

PHILIP TAAFFE

JABLONKA



# PHILIP TAAFFE

ESSAY BY  
ALBERTO MANGUEL

BÖHM CHAPEL



**ISFAHAN**  
2009  
Mixed media on linen  
285 × 329 cm 112 × 129½ in



**QUAIROUAN**  
2009  
Mixed media on linen  
285 × 329 cm 112 × 129½ in





**EIPHANIA**

2009

Mixed media on linen

285 × 329 cm 112 × 129½ in





TIARA

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

25.6 × 34.3 cm 10 × 13½ in

ALBERTO MANGUEL

## APPARENT MIRACLES

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit father Athanasius Kircher, indefatigable traveller, mathematician, linguist, archeologist, naturalist, religious historian, engineer, geologist and philosopher, whose many published books included some of the most extraordinary discoveries of his age and also many of the most absurd errors, undertook to explain, in his *Mundus subterraneus*, the curious appearance of letters and figures that from time to time are found in natural formations. Kircher had two explanations to offer. The first was empirical. Remarking that letters are, after all, made up of simple traits, Kircher suggested that his readers try out a method of drying a certain type of clay, by which anyone could produce such specimens of apparent “writing”. The second was metaphysical. According to Kircher, though certain minerals could produce cracks and lines that looked like writing, stones and crystals that uncannily depicted marbled landscapes, scenes of action, portraits of people, plants and animals, could not do so without the effects of what he called the “virtues, appetites and spirits” of Nature, God-given powers that compelled inanimate matter to create reflections of the visible world. To illustrate both his empirical and his fantastical theories, Kircher illustrated his *Mundus* with magnificent examples of letters, geometrical forms, human figures, zoological and botanical shapes and what today we would call fossil samples. And to explain such iconographic diversity, Kircher suggested four main causes: chance, malleability of matter allowing it to receive impressions, accidental petrification of the bodies depicted, angelic intervention. For Kircher, the world was written in several different and readable scripts.

Because we imagine the world before we experience it, because we recognize in our surroundings stories that we make up as well, because we lend the indifferent universe narrative sense and coherence, our species can be defined as reading animals. Landscapes and seascapes, constellations and currents, strata in stones and veins in wood (like those that caught Kircher’s attention), appear to us as deliberate maps or illustrations, iconographic accounts of something that we have yet to unravel.

As far as we can tell, we are the only species for whom the world seems to be made of stories. Biologically developed to be conscious of our existence, we treat our perceived identities and the identity of the world around us as if they required a literate

decipherment, as if everything in the universe were represented in a code that we are supposed to learn and understand. Human societies are based on this assumption: that we are, up to a point, capable of understanding the world in which we live.

To understand the world, or to try and understand it, translation of experience into language is not enough. Language barely glances the surface of our experience and transmits from one person to another, in a supposedly shared conventional code, imperfect and ambiguous notations that rely both on the careful intelligence of the one who speaks or writes and on the creative intelligence of the one who listens or reads. To enhance the possibilities of mutual understanding and to create a larger space of meaning, language resorts to metaphors which are, ultimately, a confession of language's failure to communicate directly. Through metaphors, experiences in one field become illuminated by experiences in another.

Aristotle suggested that the power of a metaphor resides in the recognition conjured up in the audience; that is to say, the audience must invest the subject of the metaphor with a particular shared meaning. Kircher's figures could hold a meaning unto themselves or, like latent metaphors, carry the meaning of something else. Literate societies, societies based on the written word, have developed a central metaphor to name the perceived relationship between human beings and their universe: the world as a book which we are meant to read. The ways in which this reading is conducted are many—through fiction, mathematics, cartography, biology, geology, poetry, theology and myriad others—but their basic assumption is the same: that the universe is a coherent system of signs governed by specific laws, and that those signs have a meaning, even if that meaning lies beyond our grasp. And that in order to glimpse that meaning, we try to read the book of the world.

Writing exists in two distinct basic forms: thought writing and sound writing. In the first, ideas are transmitted directly; the drawing of a goat represents the word "goat" or "herd". In the second, ideas are depicted by signs representing sounds; each system of signs belongs therefore to one particular language. The writing of the world belongs (as Kircher imagined it) to the first system: cloud formations and mountain ranges, creeks and open spaces, rivers and wooded areas appear to convey accounts of the world that (Kircher believed) a practiced eye might read. Some sixty years before the studious Jesuit published his *Mundus*, Prince Hamlet taunted the foolish Polonius with clouds that looked like weasels or like whales; in doing so, he was proposing to the Lord Chamberlain a specific reading of the sky, neither more nor less valid than any possible other. The writing of the world is a generous writing.



