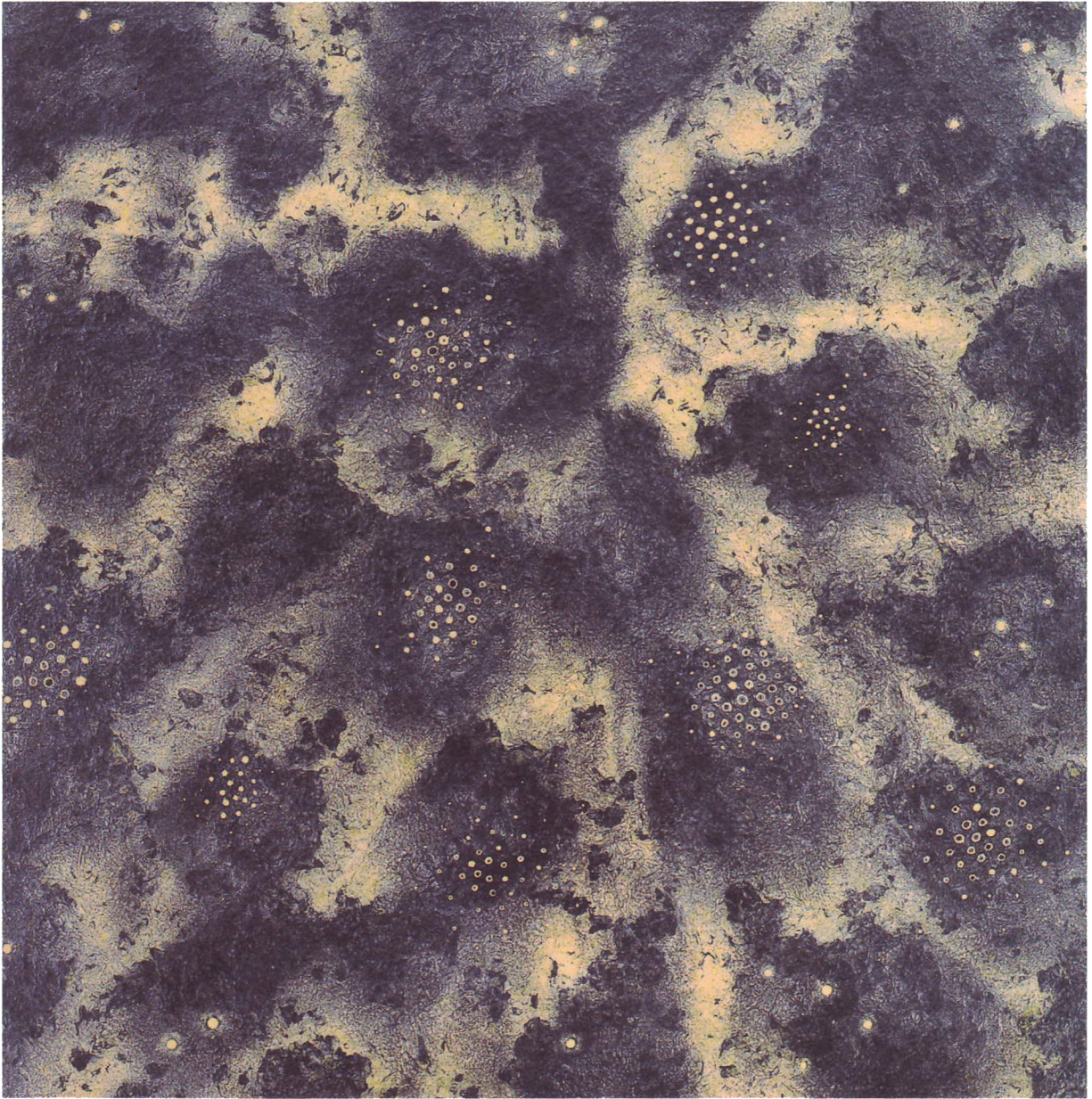


HAND PAPERMAKING



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Laws of the Small, 1999, oil stick on handmade paper. 45" x 39". Photograph by Robert Schoen.

