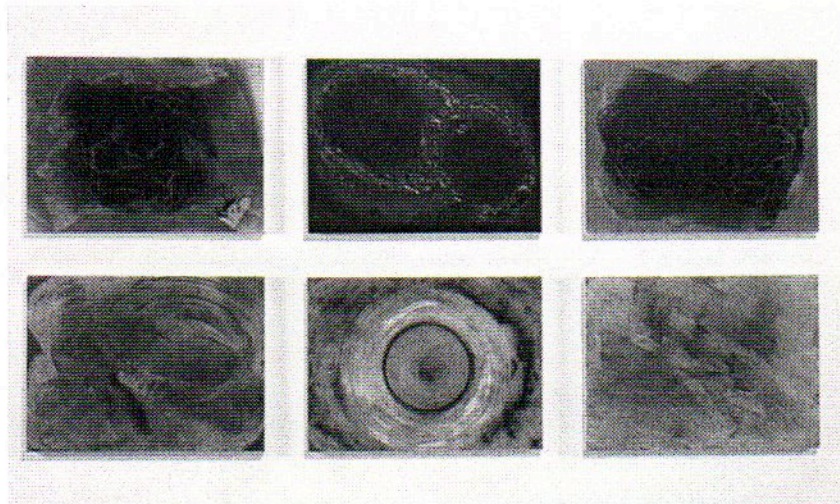


## Dorothea Rockburne: Astronomy Drawings at the New York Studio School

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN

March 11 – April 17, 2010  
8 West 8th Street, between fifth and sixth avenues  
New York City, 212 673 6466

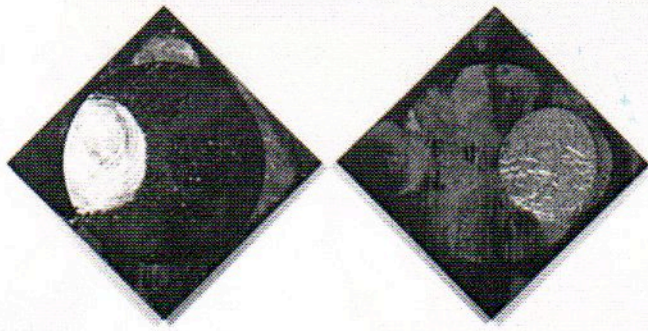


Dorothea Rockburne, *Universe Series*, 1994-99. Raw pigment, acrylic medium and charcoal on watercolor paper, mounted on ragboard, six panels, each 22 x 30 inches. Images courtesy of New York Studio School.

It would appear that the timing of Dorothea Rockburne's exhibition of exquisite astronomical drawings could not have been more fortuitous. Within a couple weeks after the opening at its New York venue, an on-line Associated Press article confirmed that the \$10 billion Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Geneva – also known as "the world's largest atom smasher" – had established a new record in the number of high-energy collisions among proton beams. LHC scientists, known as particle physicists, were thrilled to discover that their costly investment was getting closer to a microcosmic simulation of the mystery behind the Big Bang that presumably instigated the beginning of the universe 14 billion years ago.

While there is little doubt that such physical and astronomical concepts are of interest to Rockburne, as they have been for her entire career, such statistics are unlikely to alter or defer her own process of envisioning the universe in the terms that she understands. In an interview with the curator of the exhibition, Ann H. Murray, Rockburne explains that in 1990 she was ... "beginning to question the Big Bang theory from this viewpoint: if the universe was created from an initial speck of infinite density (a singularity), where had that matter come from and what caused matter and energy to explode and inflate? Had this happened previously, creating other universes? Thinking about this made me want to roam around the universe through painting and thought."

Rockburne has always been interested in etiology, that is, the causes behind phenomenon. In art, this is a territory often unexplored by scientists. What are the causes of the universe? Are they, in fact, related to the creative process that one may discover in painting? The works on paper in this exhibition are filled with evidence that, in their own way, is equal to the record number of high-energy collisions among proton beams. One only has to study the intricacy and intensity of the series, titled *Universes* (1994-99), made with raw pigment, acrylic medium and charcoal on watercolor paper, to see the evidence of Rockburne's internalized and highly informed vision. Each of the six paintings offers a different point of view. Some reveal darkened premonitions with cracking interstices in space, while others elicit light and speed – whirling cycles in which helix patterns appear and where glittering elliptical shapes suggest a passage within the evolution between energy and matter.



Dorothea Rockburne, *The Twins: Castor & Pollux*, 2002. Lascaux Aquacryl and copper on gesso prepared linen, two panels, each 24 x 24 inches.

In *The Twins: Castor & Pollux* (2002), made with Lascaux Aquacryl and copper on gessoed linen, the constellation of these bifurcated figures appears, not in the literal sense of diagrammatic form, but as antipodal formations, each with their own distinct light and magnetic fields. In *Piero's Sky* (1991-92), a drawing, the equipoise of elliptical shapes begets a balance between tension and harmony that recalls, for this writer, the penetrating moment captured by Piero della Francesca in the Clark Institute's *Madonna and Child*.

Rockburne's works on paper herald metaphorical value without losing their sense of physical time and space. Relative to her vision of the universe, this would seem to coincide with a presentation of recent infrared photographs shown in Munich this past January by Professor Dimitar Sasselov from Harvard. These staggering images made it clear that the universe is an interconnected assembly of electrical circuits and that energy and matter are, indeed, infinite in their connectivity. What is truly exhilarating about Rockburne's astronomy drawings is their elasticity and their ability to incite both stasis and kinesis. Given these conditions, they allow us to travel through an uncharted space. In these modest works, ideas and emotions have no separation. They are inextricably bound to whatever universe exists within or outside of us. They constitute a meditation on the sources of desire that unlock our momentum towards discovery.

[Send comments for publication on this article to the editor](#)