**CHIMAERA**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

25.6 x 34.2 cm 10 x 13 1/2 in



**NEBRIS**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

25.7×34 cm 10×13 3/8 in

If the world is a book, everything in it is text, and every page of that text carries a system of signs to be deciphered. We read stones and crystals, but also jungles and cities, oceans and icy plains. In the book of the world no page is blank, since as Mallarmé confessed, even the whiteness of the untouched page is filled by the reader with fear, since the mind recognizes in the void not emptiness but absence, that which is not there, the text not yet written, the region where everything is still possible. Much in the same way that we are inclined to fill uninhabited realms with our ideological and material clutter, with settlements and philosophies and monuments, we are inclined to look for ways of filling the pages of actual books. From the very first Sumerian tablets to the electronic screens of our time, text and its attendant impedimenta crowd the spaces available. We won't resign ourselves willingly to nothing.

Philip Taaffe's paintings seem to respond to this colonizing impulse. His pages allow no blanks, gorge themselves in colour, imply travel through their space. One of the features of the world-as-book metaphor is that it carries within it its own reading: that is to say, it contains within its margins the continuous passing from page to page that is the kinetic property of the reading craft. The same is true of Taaffe's work: the flowing of colours creates shapes in their implicit progression, criss-crossing as currents in a stream or, slower, as strata in rocks. They have the quality of a fluid kaleidoscope (an apparatus Kircher sought to invent) in which the reflected particles are not straight-edged but curved, like waves. Each of Taaffe's paintings is part of a limitless whole, of a universe in constant movement that ebbs and flows, mingles and separates, of which we are witnesses and in which we are also immersed. They resemble the marbled end-paper pages of the refined bound volumes from the seventeenth century on, sometimes used on covers as well, or on casings for precious volumes. Much like Taaffe, Kircher also sought to create pages of fluid movement, using the properties of coloured liquids, and Kircher's colossal *Ars Magna lucis et umbrae*, published in Rome in 1646 (and then again, to escape censorship, in Amsterdam in 1671) includes in its tenth book a recipe for creating marbled paper, which Kircher had seen in Sicily, brought back from the East by European traders.

Sometime in the tenth century, in the Chinese province of Szechwan, a paper was created that avoided the fearful primordial blankness. Called "drifting or flowing sand," it consisted of a sheet of common paper dragged through a fermented flour paste to which several colouring essences were added. A second procedure required a paste made from honey locust cocoons, croton oil and water, into which the paper was dipped; the dyed paper was then swept with a brush, and dandruff flakes were allowed to fall on the wet surface. The resulting figures (which no doubt resembled something like Hamlet's fauna)



were then applied to a fresh sheet of paper, on which they became imprinted. No example of the “drifting sand paper” exists today.

A different kind of decorated paper was invented in Japan perhaps a century earlier. Known as “floating ink” paper, it was prepared by soaking in water a sheet of paper on which ink drawings had been made. Carried into the Middle East by silk merchants, these techniques developed in Turkey and Iran, and eventually became known in Europe. Taaffe’s paintings echo back to these prestigious ancestors.

The metaphor of the world as book is more ancient than that of the book as world, and more complex because it does not require progress or even understanding of that which is being read. Its landscapes demand no translation into sense, allow for perusal without acquisition, grows in the tension between concrete shapes perceived and incorporeal and elusive meaning. Some two centuries after Kircher’s explorations in the realms of streaked stones and marbled paper, in Boston, Edgar Allan Poe published a chronicle of the adventures of one Arthur Gordon Pym, left purposefully unfinished, as if to allow the narrative’s form to mirror the fragmentary and unresolved contents. Two-thirds of the way through the novel, there occurs an episode that, keeping in the background the world-as-book metaphor, anticipates Taaffe’s interpretation. Arthur Gordon Pym and his unfortunate mates reach a strange island in the Southern hemisphere. Among the island’s mysterious characteristics is its water.

