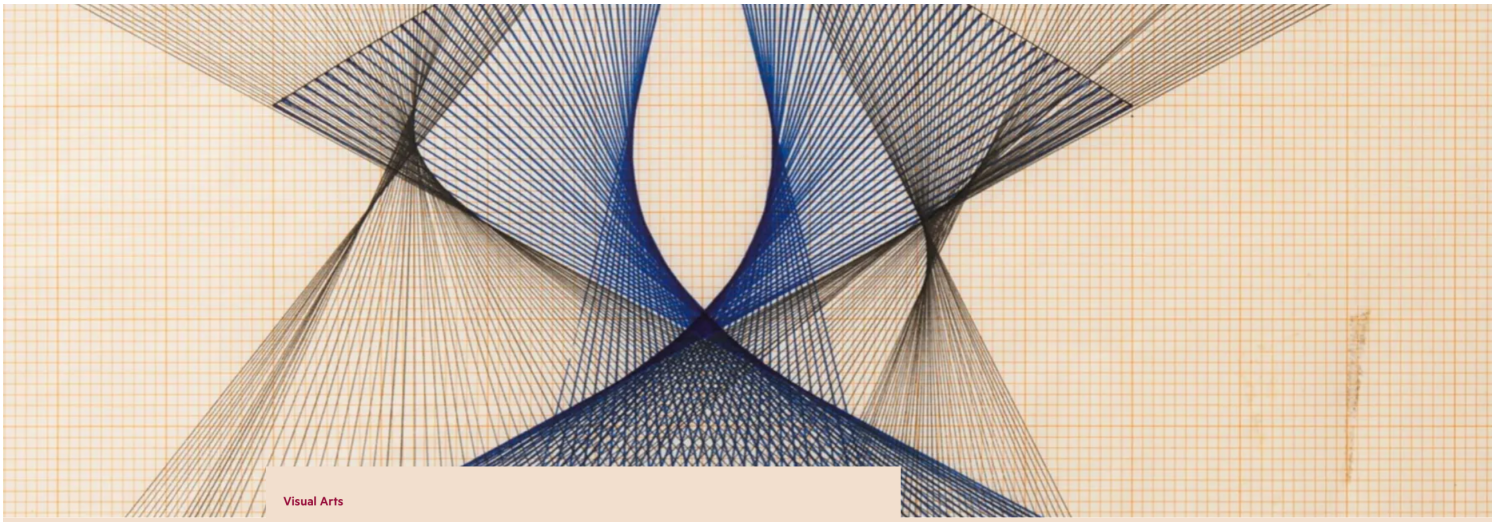

Lenore Tawney, 'Untitled' (1965) © Courtesy of the Lenore G Tawney Foundation, New York, and Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski

Visual Arts

Of Mythic Worlds, Drawing Center review — shapes in search of the eternal

The New York show tracks images and symbols across centuries to examine how artists depict the infinite

Ariella Budick MARCH 21 2023

Artists are never on thinner ice or more sublimely sure of their footing than when they're hunting for a view of the infinite. The Drawing Center's expansive show *Of Mythic Worlds* in Manhattan takes as its topic what its curator Olivia Shao calls the "universal pursuit to understand that which is outside of our objective, worldly experience". In other words, it's about everything. Material objects — sheets of paper — strive to reveal the insubstantial. Marks made in charcoal and ink point to the inchoate and represent the unrepresentable.

If all that sounds like a tall order for an exhibition of 50 works ranging from 17th-century China to 21st-century New York, it's also hard to imagine one that could do justice to its ambitions. Shao perceives a formal coherence in depictions of the spiritual realm, patterns that materialise from era to era like half-forgotten clues in a perennial treasure hunt. The circle appears again and again — as a mandala and a full moon, as orbiting heavenly bodies in Jordan Belson's 1952 *Brain Drawings* and as an aching, irradiated void in the skull in Duane Linklater's "Migraine 1" (2022).

