

# I AM THE PROBLEM

Edward A. Burke



The catalog's selected artwork portrays the ongoing environmental destruction. I have communicated this crisis through various visual mediums for the past two decades. The narratives are expressed as traditional paintings and drawings, along with a digital process named "Tradigital." This process has resulted in large-scale monoprints, projections, and large monitor images, further amplifying the arts' visual communication.

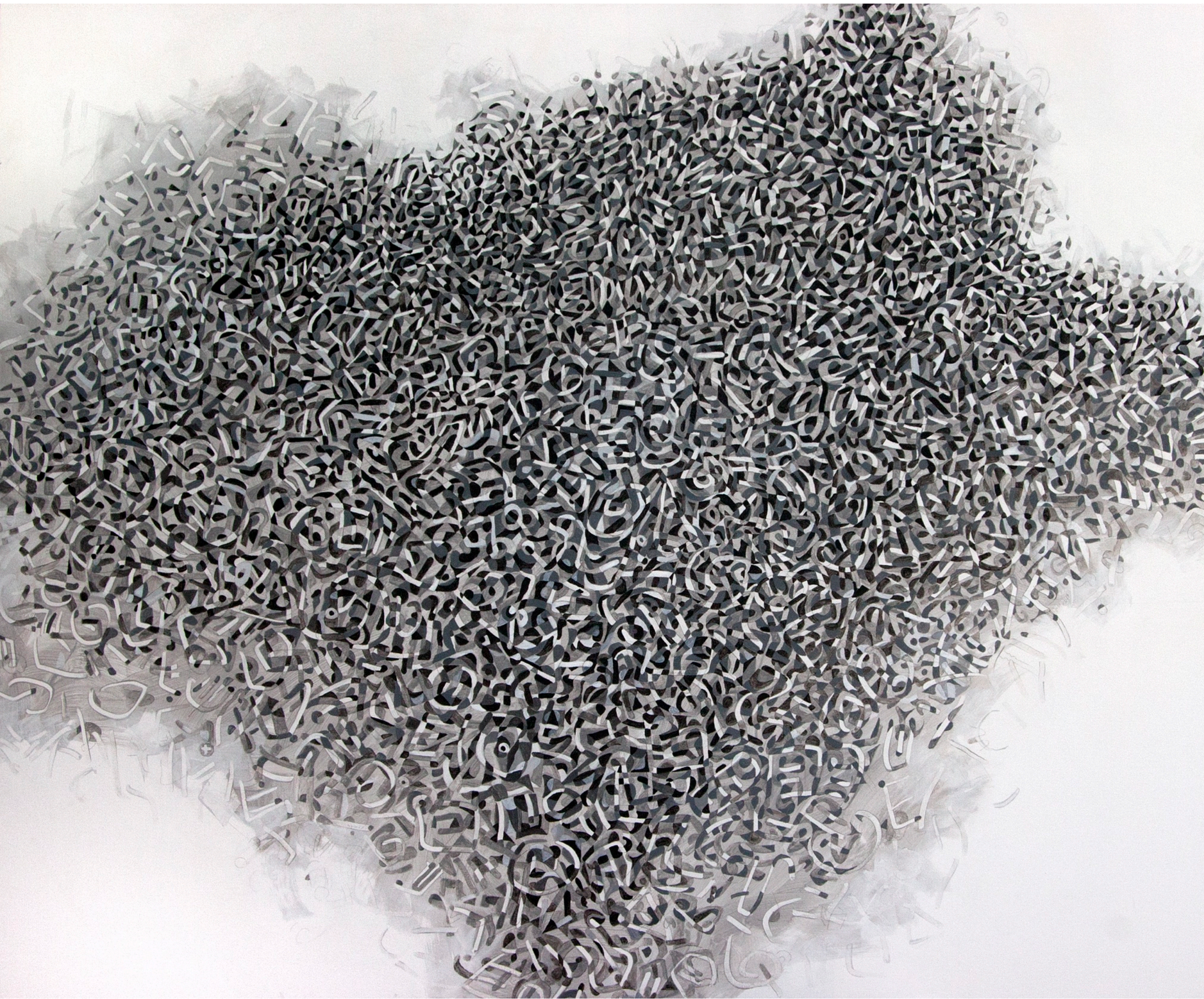
George Kondogainis, a renowned expert in digital imaging and fine art inkjet prints, contributes to the quality of this digital expression through his expertise in digital media and master printing.

## **Plastic Sea**

"Plastic Sea" is a piece that holds a special place in my body of work, as it represents a turning point in my artistic journey. The genesis for this composition stemmed from a profound documentary experience that highlighted the devastating consequences of ocean pollution. Watching Anna Cummins, the Executive Director and co-founder of 5-Gyres, describe the staggering amount of garbage swirling in our oceans was eye-opening. Contrary to some media portrayals, these are not massive islands of trash, but the issue is just as severe. Plastic materials, in particular, disintegrate into minuscule particles that marine life ingests, creating a destructive ripple effect. What's alarming is that these pollutants don't solely harm sea creatures; they find their way back to us through the seafood we consume, carrying toxins that pose serious threats.

This revelation haunted my thoughts and infiltrated my dreams, compelling me to express my concerns through art. "Plastic Sea" is the tangible culmination of these emotions. It's a painting that captures the essence of this environmental crisis, the subtle yet impactful way plastic infiltrates our oceans and ecosystems—included in the Katonah Museum's Juried Biennale Exhibit 2010; at the exhibition's opening, it sparked profound conversations about ocean pollution and its far-reaching consequences for our planet.

"Plastic Sea" serves as a visual representation of an urgent environmental issue and catalyzes dialogue and awareness. It marks a pivotal moment in my artistic journey, where my work became a medium to communicate critical messages about our world's fragile balance. This piece embodies my commitment to shedding light on environmental issues and using my art as a vehicle for change, inspiring others to take action and make a difference.



Plastic Sea 2012 Acrylic on Canvas 60" X 48"

## Sun Block

The painting "Sun Block" is my vision of the "Coral Reef Death," caused by manmade waste floating in the world's oceans, blocking sunlight from reaching coral reefs. Without the sun, coral dies. At this point in our history, fifty percent of the ocean's coral is dead. This living organism is vital to the ocean's and biosphere's balance and health.

