

Paintings by Jerry Segal

Where Stars Are Born and Infinity Imagined

July 5–30, 2016

Artist reception Wednesday, July 13 • 7-9 PM

Jerry Segal’s prismatic images of spiraling, billowing gaseous star formations that he derived from Hubble Space Telescope photos immediately triggers, for me, a connection to the impact that photography had on painting during the nineteenth century. Soon after Kodak introduced the first hand-held camera in 1888, painters began exploring ways that this new mechanical form of image-making made it possible to capture details not visible to the naked eye, spontaneous moments and fleeting atmospheric effects. Artists instantly comprehended, and began tinkering with, the notion that the photographic image may factually document the world around them, yet it also merely depicts the illusion of reality. Altering the way artists, along with the rest of the world, thought about vision, memory and representation, the invention of photography was a societal game-changer. It literally changed the way we see.

The interstellar cosmos that Segal depicts represents a part of this universe that is real, yet will only ever be visually accessible to us through Hubble’s photographs. Akin to the appeal of the early days of photography, Hubble’s images, too, reveal features invisible to the eye, portray seemingly random scenes and capture evanescent atmospheric effects like the

mysterious shape-shifting movement of gases. Expanding on photography’s illusory link to reality, Hubble photographs, first introduced to the public in 1990, depict star formations that are billions of light years away and therefore no longer even exist. A game-changer, particularly in the realm of astronomy, these photographs enable us to visualize what we cannot see or quite grasp.

Observing the paintings included in *Where Stars Are Born and Infinity Imagined*, it is no wonder Segal is lured by Hubble’s imagery, the enigmatic concept of realness they depict and by the stupefying mysteriousness of the universe. A scientific instrument, the Hubble Telescope documents critical data that enables astronomers to more accurately measure the age of the universe, identify quasars, discover gamma-ray bursts, locate dark matter and see galaxies in different stages of formation. An expressive medium, the pictures evoke faraway landscapes, trippy other-worlds or wildly chromatic abstract compositions. Their forms, palette, scale and proportion are convincingly designed with artistic acumen. It’s as if Hubble images are an extreme symbiosis of science and aesthetics. An artist interested in pared-down imagery and distilled shapes and a

business owner who embraced technology and invention, this synergy between creativity and science is an apropos fit for Segal. Notably, the telescope’s imagery is made with the most up-to-date technological advances. Segal, however, conversely abandons all aids, including paintbrushes, and instead lets his hands work through the paint. Despite his interest in technology, as a maker he seeks an unmediated, tactile method of committing paint from artist’s hand to canvas. Using his hands lets him manipulate the paint in a way that suggests the galaxy’s vaporous haziness. Thinking about how Segal makes his work likewise fuels consideration about how the very universe his paintings represent was made.

The unfathomable unknowability of the universe that intrigues Segal has puzzled philosophers, scientists, artists and laymen for as long as humans have existed. Astronomers studying Hubble photos recently confirmed that there are more than 200 galaxies and that some are as old as 13.2 billion years. Twenty-first century technology might provide us with valuable information, yet Hubble’s images create more questions than provide answers. A close view of Segal’s painted interpretations of the gaseous, rolling cosmos prompts heady metaphysical

interrogations about physical properties, time, matter, space and existence that philosophy, science and religion each have perspectives on. Why does anything exist? Why was the universe created? Is time infinite? Is the universe endless?

These are but a few of our most essential questions about existence and the purpose of the universe that Segal’s images invite viewers to instigate. Just as potently, though, Segal’s paintings are visually mesmerizing. The shapes, chromatic hues and dramatic contours strongly facilitate getting lost in the compositions; getting lost is, after all, a form of discovery. Segal, who is not heavy-handed with a prescribed set of interpretations about the work, wants viewers to glean individually derived meaning from the paintings.

Ultimately, Segal’s ability to pass his wonder of the world onto us is what makes this series so compelling. While, for me, his configurations have evoked photography’s invention, the merging of art and science and connections to metaphysics, they remain open to personal interpretation.

—*Melissa Hiller*, American Jewish Museum Director

ישמחו השמים!

There are moments in our lives when we can simply look up at the sky and rejoice in the glory of the world. For me, it often happens on that first spring day in Pittsburgh when I can actually see the sky. It happens frequently as I look out an airplane window and marvel at the tops of the clouds. Standing on Masada and seeing forever to and through the haze over the Dead Sea, I feel connected to those who came before us and marveled at the same sights. There are so many more...

When I experience these moments, I stand in humble awe. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us, there are moments in our lives when an appropriate sacred reaction to the glory of nature might just be ‘Wow!’ My awe is for the handiwork of Creation. I embrace the biblical account in Genesis that reminds us to imitate God by saying “This is good” every day of the week. I embrace the scientific methodology that helps us better hypothesize how creation first happened with a Big Bang.

Jerry Segal’s paintings depicting nebula formations is a fitting guidepost for both the light of outer space and the light of our inner space.

Yismechu ha-Shamayim! Let the Heavens Rejoice! —Psalm 96

During a recent tour of Jerry’s studio, an hour was hardly enough time for a discussion with him about his paintings because each one evokes a combined biblical and scientific awe of an image whose lifespan might very well be measured in light years. He described to me how the images seen through the Hubble Telescope and channeled with paint through his palms and fingers might no longer exist. Each is a world in and of itself that was created, existed and might no longer be today. Many of the paintings evoke images that are familiar to us. Dinosaurs, the human form, and flowers are identifiable elements hidden within the compositions as if they were created for our benefit in our small corner of the universe.

Despite the ephemeral nature of the light he depicts, Jerry will be the first to tell us that the light we see goes all the way back to the very first light of creation. After all, the light of the Big Bang is still around us. Scientists have described how it still radiates all around us. We can see each other in the light of creation.

And God said: “Let there be light.”

This first light God made before the sun and stars.

God showed it to David, who burst into song.

This was the light Moses saw on Sinai!

At the creation, the universe from end to end radiated light—but it was withdrawn...

And now it is stored away for the righteous, until all the worlds will be in harmony again and all will be united and whole.

But until this future world is established, this light, coming out of darkness and formed by the Most Secret, is hidden:

אור זרע לצדיק ולישרי-לב שמחה
Or zarua latzadik ul’yishrei-lev simchah.

Light is sown for the righteous and joy for those of good heart.¹

—Psalm 97

There is a light in the inner space of Jerry that enables him to share the light of outer space. It is a beautiful artistic process: The light of our collective outer space kindles the light of our personal inner space with hopes that it will enlighten so many others.

After all, light is hidden away for righteous people. Yes, let the heavens be glad!

—*Rabbi Ron Symons*, Senior Director of Jewish Life

¹Based on the Zohar 1.31b, Chagigah 2a and Genesis Rabbah 3.6; *Gates of Prayer*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, p. 168.