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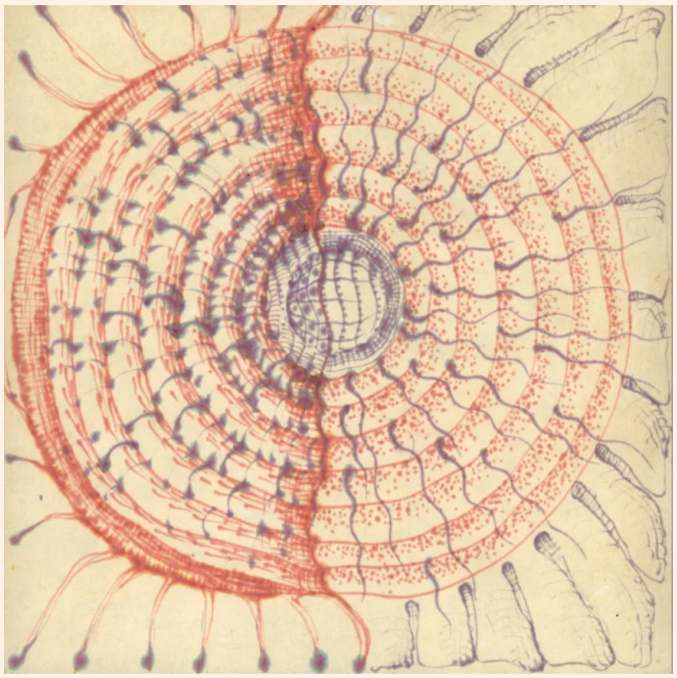


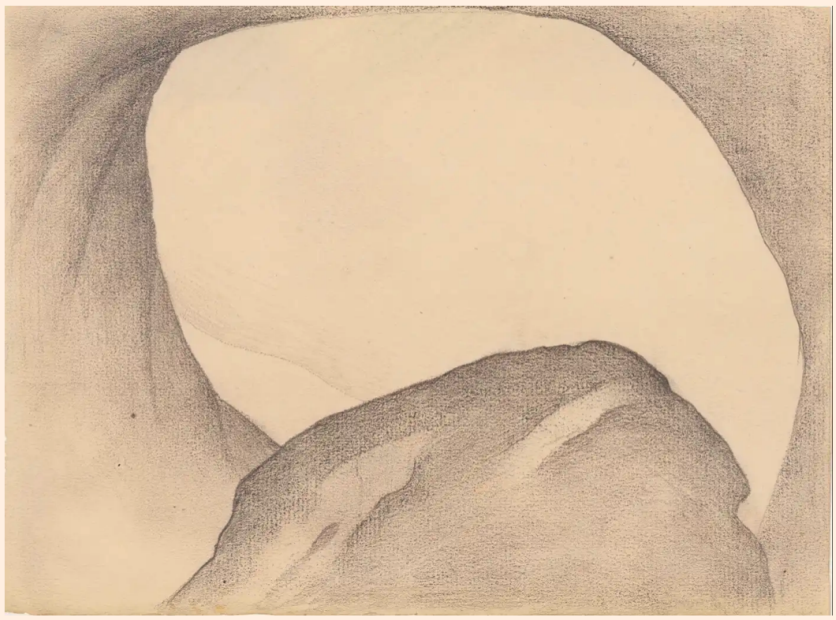
Jordan Belson, 'Brain Drawing' (1952) © Estate of Jordan Belson, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Cameron, 'Pluto Transiting the Twelfth House' (1978-86) © Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun and the Cameron Parsons Foundation. Photo: Daniel Terna

Other motifs pop up, too, their connotations vaguer than vague but their rhythms recognisable. A bulbous silhouette takes the form of a mountain (in a Georgia O'Keeffe landscape) or an astrological event (in Cameron's "Pluto Transiting the Twelfth House" from 1978-86). I scanned the galleries for a more familiar iteration of the same lumpy form, the elephant inside the boa constrictor from *The Little Prince*, but this context is too transcendently sober to include anything so playful.