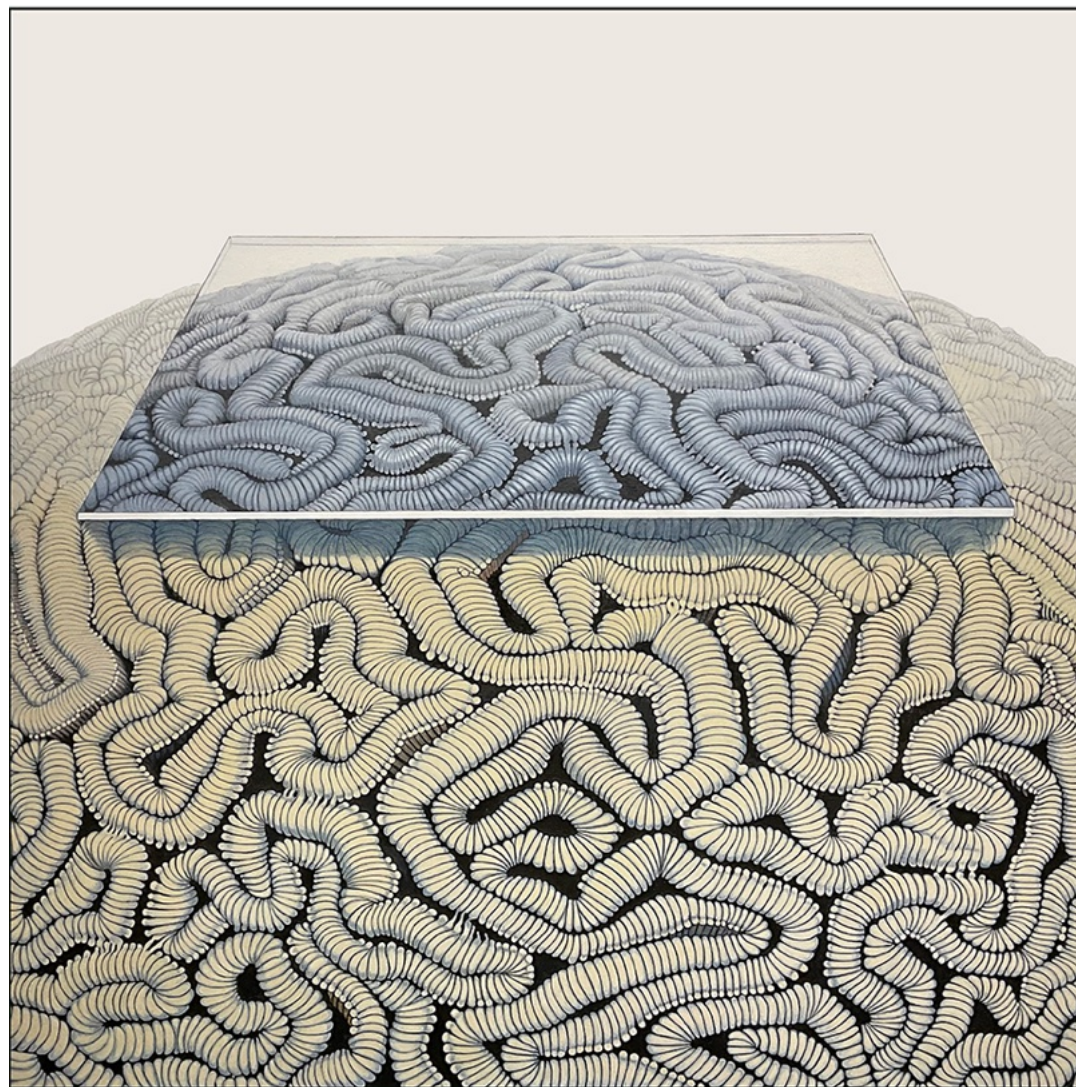
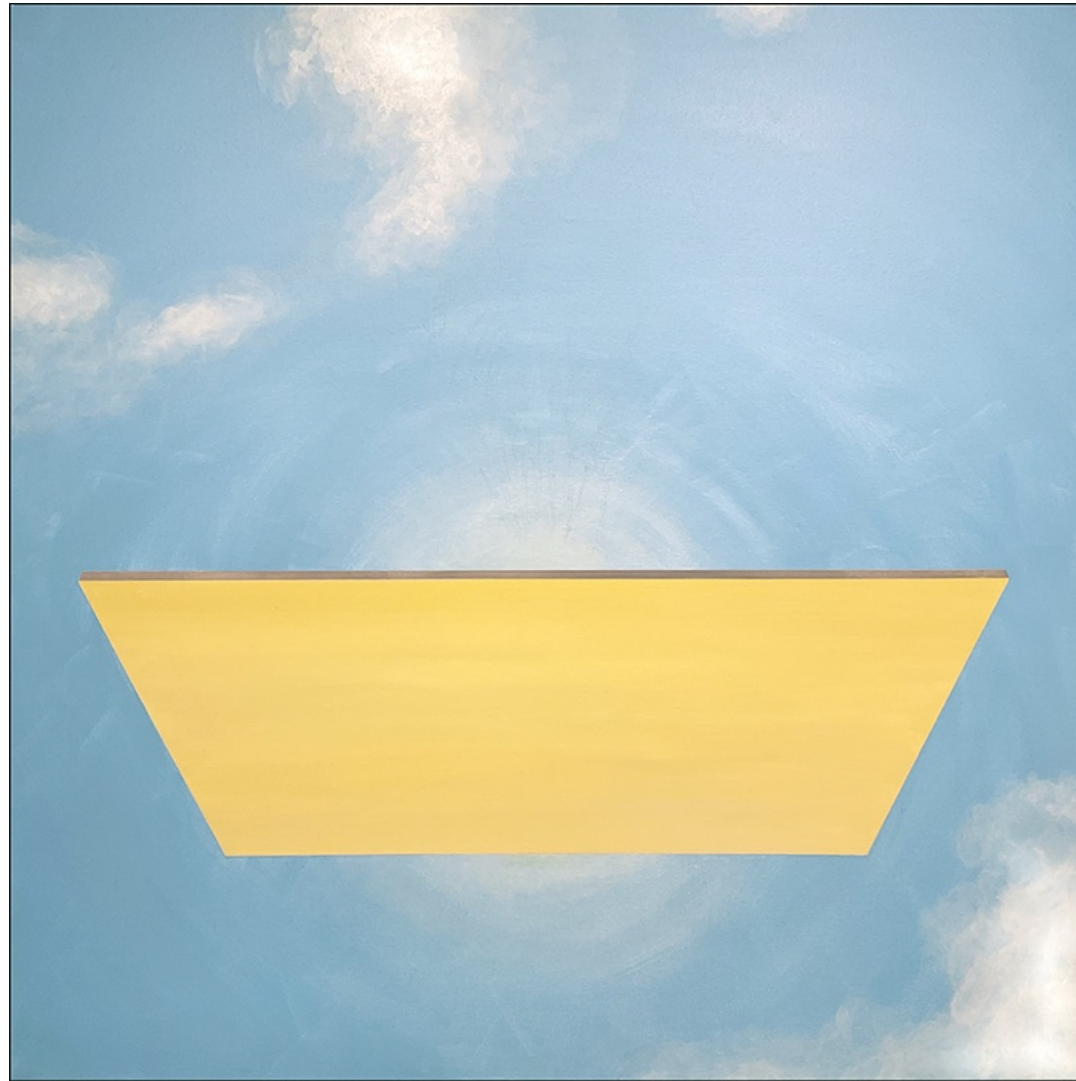
Sailing the star dome above  
on azure blue sea, I loved,  
beckons maidens tears of scorn  
for fading coral life, they warn.