Wondering Out Loud

Michelle Samour

I wonder about the stars in the sky, an egg in a nest, the cells of my body. I wonder about the space around the stars, the shell around the egg, the skin around me. How does it all begin? What holds onto what? Always moving or about to move, never still, never completely understood. I wonder when the sun goes down and the stars emerge, whether I am on the inside looking out or on the outside looking in. Microscopes, telescopes, biology, cosmology. I am lost in a meditation between earth and sky, looking for answers and finding only questions...I wonder.

Nothingness

Among the great things that are found among us, the existence of Nothing is the greatest.
— Leonardo da Vinci

I am interested in making work that offers the viewer a passage into contemplation (the empty space). Scientists refer to this space as a vacuum; philosophers refer to it as nothingness. The imagery that I use in my work is only a vehicle for asking questions and entering into that space. Lao-tzu, the founder of Daoism, compares the Dao to the empty space within a pot, without which the clay would have no function.

I often ask myself what it means to be a Westerner, working with materials and processes indigenous to the East and using imagery that is not iconographic but which references Eastern philosophy. I think of the irony of having Korean and Japanese students take my papermaking classes because they want to learn Eastern sheet forming. Many have told me that because paper is so much a part of their culture, they have taken it for granted. It seems that many of these students have learned Western papermaking in their own countries. What kind of assumptions do we make about one another's cultures? Do we desire more what we do not have?

The Japanese word for handmade paper is *washi*. *Wa* translates as Japan, and *shi* as paper. *Wa* can also refer to harmony between humans and nature, a desirable state of being. Some Japanese papermakers say that making good paper depends directly on this harmony. This dependency between one's inner spirit and the formation of good paper relates to my imagery and the intention of my work. My drawings and the journey begin when I make the paper.



Journey, 1996, oil stick on handmade paper. 45" x 39".
 Photograph by Tom Lang.

Moving Out from Out of the Woods, 1982 installation at
 Rose Art Museum, Waltham, Massachusetts, wood lath, birch.
 75" x 20" x 20". Photograph by Tom Lang.

Process: Chaos and Control, or Order and Disorder

To be ignorant of motion is to be ignorant of Nature.

– Aristotle

I make my sheets on a 4 ft. x 8 ft. vacuum table, which is edged with a 5 inch lip. After pigmenting several different batches of gampi, I mix them together with a coagulant so that the fibers maintain their distinct colors (a process I learned from Donna Koretsky). I fill the table with water, then pour in the gampi and disperse it with my hands. In this process of making my sheets in the vacuum table, where the fibers float in a sea of water, I am forced to let go of some control over their formation. When I drain the water, a moment of time is captured as the fibers settle themselves into a modulated, tweedy sheet. After drying the sheets on boards and sizing them with gelatin, I am ready to work into them with paint or Cray-Pas. Each drawing is different, a response to the individual sheet. The drawing, in part, illustrates and magnifies the sheet-forming process.

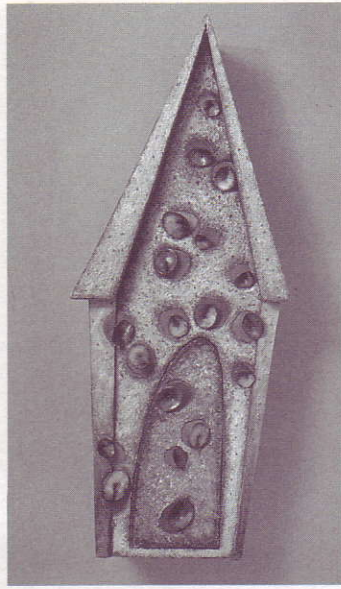
Recently, I have begun to place strained, pigmented pulp directly onto sealed, wooden stretchers or shallow boxes. I refer to these pieces as paintings. Because I am working with less water, I have slightly more control over the placement of the fiber. My intention remains to create an amorphous field that I can work back into with drawing materials and paint.

Beginnings

...there had to be a painting wholly liberated from dependence on the figure, the object—a painting which, like music, does not illustrate anything, does not tell a story, and does not launch a myth. Such a painting is content to evoke the incommunicable realms of the spirit, where dream becomes thought...