This collection of rarefied gestures adds up to a curator's credo. Shao seems to believe that in every culture and in any time, artists tap into metaphysical forces by invoking a consistent repertoire of visual forms. Her approach is deliberately ahistorical. By gathering works created in multiple centuries, she hopes to strip away time and identity, letting each image resonate with all the others in an orchestra of jangling symbols. She doesn't address the question of whether these resonances come from universal principles or banal convention. Do wavy lines imply invisible motion by some inherent property or just by consensus? Do grids really impose order on open space, or have we merely learned to see them that way?

Spend enough time drifting from one galactic or internal vista to another and you find yourself in the border zone where the abstract and the illusionistic overlap. O'Keeffe's wavering lines against a blank ground evoke wind or choppy water, or birds in flight. In one of her untitled landscapes, we see a shining patch of sky from inside the mouth of a cave. (A similar perspective, of the Moon seen from an opening in the Earth, anchors the Metropolitan Opera's prettily spiritual new production of Wagner's *Lohengrin*.)

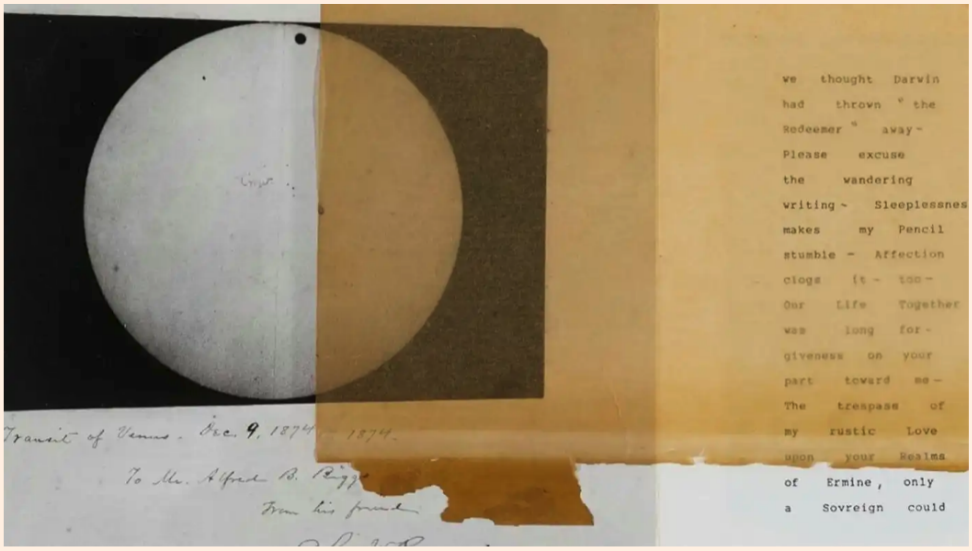


Georgia O'Keeffe, 'Untitled (Landscape)' (1960s) © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

These recurring signs necessarily hint more than they unveil. "The artistic image is always a metonym, where one thing is substituted for another," wrote the director Andrei Tarkovsky, whose film *Solaris* is excerpted here. "The infinite cannot be made into matter, but it is possible to create an illusion of the infinite."

These assorted metonyms, metaphors and meta-works speak to me only intermittently. Lee Bontecou's untitled drawing from 1960 is one that does: it compresses the sensual menace of her sculptures into two scaleless dimensions, so that you can't tell the minuscule from the boundless. The dark space at its centre could be an eye or some other ravenous orifice, but it might just as easily represent a volcano's crater, a dark sun or a black hole sucking life from the galaxy. You can see it receding into nothingness or swelling like a bump, at once void and protuberance.

A mixture of the intimate and the cosmic permeates two collages by the journalist Janet Malcolm, who joined pages cut from astronomy books with fragmentary passages by poet Emily Dickinson. Malcolm seems an odd interloper here, like an unyielding rationalist who has wandered into a seance. A bit of back-story, included in the catalogue, helps explain her presence. In 2012, Malcom acquired a copy of the book *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios*, a compilation of handwritten notes and scraps of love letters that the scholar Marta Werner had retyped and arranged on the page with great aesthetic precision.