— EAB

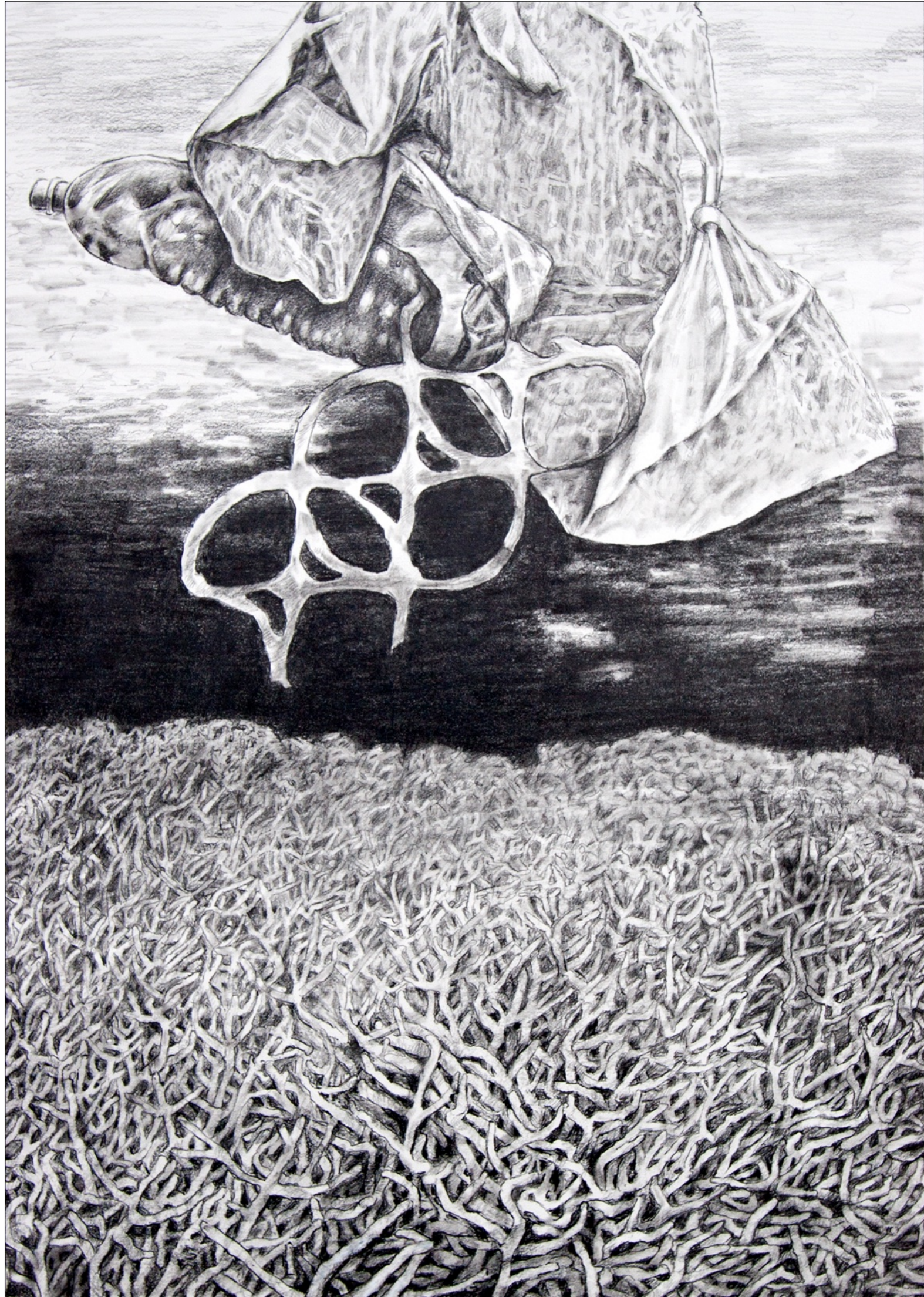
I divided the picture plane into two—the top representing the sky and sun and the bottom representing the ocean and coral. The simple geometric shapes represent manufactured objects. Beneath is a representation of a brain coral. I like the shape of its curve against the rectangular form above it.

A Cornell University study found diseases on coral reefs are impacted by plastic. Plastics carry pathogens and are a vector for diseases to flourish on coral reefs. Floating or submerged hard debris can also damage corals by blocking sunlight from reaching them, leading to low-oxygen conditions that allow disease-causing bacteria to thrive and damage or kill the corals.

The name "Brain Coral" is given to the Muscidae and Merulinidae coral families due to their resemblance to the human brain. These coral species are found in shallow water reefs in most of the world's oceans. These corals are living animals, "Anthozoa" or "flower animals," and are a vital part of reef-building as a habitat for sea life. The life span of Brain Coral can be nine hundred years if not destroyed by humans.



