

A detailed microscopic cross-section of a plant stem, showing various vascular tissues. The image is colorized, with the xylem appearing in shades of blue and purple, the cambium in red, and the phloem in green and yellow. The cellular structure is clearly visible, with thick cell walls and distinct vascular bundles.

# BRUCE RILEY

MILLER GALLERY | JUNE 2010



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JUNE 11- 25, 2010  
text by Matt Morris



MILLER  
GALLERY

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# Associating with Undefined What-Have-Yous:

## Thoughts on Bruce Riley's Recent Paintings

by Matt Morris

Multiple heavens are stacked through different time zones and universes, and the soul is split into parts at death, with some pieces going to hell, some to their eternal reward and some go to live in the trees. So recounts the indigenous spiritual beliefs of Indonesian and Philippine cultures. The structure of these mythologies may be approximated in the paintings of Bruce Riley. Layers of watermedia and resin compress whole worlds into deep, churning events. Various organic, patterned (sometimes condensing in ornamental designs) and loosely figurative, Riley's paintings play jewel tones against one another into luminous, vivifying complexities. While a painting is traditionally thought to open a window into the wall on which it hangs, these works are portals to someplace(s) altogether plural and pancosmic, where the painter and the viewer can occupy myriad roles (and positions and poses). We can be anyone we want, and there are a million ways to do it, as long as we are freed to flex our imaginations. These paintings testify as much.

*My work's about everything all at once; it's about a universal thing that I might have access to, a state of being that doesn't have anything to do with any kind of description. I'm so sorely aware of this humancentric view of how we process information in the world; it just seems like chewing things up a lot. There's no need for answers. I'm very interested in a process of non-thinking, instead pulling something out of that spiritual ether and letting that guide, because there is a natural, coherent systemizing of life. The whole thing is a quiet watching.*

In 1921, Hermann Rorschach's Psychodiagnostik explained the psychiatrist's technique for testing a patient's associative responses to the abstract shapes found in a series of inkblots. And while many abstractionists in the proceeding century may eschew the viewer's impulse to call out wriggling forms and flowing puddles as persons, places and things, Riley's practice welcomes this engagement.

Rather than calling a thing by its name, these works and their audience are liberated to call a thing whatever they want. The sensuality of the perceptual is the dominant force here, and words (even these words) shudder in ecstasy before a total forfeit to the visual experiences they aim to articulate. A fantasy half formed unfolds: exotic orchids that only bloom once a year, and even then must be coaxed out with song; drag superstar Ru Paul seated in half-lotus at an Ashram; a rainbow struggles with being snared between resinous panes, but blushes and admits he enjoys the fight; a recent sighting of the Loch Ness monster smacking a tray of chutneys; some of the paintings' flies are open.

As faces form in the paintings, they necessarily acknowledge the Chicago Imagists (associated with the "Hairy Who?" exhibitions that radically departed from conventional representations of figuration in painting), but there's some sass to their tone. Lolling tongues (or phalluses) stick out in playful disregard, and these members come polka dotted or bejeweled. Riley's newest works are vivaciously masculine, like stained glass church windows peering into the heart of a man who is all ages at once. He (the artist) is excited, yet withdrawn. His actions in the paintings are obvious insofar that the paintings exist, but he doesn't rely on the conventions of the artist's hand or the brush's stroke. Rather, a new system is in place, where drips, pours, sprays and stains of pigment and medium coalesce into utterly organic forms: as if blown in from a freak storm or plucked from Riley's garden just outside his studio window in Chicago.