– Michel Seuphor

Before I began working with handmade paper, I was making collages with sticks, stones, and other found materials. I used glue and tape to attach these materials to the paper but it began to buckle under their weight. I wanted more integration between



The Offering, 1987, wood, mixed media. 38" x 15" x 8". Photograph by Tom Lang.



Be Still My Beating Heart, 1987, paper pulp, wood, mixed media, illuminated. 50" x 21 x 11". Photograph by Tom Lang.

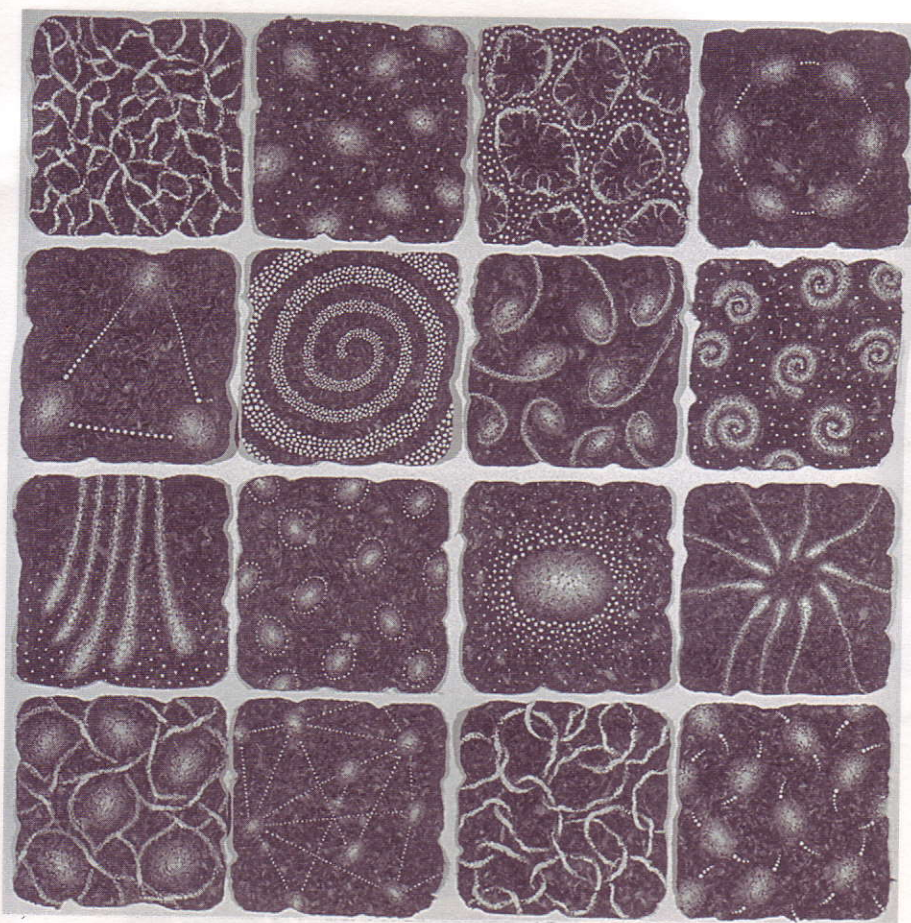
the paper and the materials, so I began as many do, recycling papers in a blender and embedding my materials during sheet forming. I moved from recycled drawing paper to linters, and proceeded over the next twenty years to use pulp in a variety of ways to support my imagery.

I began using pulp in 1975 during the beginning of the revival of hand papermaking in this country. Much of what I learned came from workshops, and from consultations with and phone calls to other artists around the country who used handmade paper. As I lived in Boston, I drew upon its rich resources. I first learned how to make Eastern sheets from Elaine and Donna Koretsky at Carriage House Paper in Brookline. Until that time I had been working with recycled papers and cotton linters. Not only were the method and the fibers new, they also gave me a deeper understanding of the process of making paper.

I consulted often with Lee MacDonald. When Lee wanted to carry a line of pigments, he asked me to test them for him. I did a series of color tests using pigments from different manufacturers and experimented with retention agents and other additives. Much of what I learned from this investigation had a direct impact on how I used color in my work. My palette expanded from the earth tones of powdered pigments to the more intense and much larger range of the aqueous dispersed pigments that I now had access to. My pieces became louder and more active, partly because the image was responding to the color.