Sun Block 2022 Acrylic on Canvas Diptych 36" x 72"



Somewhere Beneath the Sea 2019 Graphite Pencil on Paper 15" x 21"

## **EATING YOUR TOYS 2023**

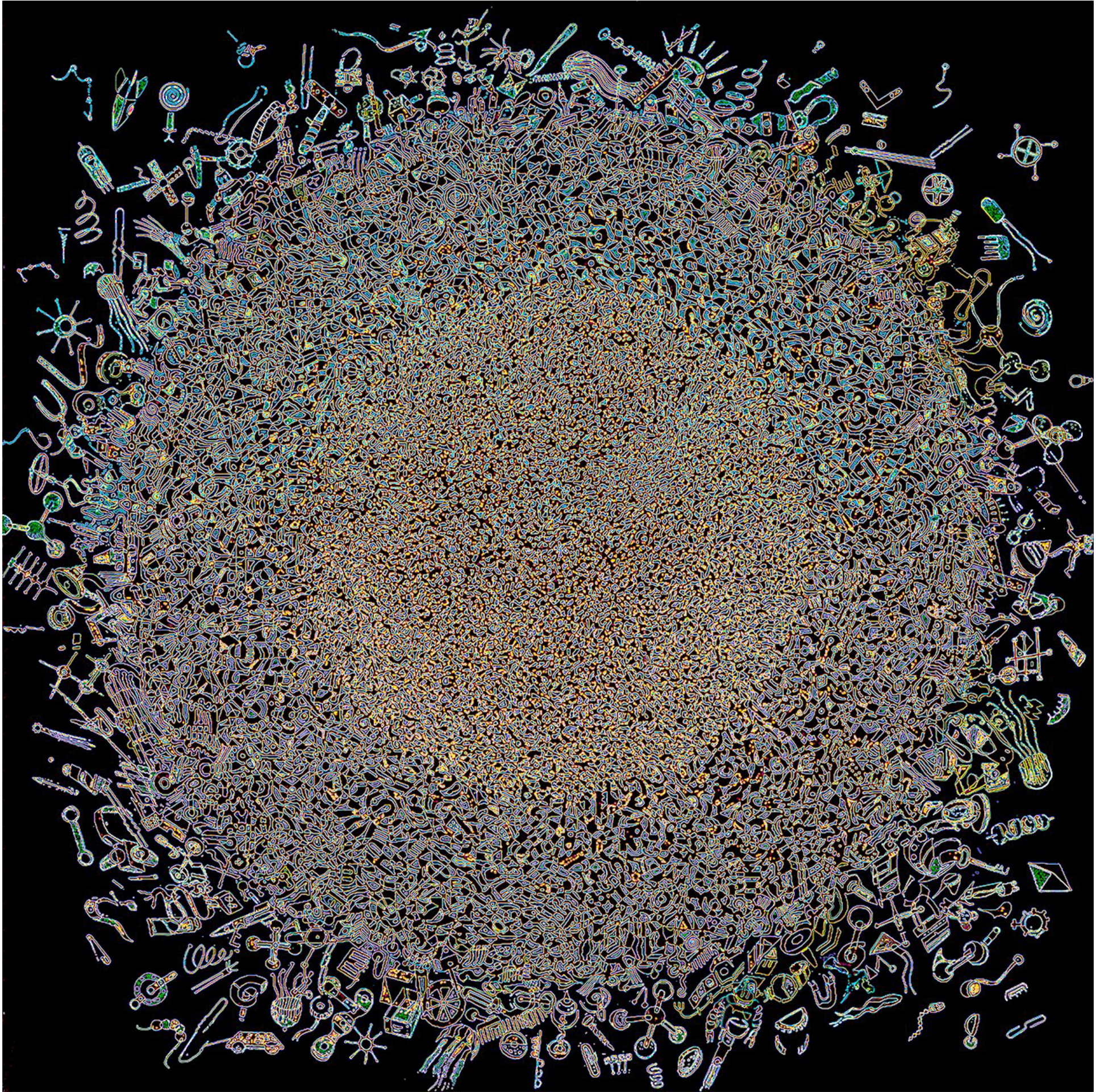
This new tradigital adaptation of my 2014 painting, "Eating Your Toys," conveys the same message as the original. I used a large-scale image of the original painting, brought it into a digital environment, added new objects, and manipulated various layers in my Apple Mini computer to produce this dramatic monoprint.

This original painting was my response to the endless pollution crisis of the world's oceans. The title "Eating Your Toys" addresses my hypothesis that our toys may have ended up as waste in our oceans when we were children.

The central theme revolves around the concept that these cherished childhood items, such as toy soldiers, figurines, ping pong balls, and dolls, have become part of the marine ecosystem in a harmful way. Over time, they degrade into tiny particles known as microplastics, often mistaken for food by marine creatures. This misidentification creates a ripple effect up the food chain, ultimately leading to humans unknowingly consuming these microplastics when enjoying seafood like salmon, tuna, and lobster.

Through this artwork, I aim to shed light on the consequences of our society's disposable culture and the long-lasting impact of plastic waste on our environment. The circular composition can be seen as a universe of or a single micro-plastic of pollutants, depending on the observation distance. At the same time, the gathering of these objects symbolizes the entrapment of our collection of childhood memories within this ecological crisis. It's a sobering reminder that we are literally "eating our toys."

I invite viewers to reflect on the interconnectedness of our actions and the environment, inspiring even modest changes in our behavior that may provide a more sustainable approach to the world's oceans. I hope the artwork engages the audience emotionally, sparking both concern and curiosity about the fate of our planet and the discarded toys of our past.