*I'm messing with all of that cultural build up, all of that time binding, all the things that we are culturally and individually. I explore it through watching my own organism, using myself as a litmus test for where I look and what I allow myself to be. What I am at any given time is the current content of my consciousness. Since I've been watching my consciousness, the paintings have just become beautifully happy. My work, my life, all rolled into one. There are no hours; there's no time.*

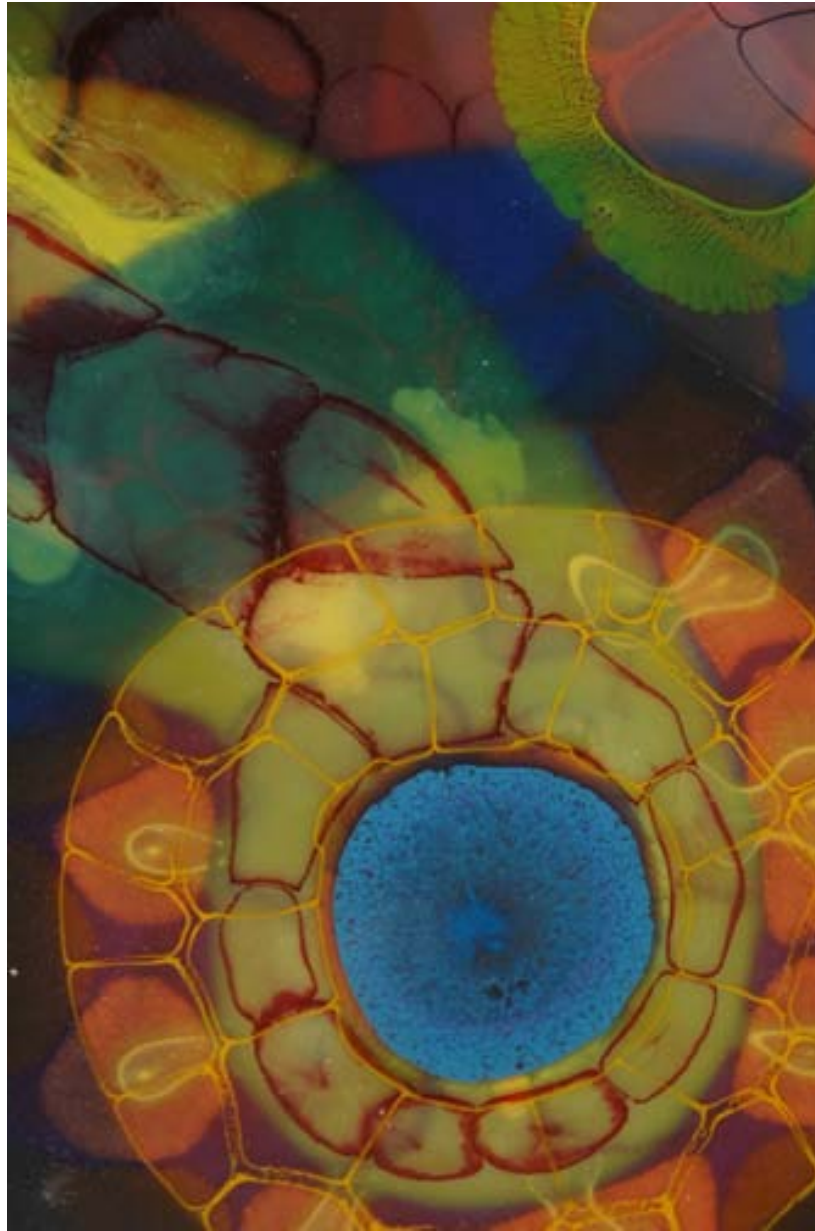
Riley's paintings have taken a turn towards the joyous and mysterious. In the recent Self Portrait (I wish with seven years' worth of layered painting on its surface), a single 'figure' is changed in for a gathering of glowing orbs, looming before a syrupy black field. Disco balls, Buddha hands or droplets of sun: these lemon, lime and spicy red forms overlap into a constellation of undefined what-have-you's, reassured in their lack of isolation.