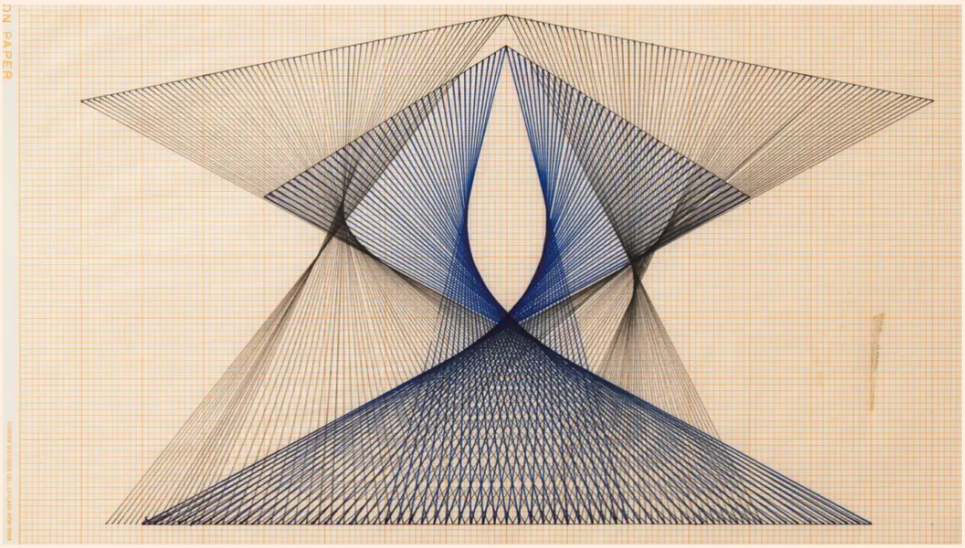


Janet Malcolm, 'Ermine', from the 'Emily Dickinson Series' (2013) © Etienne Frossard. All rights reserved

She was drawn into an epistolary relationship with Werner and a dive into Dickinson's life, which somehow complemented Malcolm's interest in 19th-century astronomers and their photographs of the transit of Venus. As if in a historical detective novel, these strands turned out to twine in intricate and startling ways, leading towards some of the more outré zones of Victorian sexuality.

The coincidences and connections rattled her: "There does seem to be something occult going on here, and I don't think I believe in the occult," she wrote to Werner. The result of her discomfiting obsessions is the *Emily Dickinson Series* of collages, in which free-floating words share a habitat with planets, their clarity occluded behind onionskin paper like pages from an ancient photograph album.

Don't tell an artist not to gaze into an eclipse. In a 1965 work by that name, Lenore Tawney prefigures the shapes in Malcolm's collages, giving us a perfect circle with lines flaring beyond its edges, a radiance escaping the force field of shadows. Tawney worked mostly with fibre, so this kind of peekaboo layering was unusual for her, but the mystical aspirations weren't. In 1957, she moved to Coenties Slip, a hive of artistic activity at the then-decaying tip of Manhattan. Influenced by her new neighbours, including Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly, she took up minimalism and eastern religion with equal enthusiasm, creating frameless tapestries that hung in the air like stars.



Lenore Tawney, 'Untitled' (1965) © Courtesy of the Lenore G Tawney Foundation, New York, and Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski

Shao's desire to detach pieces from their temporal context rubs against the viewer's need — well, my need, anyway — to be oriented, to ground glimpses of the eternal in snapshots of a particular moment. There's a reason that the 20th-century French semiotician Roland Barthes produced wriggling nets that occupy a grey zone between mark and meaning: he was interested in what makes signs intelligible, how a combination of lines and dots acquires content.

In the spirit of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, which transform handwriting into art, Barthes' elegant strokes explode with inner energy. A dense vortex dissipates at the edges, where flecks of ink shoot away on disparate trajectories. Another of his drawings displays the gulf between the show's limitless goals and its inherent frustrations. A school of sperm-like squiggles darts through space in all directions, leaving indecipherable contrails that seem to fade even as they appear. That right there is *la condition humaine* expressed in a handful of runes.

To May 14, drawingcenter.org

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