on to chapter 10....

Dean Gustafson, April 2021