*All quotations are from Bruce Riley and are drawn from an interview with the author at artist's studio on Sunday, May 9, 2010.*



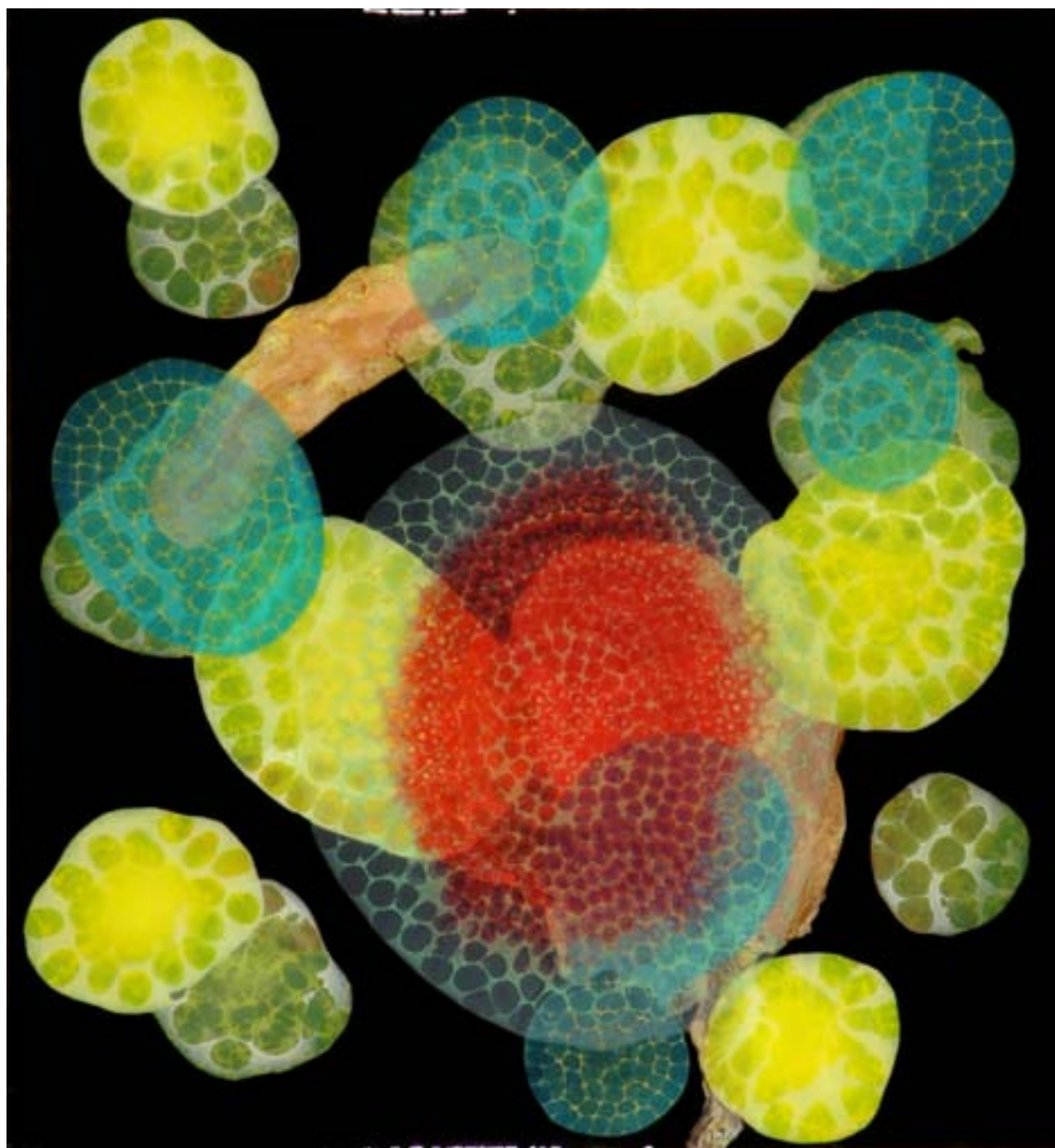
*Bee Bonnet*  
mixed media on panel  
72" x 48"