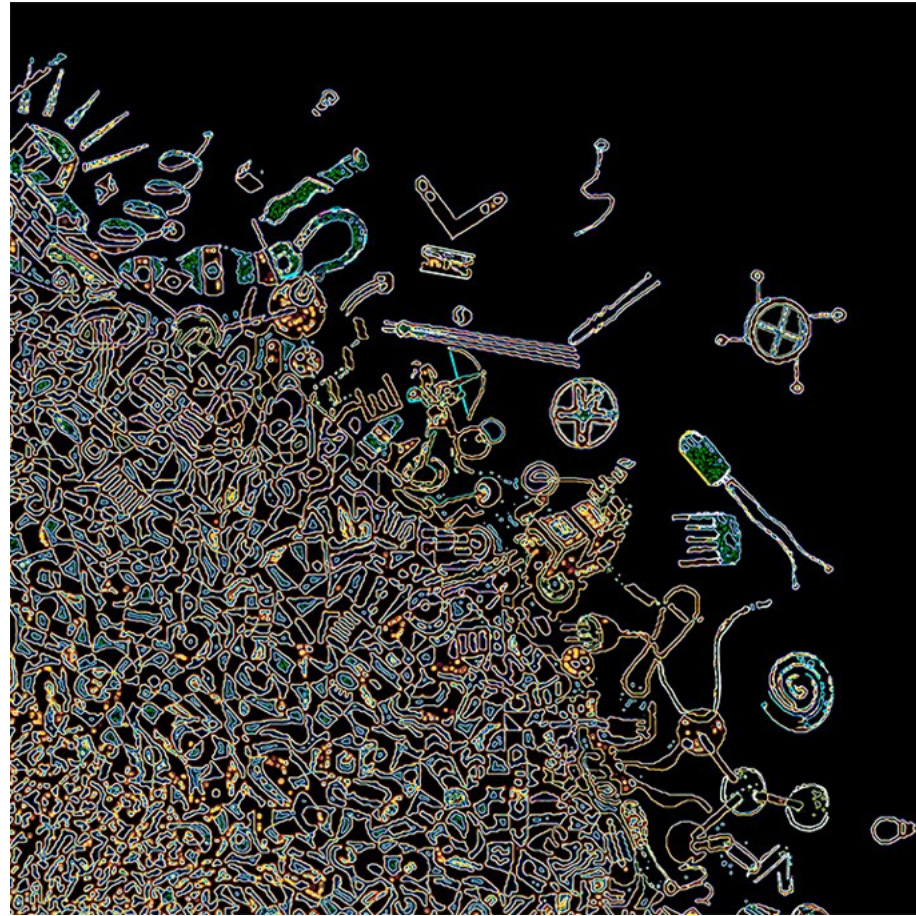


Eating Your Toys 2024 Tradigital / Monoprint 60" x 60"





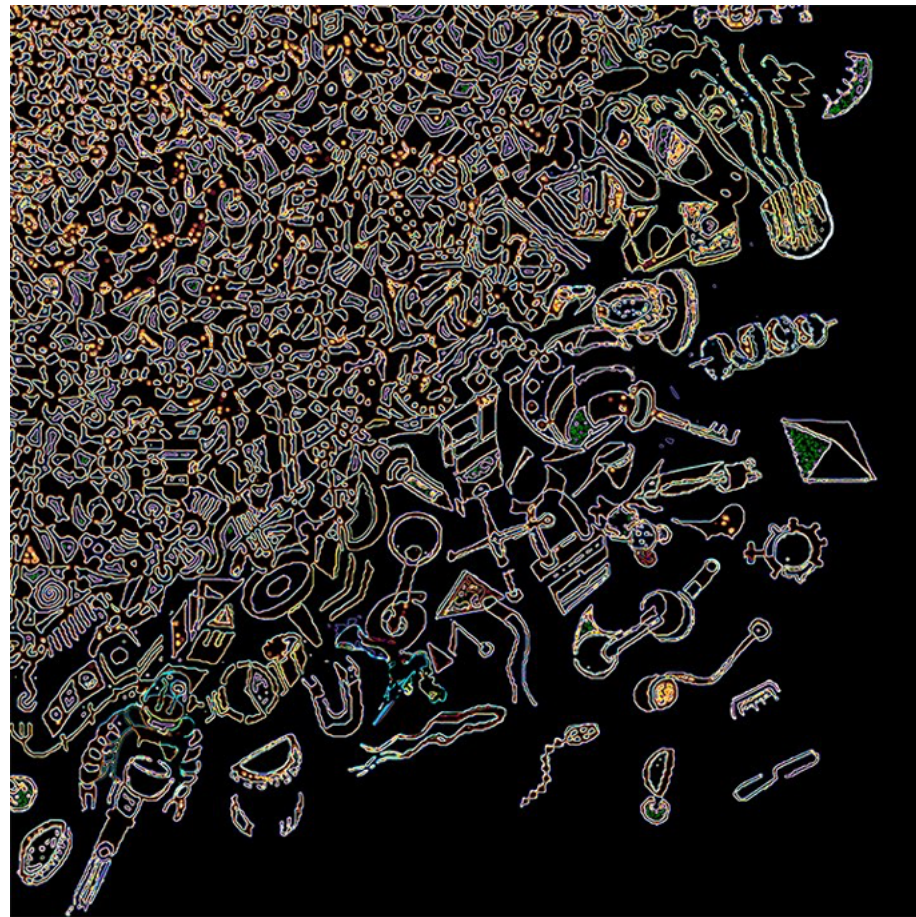
Upper Left Detail



Upper Right Detail



Lower Left Detail



Lower Right Detail

## **CAUSE & EFFECT**

In "Cause & Effect," I attempt to convey the impact of human activities on the fragile biosphere that sustains us. The central figure, prominently positioned in the foreground, represents humanity itself. The head of the figure emits billowing smokestacks, releasing toxic emissions into the atmosphere. This imagery symbolizes how our actions have dire consequences for the environment.

But this portrayal has a twist—the cube replacing the figure's skull. This cube signifies humans understanding of the planet's importance and vital resources. It's as if he is aware of the damage he's causing, trapped in a mental cube of realization. This juxtaposition of the industrial and the cognitive creates a powerful commentary on the human condition.

Above the central figure are suspended cubes representing manufactured objects created at any cost to our planet. Within these cubes are symbolic life forms encapsulated and destroyed by the relentless pursuit of production. The sky's unnatural colors, and the figure's skeletal depiction further emphasize the narrative of ecological degradation and human destruction.



Cause & Effect 2023 Tradigital / Monoprint 60" x 60"

## **Earth VS. Alien Invaders**

This drawing combines my love of vintage 50's science fiction films and uses it as a metaphor for our current global warming crisis. The genesis of the drawing is the science fiction movies of my childhood, as in "Them," giant ants spawned from radiation, and in "The Day The Earth Stood Still," an alien visitor comes to Earth to stop us from destroying our planet.

In place of radioactive monsters or alien visitors, I inferred that Polyethylene plastic bottles are the same threat as radiation in those films. Of course, you could argue that these threats never came true in real life; however, we have Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Chornobyl. We lived under the constant threat of global annihilation during the Cold War and now.

### **A little story of my first drawing**

I remember my first drawing in my bedroom at 444 49th Street in Brooklyn, NY, in the early nineteen fifties. I was lying in bed with a yellow-lined pad and pencil, creating a spaceship. The drawing included equipment, helmets, oxygen tanks, ray guns, and provisions for my journey. My provisions included water, milk, puffed rice cereal, and, most vital, chocolate-covered graham crackers and pretzel rods to sustain me in outer space.

Truth be told, when I have trouble sleeping, I occasionally create a mental image of a spacecraft for a journey, much more detailed and sophisticated than that first drawing. However, I still include the chocolate-covered Grahams in the provisions.



"Earth VS. Alien Invaders" 2021 Graphite Pencil on Paper 14" x 19.5

## **DEAD BEE**

"Dead Bee" represents the issue of colony collapse disorder and the alarming decline in global bee populations—the connection between rising CO2 levels and their devastating impact on bees. The smokestacks with billowing yellow smoke represent endless manufacturing, releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and impacting the life of the bee centered in the composition. This depiction conveys the stark reality of heightened atmospheric CO2 levels, primarily from manufacturing activities, substantially reducing protein content within pollen.