“It was not colourless, nor was it of any one uniform color – presenting to the eye, as it flowed, every possible shade of purple, like the hues of changeable silk,” the narrator remarks. “Upon collecting a basinful, and allowing it to settle thoroughly, we perceived that the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of different veins, each of a distinct hue; that these veins did not commingle; and that their cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighboring veins. Upon passing the blade of a knife athwart the veins, the water closed over it immediately, as with us, and also in withdrawing it, all traces of the passage of the knife was instantly obliterated. If, however, the blade was passed accurately between the two veins, a perfect separation was effected, which the power of cohesion did not immediately rectify. The phenomena of this water formed the first definite link in that vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to be at length encircled.”

For the reader-viewer today, another of these links (certainly not the last) is Philip Taaffe’s apparent and miraculous display.

Mondion, 13 January 2012



**NILE**

2011

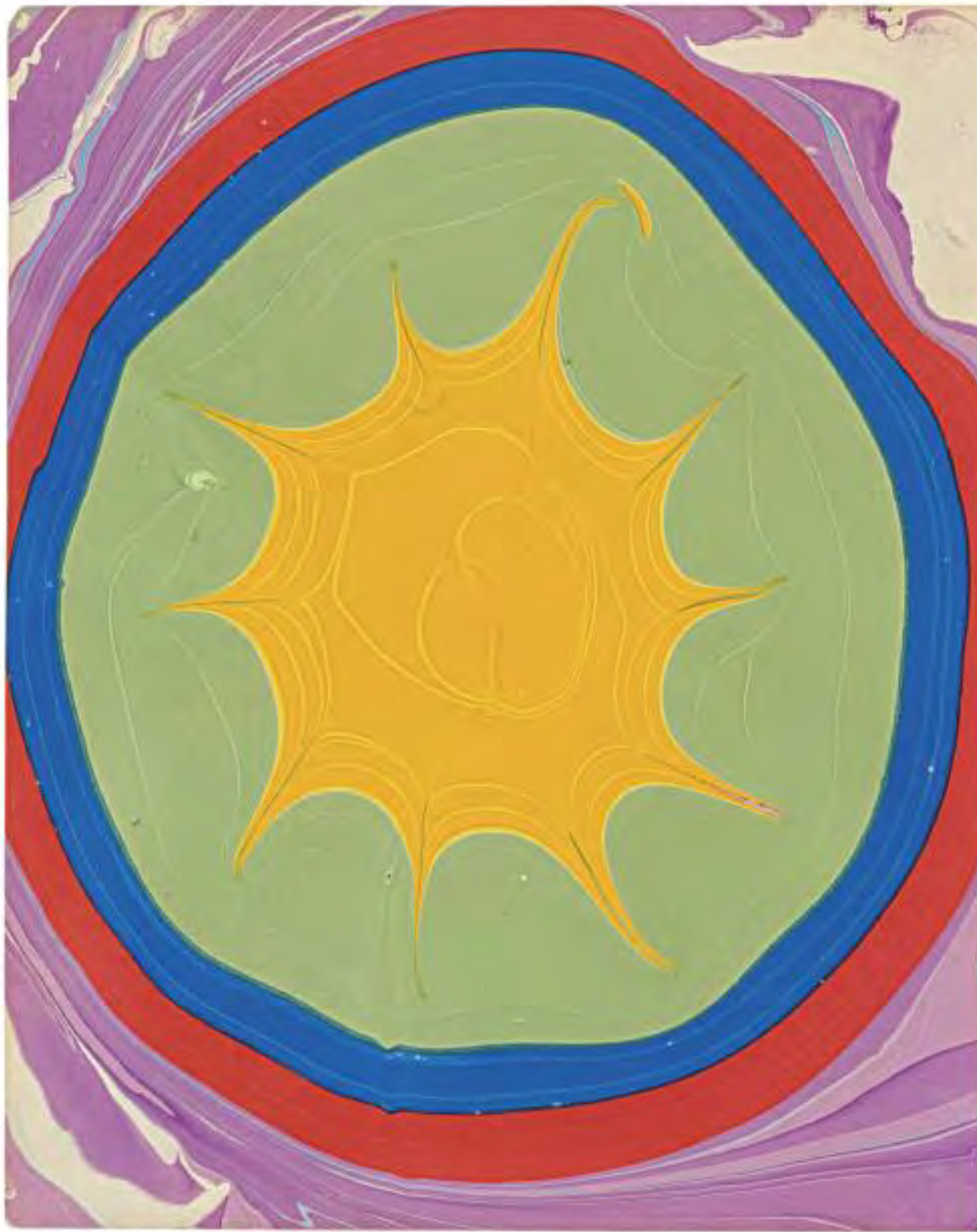
Acrylic ink on paper  
19×23.7 cm 7½×9¾ in



