

MORGAN LEHMAN

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# HYPERALLERGIC

## Painting Cosmic Phenomena with Patterns of Subatomic Decay



By Daniel Gerwin | Posted: July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017

LOS ANGELES — Legend has it that King Solomon once ordered his wise man to find him something that would make a sad man happy and a happy man sad. The wise man searched for many years before he finally returned, presenting Solomon with a plain silver ring bearing a four-word inscription: *this too shall pass*.

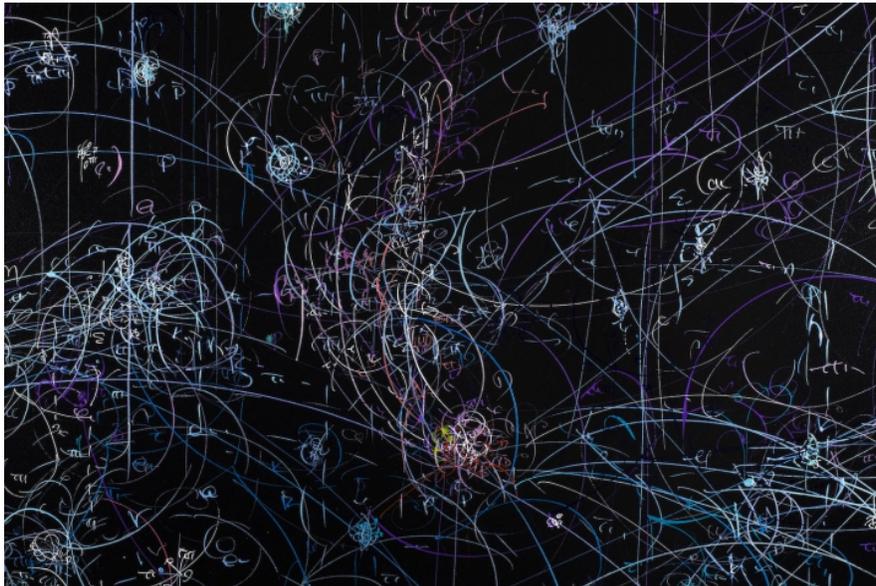
Kysa Johnson's paintings work similarly, but by different means. *As Above So Below*, Johnson's first solo show with Von Lintel Gallery and her first in Los Angeles, consists of 12 colorful ink-on-board works representing cosmic phenomena like nebula, neutron stars, and star clouds, anchored by an installation in the back room. Johnson does not portray the universe as we see it in photographs from the Hubble Telescope, though those pictures are clearly among her points of departure. Rather, she creates her images by building up a palimpsest of subatomic decay patterns: the straight, curvilinear, and spiraling paths of these

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tinest of particles, which scientists study using accelerators and electronic detectors. Like Solomon's ring, these pictures are emblems of constant change. Atoms decay, stars die.

Johnson has constructed a visual alphabet of 11 different decay patterns, which she draws in brightly hued inks on a black ground, layering and arranging them to render specific celestial bodies, say the Orion Nebula or Centaurus A. The effect is something like the blackboard of a psychedelic physicist, 4th of July fireworks, or ribbons of swirling confetti. The large and spectacular "blow up 322 – the long goodbye (history of gold) – subatomic decay patterns and rapidly spinning neutron star PSR – B1509 – 58" (2017), is a good example. With webs of line glowing magenta, yellow, white, violet, and blue over glossy darkness, Johnson combines cosmic scale with the infinitesimal world of protons, neutrons, and electrons. Considering yourself in relation to either the galactic or the atomic tends to dramatically shift your perspective: No matter how good or bad your day is going, it's not that big a deal to either the Horsehead Nebula or quantum mechanics.



The "we're all dust in the universe" view could easily shade into nihilism, but Johnson goes the opposite way, staking out a determined political stance. The floor of the gallery's back room is covered with a pyramidal arrangement of fake gold bars, mostly painted black with a few left gold, and a wall-size white-on-black drawing more than 20 feet wide and 12 feet high. The stack of bullion is a rather direct symbol of capitalism and avarice, and these days I find it impossible to look at gold without thinking of our gilt-enamored president. Next to the ingots, Johnson's large wall drawing is dominated by two Corinthian columns topped with orbs representing the sun and moon. The orbs identify these columns as the mythic Pillars of Solomon, of interest to Johnson for their significance in Masonic lore, which includes both

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self-purification and the alchemical “purification” of lead into gold. The columns, whatever else they represent, speak to me immediately of empire and of federal architecture in Washington, D.C., underscoring the relationship between material greed and the quest for worldly power.