*Bee Bonnet* detail

*Self Portrait*  
39" x 36"  
mixed media on panel





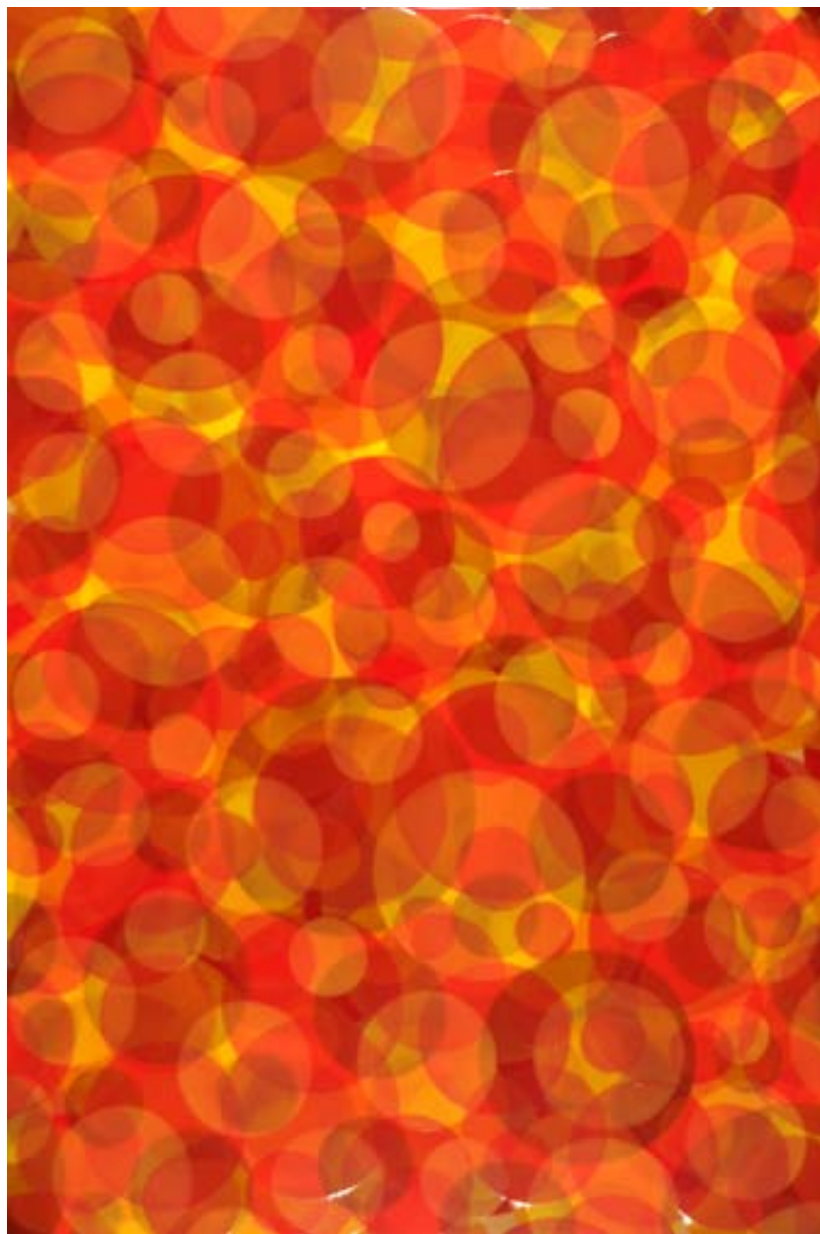


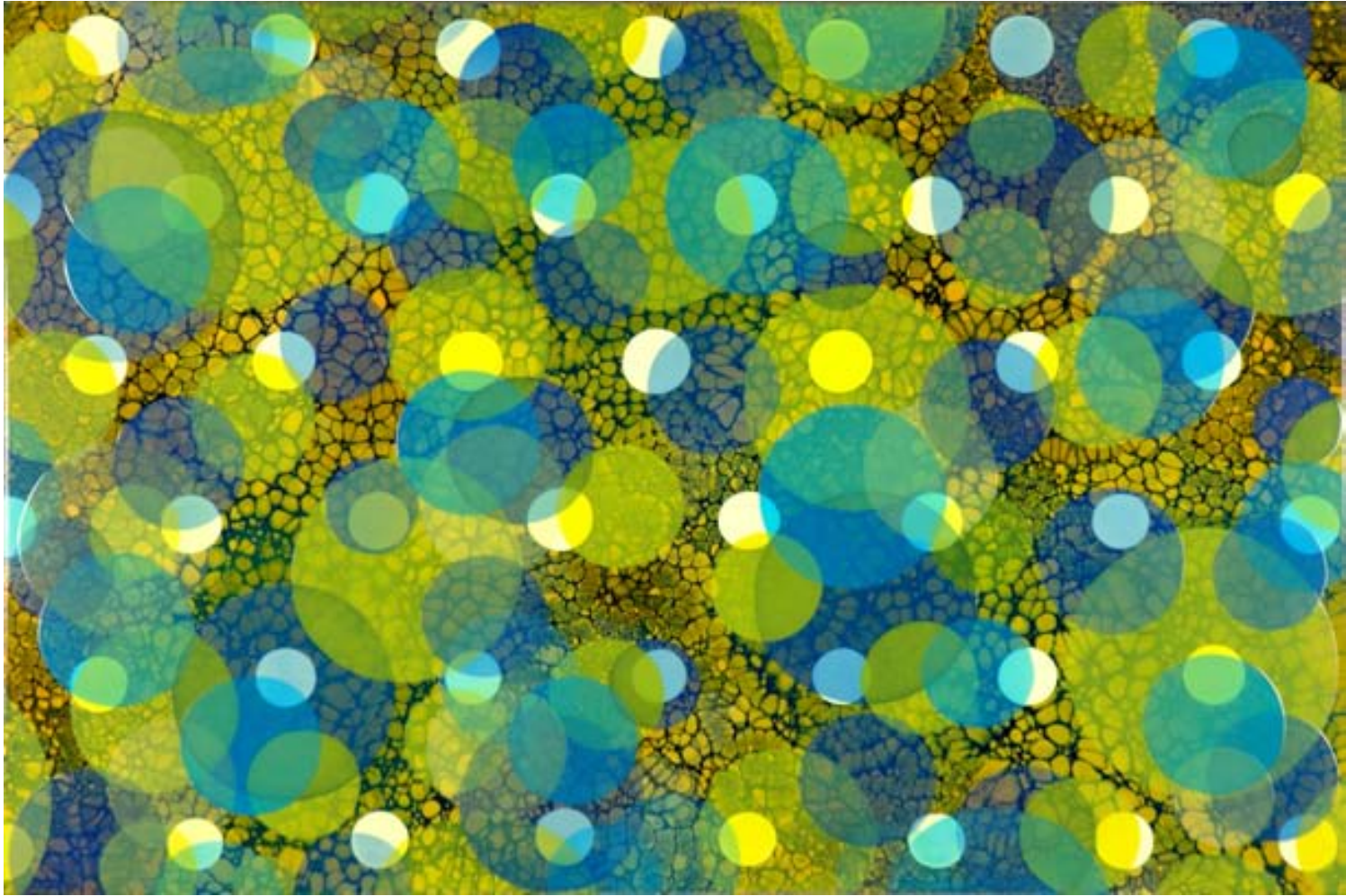
*Fakir*  
mixed media on panel  
12" x 12"



*Flatworm*  
mixed media on panel  
12" x 12"

Waves  
mixed media on plexiglass  
48" x 72"





*False Positive*  
mixed media on canvas  
48" x 72"

*Proud Moanin' Loudhorn*  
mixed media on panel  
39" x 36"