**HERM**

2011

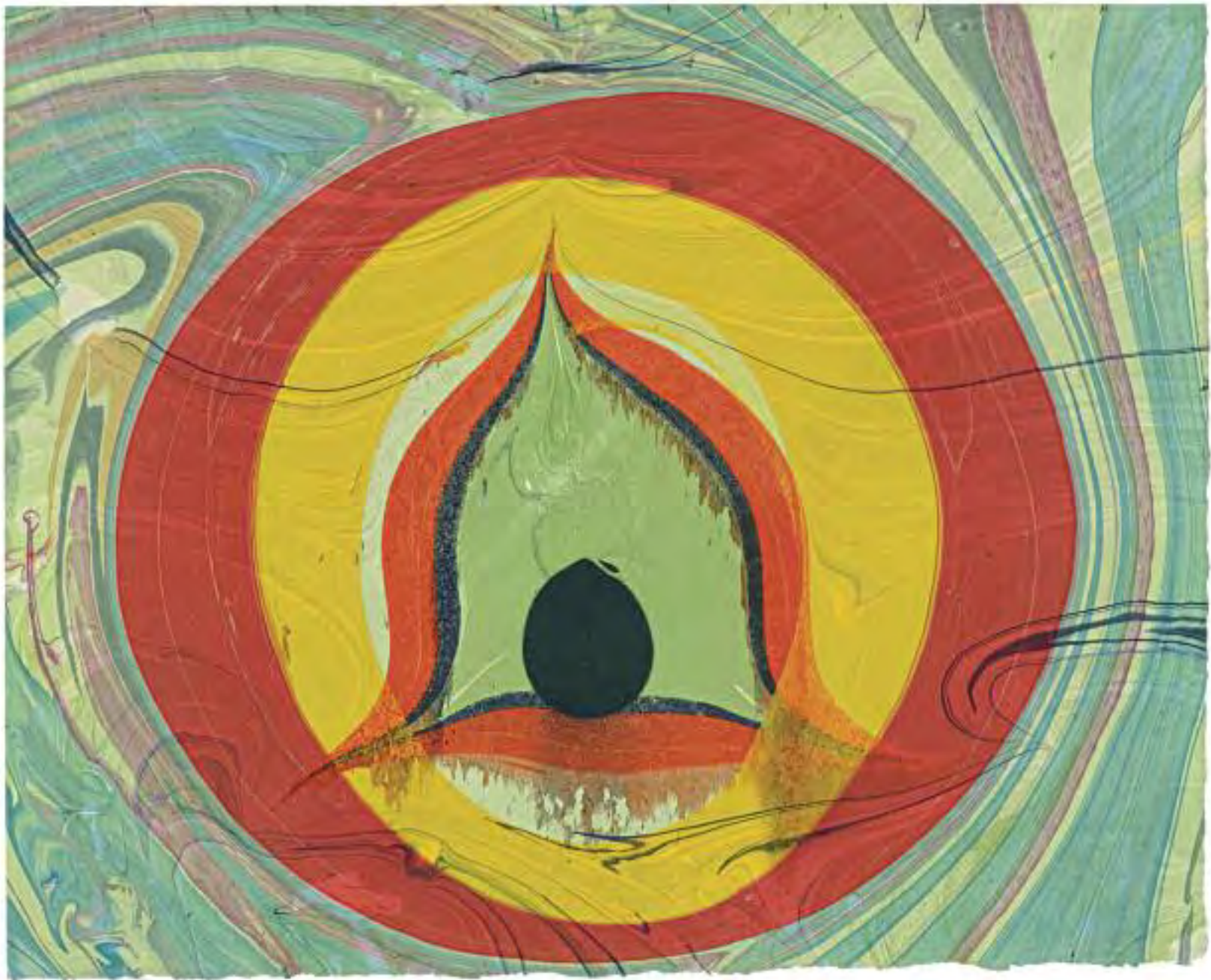
Acrylic ink on paper  
29.3 x 23 cm 11½ x 9 in