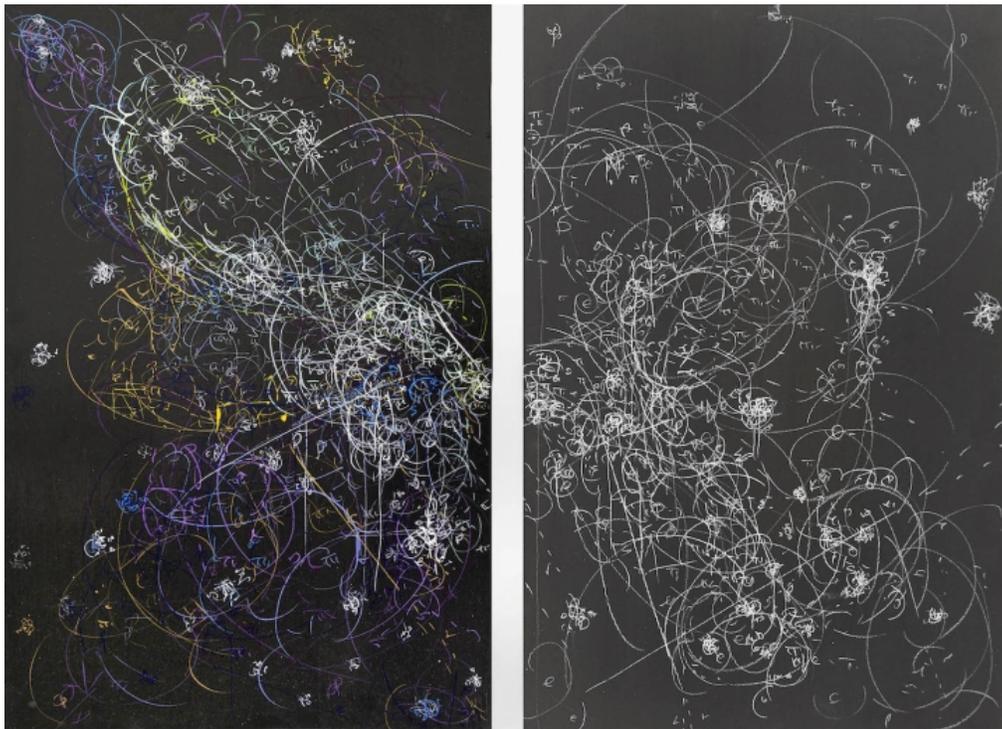


In addition to the drawing, five large works are hung around the pyramid, part of a “history of gold” subseries depicting neutron stars, which are theorized to be the source of all gold. All this strikes me as an indictment of our current gilded age, in which the gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to grow wider while the boundless greed of those now in power defies reason. As it happens, the same precious metal was used as a metaphor for the limitations of art’s power to challenge society in critic Clement Greenberg’s famous formulation of the avant-garde, whom he describes as tethered to the elite by an “umbilical cord of gold.” Greenberg’s words are as true today as when he published them in 1939, except that now artwork has the status of a liquid commodity, a shift that is leading to the closure of many midsize galleries as the blue chips expand their dominance. Moreover, in the country with the world’s highest rate of incarceration, the 2007 financial crisis resulted in exactly one bank executive going to jail (and he was not a CEO). Given all this, Johnson’s work provokes troubling questions about the inability of art to challenge economic injustice.

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There is much pleasure to be had soaking in the chroma throughout the gallery, but one of my favorite pieces is “blow up 286 – the long goodbye – subatomic decay patterns and Centaurus A” (2016), with one panel in color and the other pared down to white on black. Though it’s only 18 x 24 inches, the little diptych captures Johnson’s full range, from the simple elegance of her drawing hand to her rich explosions of hue. It reminds me of a site-specific commission she did last year at Grace Farms Foundation in Connecticut, drawing in white on the floor-to-ceiling glass windows of the Pavilion, a work I have only seen in photographs but find beguiling. Removing color distills Johnson’s language into a crystalline merger of concept and balletic line; her draftsmanship animates everything she does. For me, the great delight and lasting wonder in her art is the trace of thought moving from mind to hand.



*As Above, So Below, continues at Von Lintel Gallery (2685 South La Cienega Boulevard) through August 12.*