*Believer*  
mixed media on canvas  
72" x 48"

Biomorph  
mixed media on panel  
48" x 36"





*Warhead*  
mixed media on panel  
72" x 48"

*Solidcore*  
mixed media on panel  
24" x 24"

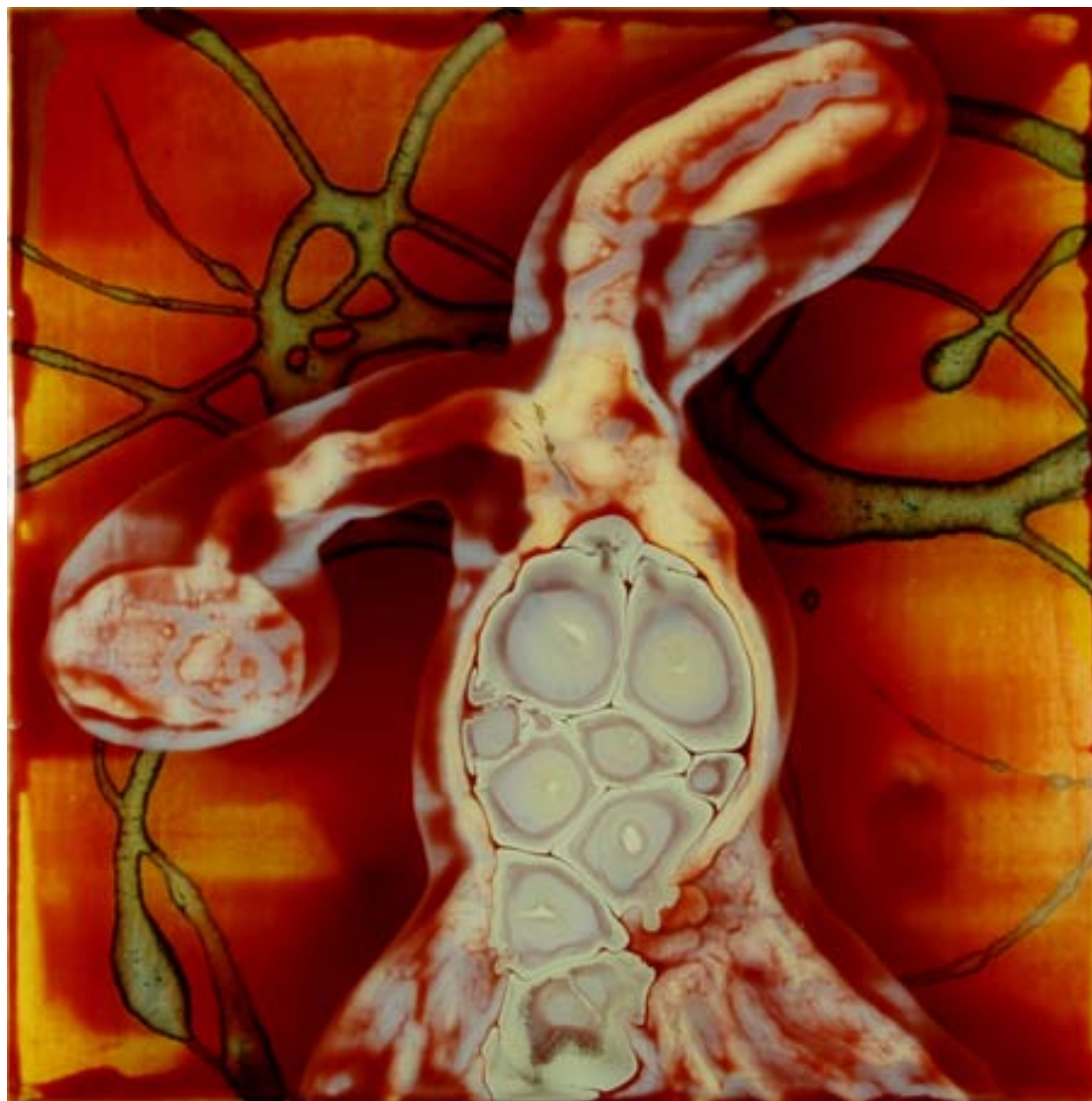


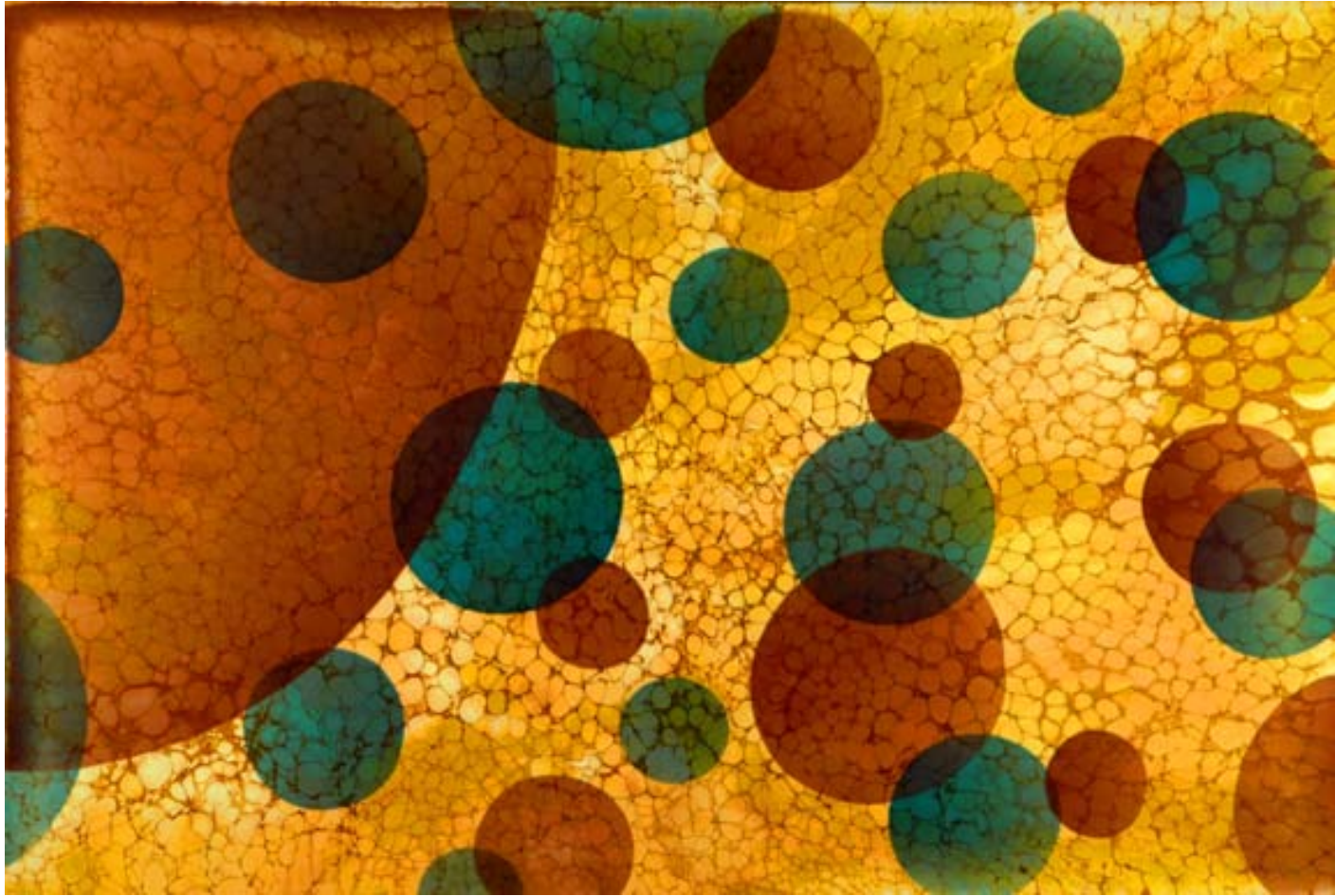




*Wormhole*  
36" x 20" each panel  
mixed media on panels

*Eve*  
mixed media on panel  
12" x 12"