**HELIOS**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper  
23.8 x 19.1 cm 9½ x 7½ in



**SHRINE**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

23.4 × 29.3 cm 9 1/8 × 11 1/2 in



**NAVARINO**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

24.5 × 30.9 cm 9½ × 12⅛ in

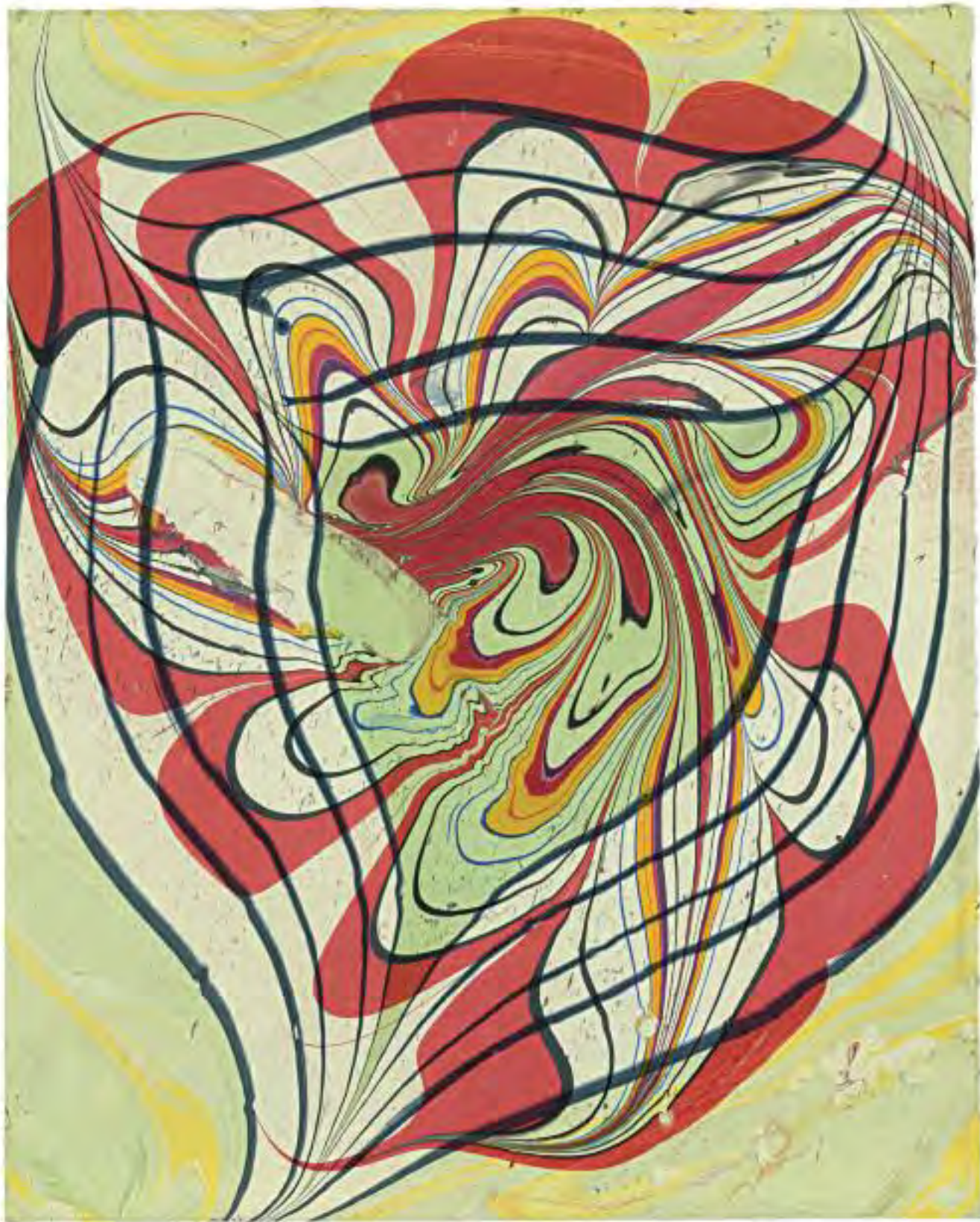


**BARGE**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

23.8 × 19.2 cm 9 3/4 × 7 1/2 in