Researchers' findings highlight the critical role of protein in pollen as a vital food source for honey bees. The decline in protein availability significantly hampers the reproduction ability of these essential pollinators. As "Dead Bee" infers, this reduction in bee populations poses a severe threat to food resources, given that bees are pivotal in pollinating approximately 60% of humankind's agricultural foods.

My intention in this artwork is to help raise awareness about bee populations' immediate peril and underscore the intricate balance between human activities, environmental factors, and the delicate ecosystems that sustain our food sources.



Dead Bee 2021 Tradigital / Monoprint 36" x 45"

## **Colorless & Odorless**

Colorless & Odorless, created for a collaborative exhibition, "Joseph Zito – Exhibit, Plus 10" at Lennon & Weinberg NYC, was a remarkable opportunity to showcase my art, particularly my contribution titled "Colorless & Odorless." This collaborative exhibit delved into the critical issue of honey bee populations and their ongoing struggle with Colony Collapse Disorder. My artwork, "Colorless & Odorless," aimed to shed light on the role of carbon dioxide in this global crisis.

My research for creating this piece led me to an eye-opening research paper published by the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies in 2016, authored by Lisa Palmer, titled "How Rising CO2 Levels May Contribute to Die-Off of Bees." This paper revealed the alarming impact of increasing CO2 levels in the atmosphere on honey bees. It was a pivotal moment in my artistic exploration. The research highlighted how the gradual rise in atmospheric CO2 caused a significant reduction in protein content in pollen over decades, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels.

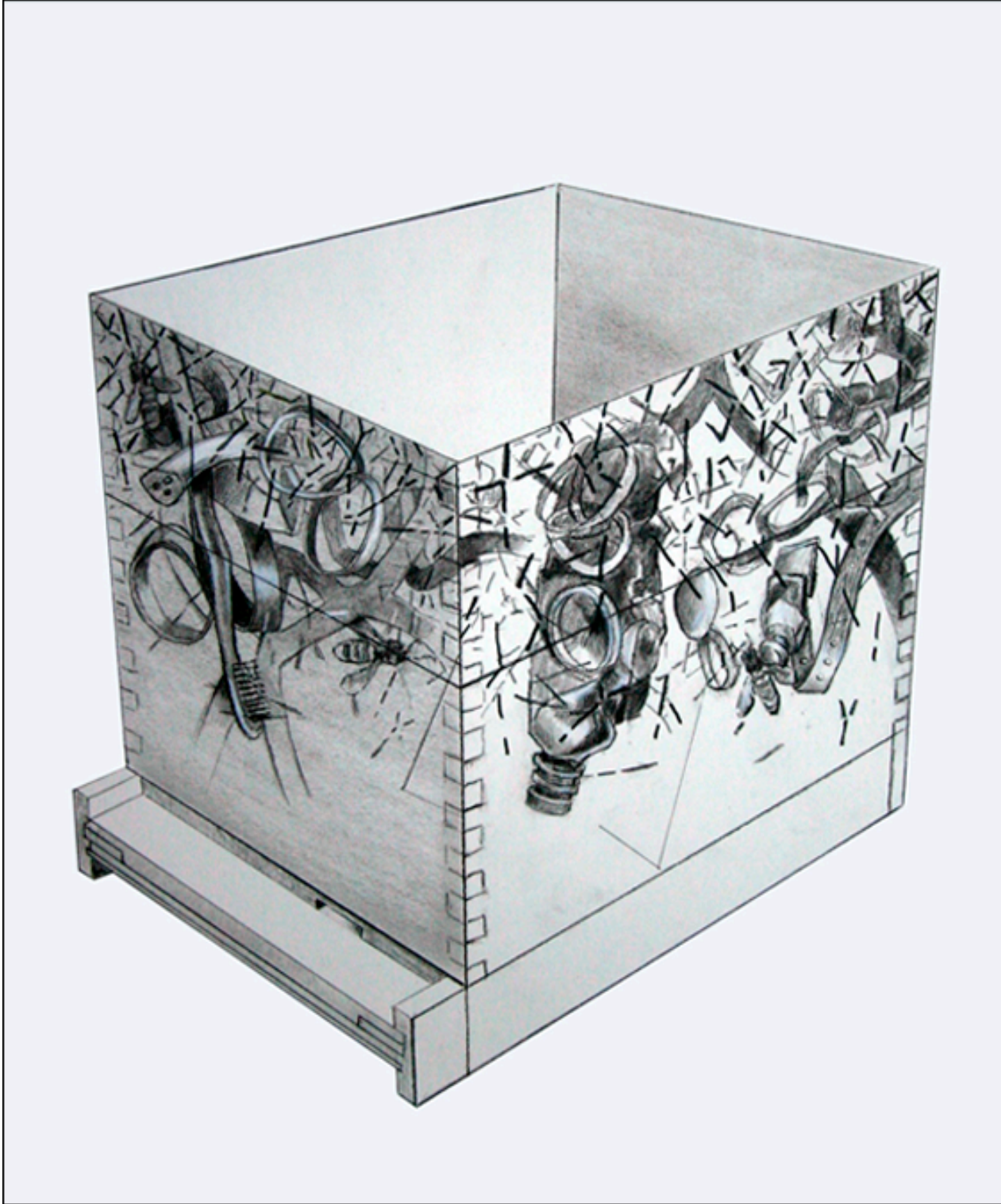
This decrease in protein-rich pollen has profoundly affected honey bee reproduction, a key factor contributing to colony collapse. To put it into perspective, honey bees are crucial in pollinating approximately 60% of our food sources, making their decline a global concern.

In "Colorless & Odorless," I incorporated symbolic imagery to convey the broader implications of our actions. I aimed to illustrate how our choices, such as the widespread manufacturing of disposable products in our homes, have far-reaching consequences. Through my art, I came to a profound realization – I, too, am part of the intricate web of factors contributing to the bee population decline.