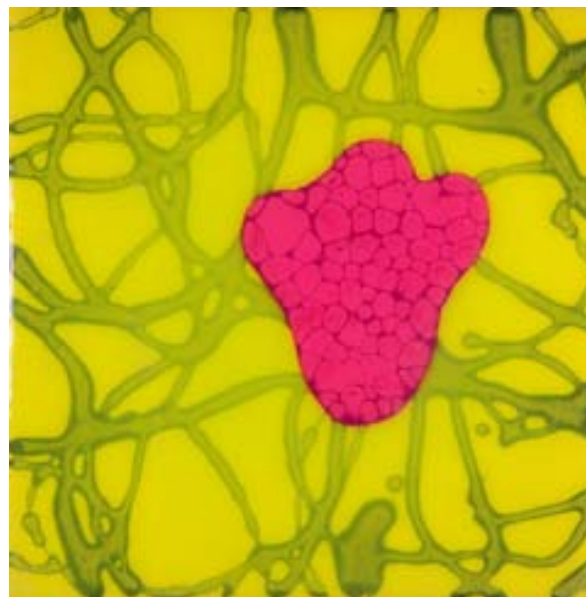


*Izzie*  
mixed media on canvas  
48" x 72"

*Zygote of Romulus*  
mixed media  
on panel  
12" x 12"



*Zygote of Remus*  
mixed media  
on panel  
12" x 12"



*Romulus*  
mixed media  
on panel  
12" x 12"



*Remus*  
mixed media  
on panel  
12" x 12"





*Quid*  
mixed media on panel  
10" x 8"

Originally from Cincinnati, the artist has lived in Chicago since 1994. The road there was circuitous, a cross-country exploration that led him to ski and hike mountain peaks and to ride raging rivers.

*The outdoors is a space aside from human endeavor that has been so important to my vision of mankind's place in the universe.*

Educated at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, he spent most of his time studying the works in the adjoining Cincinnati Art Museum. The artist also studied fine arts at the University of Cincinnati where he discovered The Princeton University Press' Bollingen Series. These published works of philosophers and progressive thinkers like Eric Neumann, Carl Jung, David Bohm and J. Krishnamurti, were of great importance to the artist's development.

*I can't stress enough the importance of this find and its impact on my art and life. This body of work exposed me to a literature that explored the mysteries of the human condition, something that I felt I was looking into with my art. I've always known my work was about everything, all at once. This reading began to give me an intellectual tool to investigate what I knew and felt.*

**Selected Exhibitions:**

Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati  
Cleveland Center of Contemporary Art  
Southern Ohio Museum; Butler Institute of Art, Akron  
Miami University Art Museum  
New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art

**Selected Awards/Grants:**

1989-90, Pollack-Krasner Foundation grant  
1991-92, Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist grant,  
Cincinnati Arts Allocation Committee grant  
1992-93, Arts Midwest/NEA Regional Visual Arts Fellowship Award





## MILLER GALLERY

In our 50 years Miller Gallery has maintained a reputation as one of the finest galleries in the United States, promoting visual arts nationwide through our Cincinnati location and our website, millergallery.com.

Our mission is to continue to provide exceptional choices and services to our patrons while supporting our roster of 50 living artists, from the region, across the nation, and around the world.

Since 1960, Miller Gallery has exhibited an extensive range of artists, genres, and mediums. We represent artists who have achieved the highest levels of recognition in the art world, alongside emerging talent whose work is breakthrough in style and technique and an enhancement to our collection.