I was invited to make some large pieces at Rugg Road Paper Works, where I had the support of Joe Zina and Bernie Toale. What a luxury it was to work in such a well-equipped studio and benefit from their expertise. I first learned how to use a vacuum table there.

Teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has also had a significant impact on my work. The school does not require students to choose a major; instead it encourages an interdisciplinary approach to art making. This approach supports my belief that paper and pulp should be used as a means to an end, and that the concept or intention of the work is paramount. The use of paper or pulp should sup-



Into/Out of, 1997, oilstick on handmade paper. 43" x 43". Photograph by Tom Lang.

port that. Teaching has also challenged me to learn new processes. My students and I have experimented together and learned from one another. This shared investigation has been stimulating for me as both a teacher and an artist.

Closer Investigations: Microscope and Telescope

I render infinite thanks to God, for being so kind as to make me alone the first observer of marvels kept hidden in obscurity for all previous centuries.

– Galileo Galilei, after viewing the night sky through his telescope

Twenty-five years ago I was building sculptures of lath and used lumber. They referenced rural structures and housed materials (sticks, eggs, hay, broom corn) that juxtaposed the natural world with the man-made. These pieces also spoke about gathering, collecting, and protecting. I went on to further explore these materials through drawings and castings in paper.

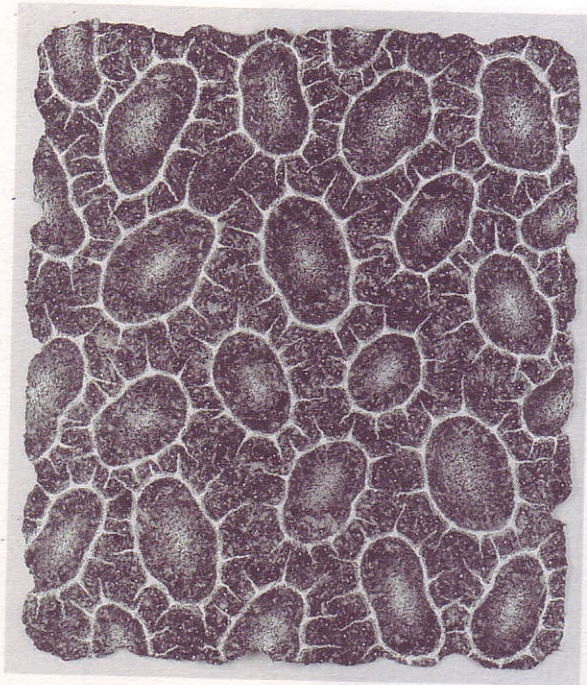
This work was in progress when my family and I moved from Boston to a rural suburb several years ago. My walks in the city's arboretum were replaced by walks in our country woods. Paved paths gave way to dirt, pine needles, and stones. As I walked through these paths, often cut out of dense brush, I would stop periodically to look at a branch, a leaf, something up close. The rhythm of walking, moving quickly through

gate. This distinction between the peripheral chaos of what I saw while in motion and the ordered or focused viewing when I stopped to observe intrigued me. I chose to leave the peripheral information off of the drawing surface. The formation of the sheet and the actual drawing became the focused investigation.