**CREEL**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper  
29 x 23.3 cm 11 1/2 x 9 1/8 in





**PRIAM**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

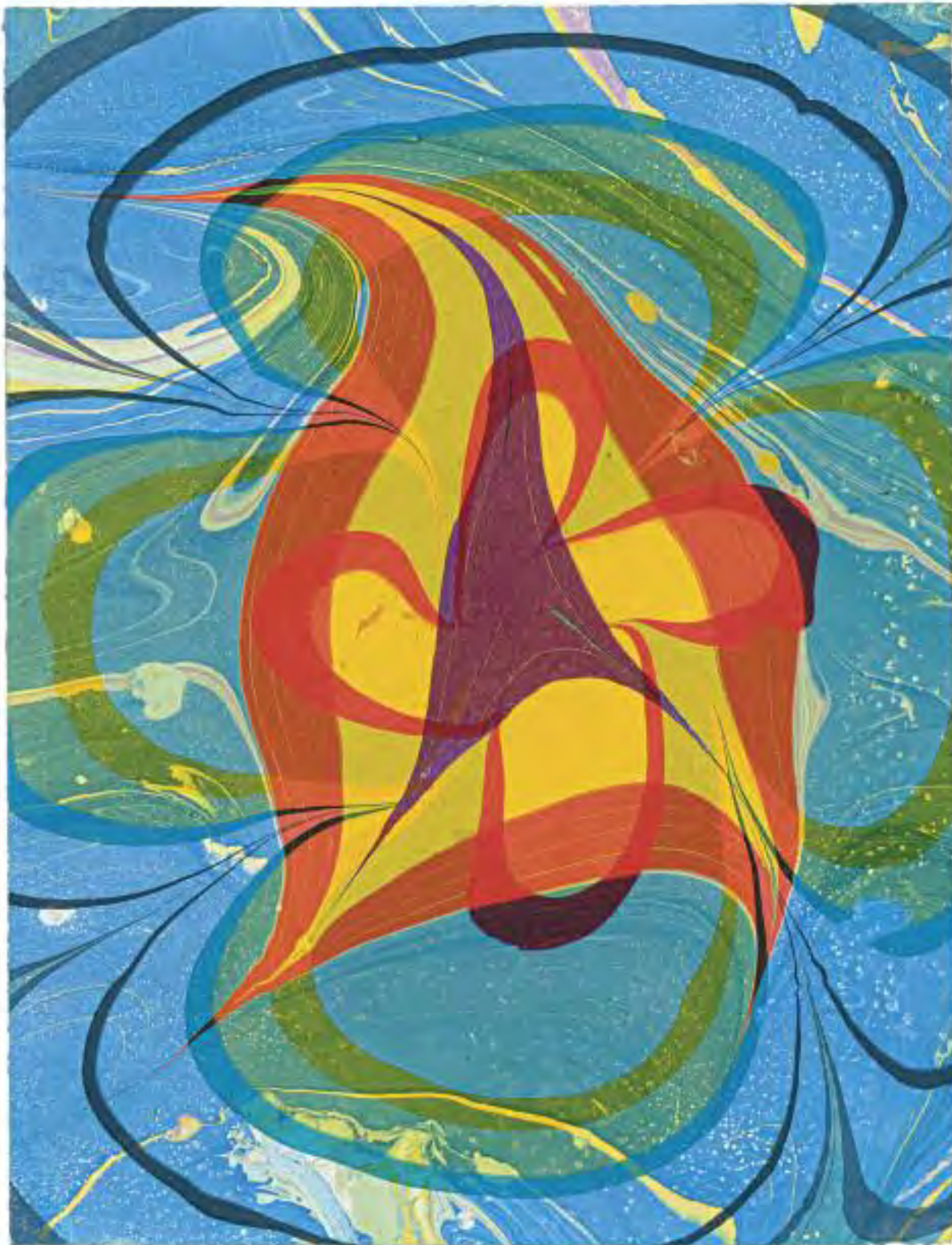
19.1 × 23.7 cm 7½ × 9¾ in



**BEZZANT**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper  
19 × 23.8 cm 7½ × 9¾ in

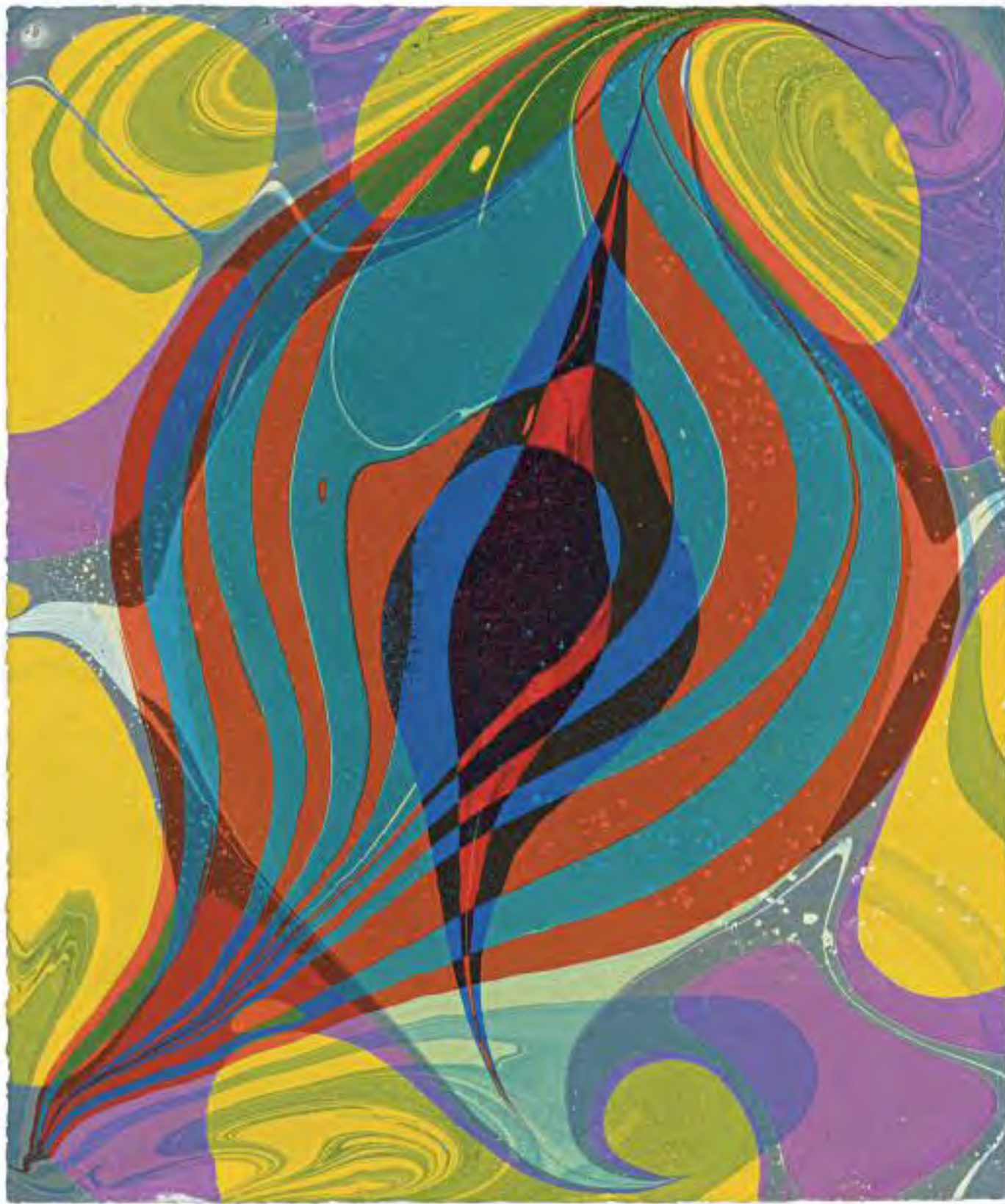


**TRITON**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

29.5 × 22.5 cm 11½ × 8¾ in



**AEGIS**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper  
22.7 × 19.1 cm 7½ × 9 in



**PEYTREL**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper

22.3 × 19.2 cm 8¾ × 7½ in



**ERYX**

2011

Acrylic ink on paper  
22 x 19.3 cm 8¾ x 7½ in

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of the exhibition

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