Colorless & Odorless 2018 Acrylic Paint on Wooden Object 14" X 22" x 19 Stand: 14" x 22" x 34"



Colorless & Doorless 1 & 2 2018 Graphite On Paper 18" x 24"



Colony Collapse 2021 Acrylic on Canvas 30" x 40"

## **Broken Water**

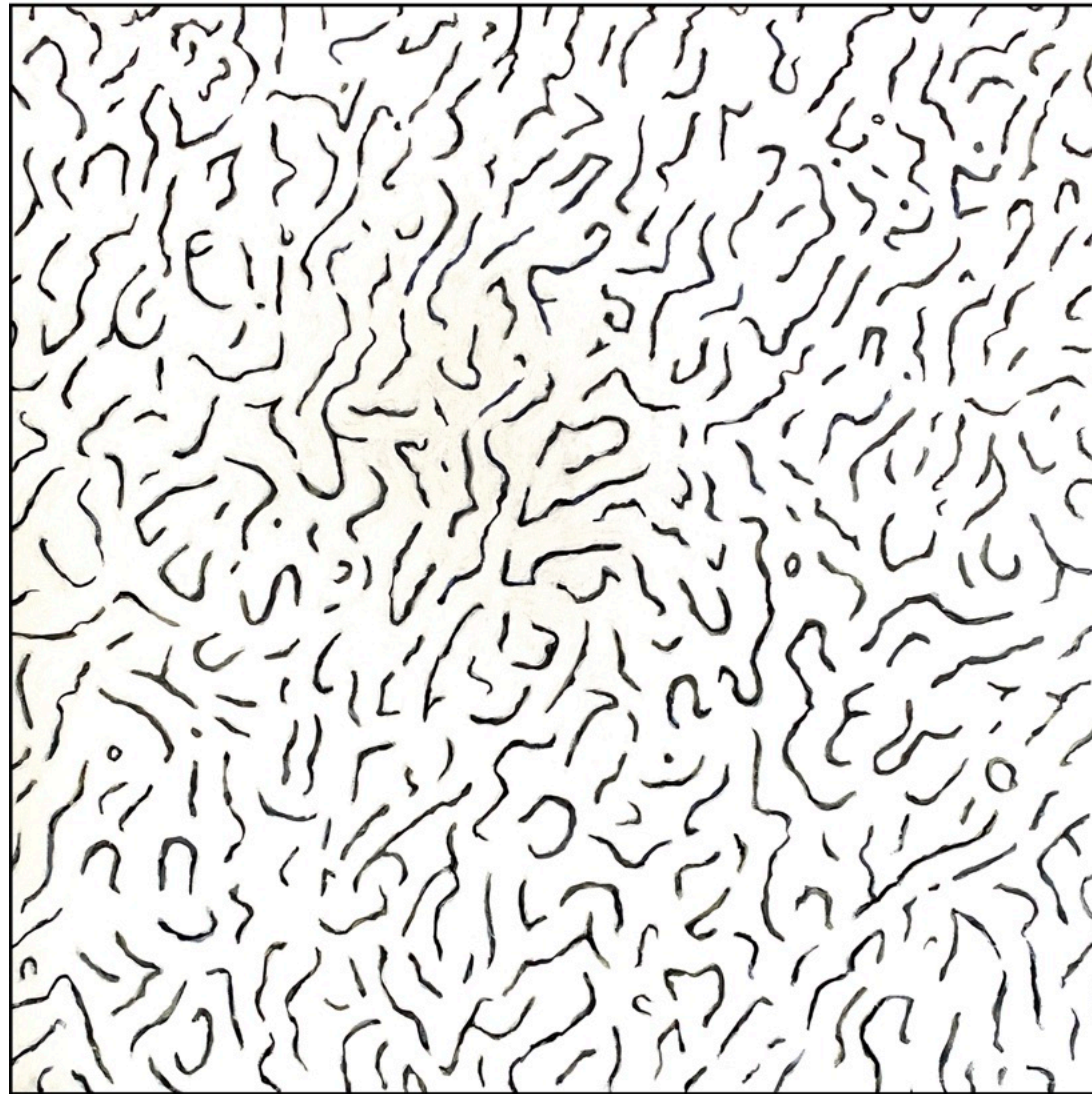
This work invokes water as a symbol of purity and rebirth, often associated with religious rituals like baptism. This aspect invites viewers to reflect on the spiritual significance of water and its role in cleansing and renewal.

On the other hand, "Broken Water" also points directly at the environmental crisis we face, where our disregard for this precious resource has led to its contamination and depletion. It's a stark reminder of the urgent need to address environmental issues and preserve this life-sustaining element. In this context, the title challenges us to confront the fragility of our planet's ecosystems and the consequences of our actions.

What's fascinating about art, mainly "Broken Water," is the concept of \*pareidolia. This human tendency is to find recognizable shapes or meaningful images in random or ambiguous patterns, like seeing faces in clouds or figures in inkblots. It's a phenomenon that highlights the subjective nature of our perception. In the case of this artwork, viewers may bring their own emotional experiences and interpretations, further enriching its meaning.

Beyond the canvas, pareidolia extends to our everyday lives. We all perceive the world through our emotional prism, whether in matters of religion, science, society, or politics. It's a reminder that our personal experiences and beliefs shape how we view and interact with the world around us.

*\*Pareidolia: par·ei·do·lia, the tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern is a human tendency. The scientific explanation for some people is pareidolia, or the human ability to see shapes or make pictures out of randomness. Think of the Rorschach inkblot test.*



Broken Water 2020 Acrylic on Canvas Diptych 36" x 72"

## **Plastic Spring Water**

The painting conveys a message about our society's relationship with water. It's disheartening that we've reached a point where people are hesitant to drink tap water in urban areas or even well water in suburban and rural regions. This apprehension is a direct consequence of our reckless actions, such as over-fertilizing lawns, employing toxic chemicals on the land, and recklessly disposing of waste, which results in the contamination of freshwater sources on a global scale.

One of the ironies that the painting highlights is that buying spring water in plastic bottles exacerbates the depletion of this vital resource. This holds true regardless of whether the plastic bottle contains BPA or not. It underscores our society's paradoxical relationship with nature, where our attempts to preserve something can inadvertently lead to its destruction.

The painting's symbolism extends to our societal obsession with hydration. The depiction of people in urban environments carrying oversized water bottles, as if they were navigating a wilderness and struggling for survival, serves as a commentary on our collective mentality. It reflects how disconnected we've become from the true source of water and the consequences of our actions on its quality.

The reference to the Mayo Clinic's research on BPA (Bisphenol A) adds another layer of depth to the narrative. It highlights the potential health risks associated with plastic containers and underscores the need for greater awareness and action to address our choices' environmental and health consequences.

In essence, "Plastic Spring Water" is a painting representing issues surrounding spring water sales in plastic bottles. The work speaks to my observations and intentions on the environmental impact of our choices and the urgency of preserving our precious freshwater resources for future generations.