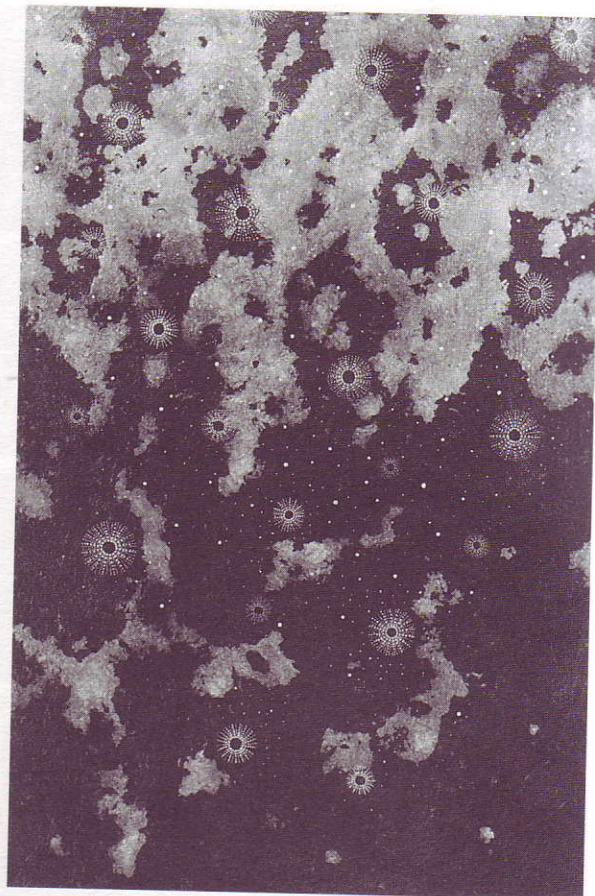
In the earth-related drawings that resulted, I attempted to enlarge a piece of nature the way the lens of a microscope might capture and reveal a piece of a larger whole. The microscope gives us an opportunity to go deeper into this world. Just as the microscope is a vehicle for deeper understanding, the telescope magnifies and isolates distant objects. In junior high school, my science class made stargazers using protractors. I remember my mother driving me around late one night. I stood on the back seat with my head and upper body emerging through the sunroof of our car, my stargazer in hand, finding constellations and marking locations, marking time.

A Dialogue Between Earth and Sky

At one end of the size spectrum there is the inner space of the most elementary particles of matter and the perplexing puzzle of space and time itself; at the other end lies the outer space of stars and galaxies which constantly surprise us with the drama of their cataclysmic evolution...



Good or Evil, 1999, oilstick on handmade paper. 45" x 39".
 Photograph by Robert Schoen.



Moving, Spinning, 2000, oilstick on handmade paper.
 64" x 44" x 3". Photograph by Robert Schoen.

As I worked, the images that referenced nature and the earth began to reference the body. The sticks and eggs became veins and cells. While my earlier drawing was dense and covered much of the surface area, in the new work my drawing became sparser. As more of the paper was exposed, the space around the drawing became at least as important as the drawing itself. I was now in a dialogue between earth and sky. Nick Capasso has described these works as "circles, ovals, sinuous lines, and points of light embedded within dark, textured grounds. These intuitively derived images simultaneously suggest stars and atoms, galaxies and microbes: constituent elements of the infinite and the infinitesimal."¹ My interest in outer space has coincided with the recent popularization of science. John D. Barrow writes in *Between Inner Space and Outer Space*: "...ultimate questions about the origins of life, intelligence, human behavior, the Universe and everything else, have ceased to be solely matters of speculative philosophy and theology. Scientists have found new things to say about these problems that are not merely restirings of the brew of philosophical opinions we have inherited from thinkers of the past."²

While I had felt emotionally grounded in my use of images that referenced the earth, I felt that now I was throwing myself into a place of disequilibrium. Raised as a Unitarian Universalist, I was always en-

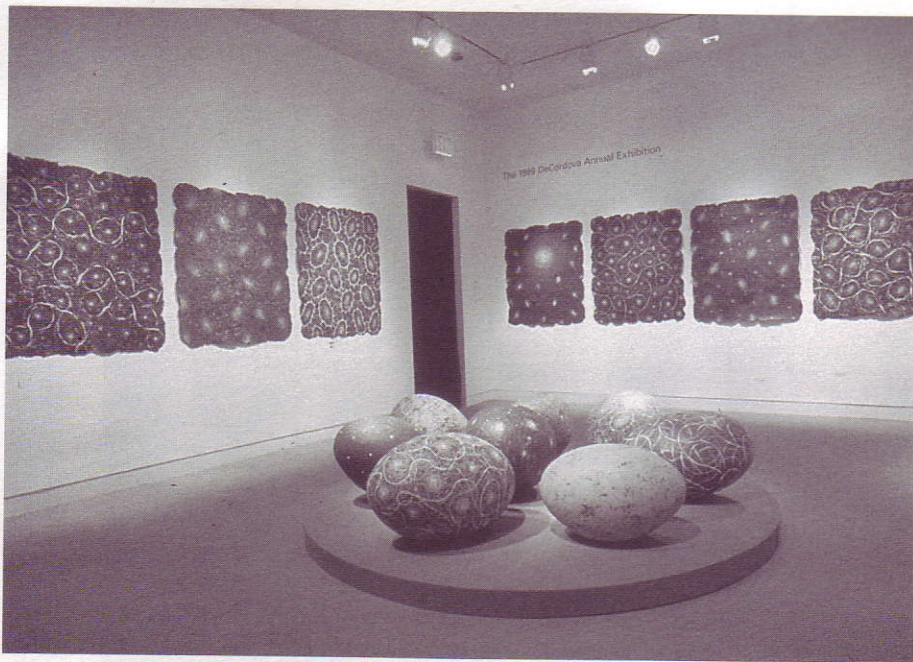
couraged to live "in the question." However, as I like to feel the ground beneath my feet, this was often disconcerting and became even more so. My recent images — which simultaneously reference fossils, sea urchins and barnacles, stars, and planets — attempt to link earth and sky.

Reconfiguring, Not Reinventing

Sure there is music even in the beauty, and the silent note which cupid strikes, far sweeter than the sound of an instrument. For there is music wherever there is a harmony, order or proportion; and thus far we may maintain the music of the spheres; for those well-ordered motions and regular paces, though they give no sound unto the ear, yet to the understanding they strike a note most full of harmony.

— Sir Thomas Browne

The piece that evolved from this questioning was *Hours of Night*. I made it, in part, in response to Diane Katsiaticas's visit to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in the fall of 1997. I had met Diane when we were in a show at The American Craft Museum and International Paper Headquarters in New York in 1982. She was working with handmade paper and mixed media then. Although handmade paper is not as much a part of her current work, what I had always responded to was her ability to



Installation (detail), 1999, DeCordova Museum. Photograph by Robert Schoen.



Hours of Night (detail), 1998, oilstick on pigmented handmade paper, mixed media. Photograph by Robert Schoen.

her ideas and her imagery. After working with Diane and the students for several days on an installation, I went back to my studio and asked myself how I, too, might expand my work, by reconfiguring but not reinventing. How else could I tell my story?

I decided to make the eggs that I had drawn. I carved them out of dense, closed-cell foam, which I had used in earlier work. During the process of carving these forms, I read that the Egyptians were the first to divide the day into twenty-four hours. The hours of night were marked by the emergence of decans, stars or groupings of stars that appeared on the hour on the eastern horizon. *Hours of Night* grew out of this investigation. It became a piece about marking time, the night sky, creation, reversals, balance, inside/outside, and revelation. I have, in effect, taken the drawings off the wall and wrapped them with themselves. Sometimes the drawings bring attention to the surface or shell, while in other instances the drawing defies the surface and becomes the night sky, with stars or constellations floating in it.

In 1999 I reconfigured this piece for an exhibition at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. The two- and three-dimensional work was presented as an encompassing installation. The formality of *Hours of Night* gave way to a more random presentation of the work, allowing for broader interpretation.

Still Surprises

The universe is real but you can't see it. You have to imagine it.

– Alexander Calder

After all of these years of working with paper, there are still surprises. Papermaking continues to take me places I have never been. It satisfies my love of being physically immersed in process with my love of creating illusion. It informs my work. It constantly reminds me to be respectful of nature and of my desire to understand and reveal mysteries that can only be seen in the mind.

Notes

1. Nick Capasso, The 1999 DeCordova Annual Exhibition catalog (DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Garden, Lincoln, Massachusetts), 21.
2. John D. Barrow, *Between Inner and Outer Space*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1999), 1.

Quotations from each section, in order:

Leonardo da Vinci: quoted in John D. Barrow, *Between Inner and Outer Space*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1999), 202.

Aristotle: quoted in Dava Sobel, *Galileo's Daughter*, (Walker & Company, New York, 1999), 30.

Michel Seuphor: *Abstract Painting*, Abrams, New York, n.d., 284–88.

Galileo Galilei: quoted in *Galileo's Daughter*, 6.

John D. Barrow: *Between Inner and Outer Space*, 1.

Sir Thomas Browne: *Religio Medici*, 1643, part 2, section 9.

Alexander Calder: quoted in *Between Inner and Outer Space*, 260.