Plastic Spring Water 2015 Acrylic on Canvas 30" x 40"

## **Storm Warning**

The inspiration for the Storm Warning narrative serves as a visual reminder to the viewer of global warming and climate change, manifesting in the heightened severity of storms and extreme weather conditions that are becoming increasingly prevalent. The inspiration for these two works draws from NASA's reports on extreme storms over Earth's tropical oceans, with a 2018 study reinforcing global warming as the primary driver behind the intensification and increased frequency of such storms.

The chaotic swirling of human belongings in the sky underscores the tragic impact of these recurring storms. The staggering annual release of approximately six and a half metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere, resulting from burning fuels and manufacturing processes, points to a significant human environmental footprint. Disposable goods contribute to greenhouse gases, citing the alarming rise in eWaste in 2019, which reached a staggering 53.5 million metric tons.

*"Through this artistic expression, the artist prompts reflection on the consequences of our consumption patterns, emphasizing the environmental toll of manufacturing and disposal practices. The link invites viewers to delve deeper into the artist's exploration of these themes through his artwork."*

*--- Kathryn Barns Smith ---*





Storm Warning AM & Storm Warning PM 2021 Tradigital / Monoprints 48" x 23"

## Lady of The Snow

"Lady of the Snow" is a large canvas that reflects the poetic essence of "Blizzard" by Terry Lennon, bridging the elegance of verse and the harsh realities of our changing climate. The artwork's narrative was the lasting impression of Terry Lennon's evocative poem, "Blizzard." Excerpt below;

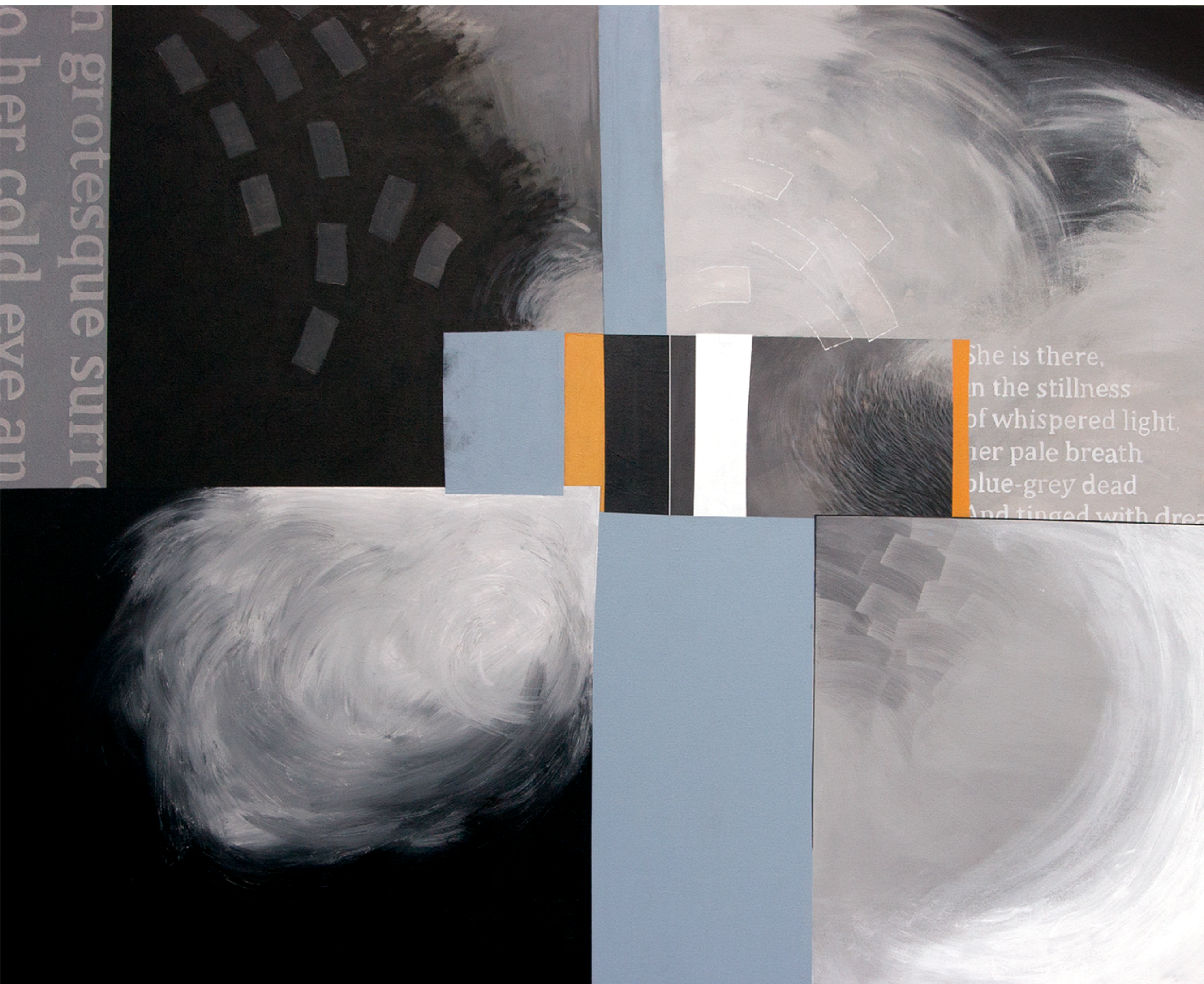
...We are drawn to her  
peering through small white drifts  
on a mullioned grid  
into the faint ice blue of her belly,  
until with cold chortle  
she blows our world black...."

--- Terry Lennon

As seen in the excerpt, Lennon's words beckon us to peer into the small white drifts and contemplate the mysterious, ice-blue world within. The poem captures the essence of a snowstorm's power and its ability to transform our surroundings. In these verses, I found inspiration for "Lady of the Snow."

I intend to communicate this poem's emotional impact through the visual medium. My approach lies in allowing the poem's power to shine through the artwork without overshadowing it with excessive detail or complexity. Instead, I aim to honor the poem's elegance with the increased severity of storms by intertwining them in the visual concept, inviting viewers to contemplate the delicate balance between nature's beauty and its unpredictability.

Ultimately, "Lady of the Snow" is a testament to the unspoken dialogue between poetry and visual art, where creativity tells a story of our ever-changing world.



Lady of The Snow 2011 Acrylic on Canvas 60" x 48"



Dream Crow 2022 Tradigital / Monoprint 36" x 45"



Storm Warning 2021 Acrylic on Birch Panel 18" x 24"